

HAVING A TWITTER ACCOUNT CAN SAVE YOU HOLIDAY CASH, TOO

It's true. First, you need to make sure you've got the basics right

Once you get used to the jargon, Twitter is incredibly simple to use. Users "tweet" virtual text messages — no more than 140 characters — into the ether. To find them, either "follow" them (type in their name after twitter.com, so twitter.com/timetravel, or [@timetravel](http://timetravel) within Twitter) or search for what people are saying about a particular word or phrase ("travel deals", for instance) at any given moment. Because of the sheer volume of tweets, it's worthwhile downloading a free programme such as TweetDeck or Twitterific (type either into Google) — not only will it keep track of the people you're following, it can keep a running tab of tweets mentioning words you're interested in, such as "competition".

Follow the right people

Most hotel chains have generic Twitter accounts, as well as ones for individual properties. In the UK, Malmaison hotels (@theoxfordmal, @theglasgowmal, etc) offer regular discounts and competitions. Often, however, independent hotels are the best. Those in New York are particularly sociable — Bryant Park Hotel (@bryantparkhotel) regularly releases Twitter discounts, and Roger Smith Hotel (@RSHotel) offers a straight 10% off to its followers.

When it comes to travel agents, small operators come into their own on Twitter. As a random sample, Journey Latin America (@JLA_UK), Adventura (@adventuradotcom), Cornish Traditional Cottages (@cometocornwall) and Black Tomato (@black_tomato) all do a great job, with regular discounts and holiday competitions.

Flight-comparison sites — such as @cheapflights_uk and @netflights — are also worth following. Fly.com (@fly_com) has just launched a customised Twitter feed that pulls up the best deals leaving from your home airport.

Time it right

To get the best deals, you need to be the first to see them. Tuesdays are officially designated Travel Tuesday on Twitter, and many deals are posted late morning. Between 10am and midday (depending on the tweeter's time zone) is often a good time to be online.

Be proactive

Don't expect it all to come to you — know what you're looking for and use the search function to nose out deals. If you're getting nowhere, most tweeting tourist boards will help you with specific queries (Visit Manchester — @visit_mcr — for example, is a good one). Because America does Twitter better than we do, use its accounts — I recently got excellent advice on Amsterdam from the American branch of Visit Holland (@visitholland), oddly enough.

It pays to say hello

Friendliness can get you everywhere. The London Marriott Grosvenor Square (@londonmarriott) recently allocated a refurbished room

to someone who'd tweeted about booking a stay there. Planet Hollywood Las Vegas (@phvegas), meanwhile, doles out freebies such as show tickets to followers who come to stay.

Act quickly, be flexible

If a deal's good, jump on it. In October, I was vaguely planning a January trip to LA and Las Vegas when Southwest Airlines (@southwestair) announced a price drop on its LA-Vegas route. Five minutes later, I'd booked my flight for £23 (down from about £70). By the time I'd booked my London-LA leg, the Southwest tickets were going for double the price.

Enter competitions

They're never hard, and the rewards can be phenomenal. In the past three months, you could have won a week in Hawaii (courtesy of @marriottahawaii), New Year's Eve in Vegas (@Vegas) and countless hotel stays. Up for grabs today? The chance to win flights to Brazil (from @JLA_UK) or a six-day safari (@acaciaafrica).

Roger Smith Hotel (@RSHotel), in New York, is giving away a room every night in January.

Complaints win freebies

With Google integrating Twitter updates into its search results, hotels are desperate to keep positive online profiles. Four Seasons recently gave a guest a free bottle of wine after she tweeted that she didn't like the in-room music. Think what ranting about a grubby bathroom could get you.

Don't forget Facebook

Although it doesn't have as many offers as Twitter, Facebook is definitely worth a look (just register as a "fan" for the companies you're interested in). Travelzoo alerts its fans (facebook.com/travelzoo) to the best offers on the web in real time, while the travel agent On the Beach (facebook.com/onthebeachholidays) has a £750 voucher competition in the works. Como Hotels (tinyurl.com/ycn8rxn) and Rosewood Hotels (facebook.com/rosewoodhotels) are also good for deals and freebies.

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