

5 ways to save on the cost of eating out in the UK and abroad

1 To eat at a posh restaurant without breaking the bank, try lunch or a pre-theatre menu (before 7pm). A three-course set lunch without drinks at Gordon Ramsay at Claridge's is £30. In the evening it would come to £65.



2 Chain restaurants such as Caffè Uno and Wagamama, have free loyalty schemes or clubs. Membership means that you sometimes get deals on meals. For more information contact www.wagamama.com/members_signup.php or www.caffeuno.co.uk/loyaltycard.html

3 See www.toptable.com and www.lastminute.com to find cheap deals for restaurants. You can use toptable to book restaurants abroad, too, some of which have special offers or discounts.



4 Restaurants abroad will sometimes offer to let you pay in sterling rather than the local currency – but don't take them up on the offer. Exchange rates are likely to be unfavourable, so insist on sticking with the local currency.

5 Eat out for free at restaurants in the UK or abroad (pay your travel fares) with up to three friends by becoming a mystery food critic. Dine at a chain restaurant such as Wagamama or Ask, and fill in an online evaluation of the meal by noon the next day. See www.mysterydining.co.uk for more.

Rip-off Britain?

We compare the cost of eating out in six capital cities

With spring around the corner, you may think of booking a break in London or a holiday abroad. If so, our snapshot survey compares the cost of eating out in six capital cities and suggests how to do it more cheaply.

We looked at restaurants in London, Berlin, Madrid, Paris, Rome and Washington DC. To make the comparison as close as possible, all those we chose were rated 'highly recommended' and 'moderately priced' by Frommers online travel guide (www.frommers.com). As far as possible, they served the national cuisine of their country.

London was most expensive for the main course, apart from Madrid. In reality, many Spanish restaurants, as well as French ones, will suggest set menus including a range of dishes, desserts and drinks, so you can eat more cheaply than headline costs we show.

Some price differences were stark. Even the most expensive dishes at the German restaurant were only slightly dearer than the cheapest in the London eatery.

The meal in the US restaurant was cheap – by a long way, with a mid-priced starter and main course adding up to just £9.57. You'll pay sales tax, which varies from state to state (10 per cent on restaurant meals in Washington DC), and will be expected to leave a 10-20 per cent tip as well, but even taking these into account, you would still be better off. This can partly be explained by the current favourable exchange rate and this can fluctuate, of course. In France, Italy and Spain, service charges are normally included as part of the bill. In France this is normally 15 per cent and you could leave a small amount on

London was most expensive for the main course

top as a tip. If there is no service charge, leave 15 per cent. In Spain, any tip is discretionary. In Italy, on top of the 10 per cent service charge, you might be expected to pay 5-10 per cent and in Germany 10-15 per cent. In Britain a discretionary tip of 10-15 per cent is usual. If a discretionary charge is added to your bill, you can refuse to pay it. If your tastes are more for a fry-up, we've found one in this country for 95p – made by Swedish firm, Ikea. See p6.

McDonald's prices

The cost of making a meal of it

McDonald's food is supposed to be similar the world over, so it's interesting to see how different prices are. We looked at the cost of a regular Big Mac meal (Big Mac, fries and a drink) in the six capital cities.



of pennies rather than pounds, but even so, the US, home of McDonald's was almost £1 cheaper than most of the other countries we looked at.

The cheapest place in Europe was Berlin at £3.32. France and Italy were most costly at £3.82. Britain came out at £3.59 and Spain at £3.54. These differences may not be bank-breaking, but they all add up.

THE COST OF EATING OUT

We looked at how much a mid-priced starter and main course would cost in these six capital cities



City	Starter	Main
Berlin	£6.32	£11.60
London	£7.95	£17.95
Madrid	£6.94	£18.75
Paris	£11.11	£16.67
Rome	£11.81	£13.19
Washington DC	£3.50	£7.03

Prices checked week beginning 8 January 2007 Exchange rates (8 January)
£1 = US\$1.87, €1.44. Prices include sales tax

Our verdict

In London it appears, according to our survey, that main courses in particular are expensive. Whichever city you're visiting, you'll often find cheaper prices by eating local cuisine and choosing a small restaurant away from main touristy areas. And have a look at our '5 ways to save', left.

