A VACATION SHOULD FEEL LIKE A REWARD, but that doesn’t mean it should break the bank. The trouble is that most travel guides either ignore the expense factor or obsess over it, turning the bargain hunt into the main adventure.

MONEY’s first Best in Travel Awards shift the focus to a more universal—and useful—metric: value. We selected all of our winners—from the domestic and international destinations to the best airlines, hotels, cruises, and travel cards—because they land in a travel sweet spot: great choices at great prices.

To locate where quality, cost, and value intersect, we relied not on our reporters’ favorite haunts, but on something far less subjective: data. With input from more than 40 sources—including TripAdvisor, Numbeo, Hotels.com, J.D. Power, and Onboard Informatics—we considered financial factors, such as overall costs and price trends, as well as experiential ones, such as cultural attractions and tourist amenities.

The result is a list that’s both timely and handy, packed with the kind of intel that makes saving money as easy as a walk on the beach. Call it your ultimate vacation value guide.

MONEY’s BEST IN TRAVEL METHODOLOGY

MONEY weighed more than 12,000 data points in 222 travel-specific areas. Here’s how we picked the winners:

DESTINATIONS
We examined the 100 most popular travel destinations in the U.S. and the 100 most popular overseas, based on total web searches for a given location, hotel rooms booked, plane tickets purchased, and the volume of reviews for local tourist-related businesses and points of interest.
We then ranked the destinations, giving the most weight to places with a drop in year-over-year prices, as well as the most high-quality amenities based on travelers’ reviews. We also considered overall costs, weather and crime reports, and transportation options. Only one city was chosen in each state. Rankings also considered additional MONEY research and reporting.

TRAVEL SERVICES
For each category (hotels, airlines, car-rental companies, cruise lines, credit cards, all-inclusive resorts, and frequent-flier programs), we chose a top pick (platinum) and a runner-up (gold). Rankings were based on overall cost, year-over-year price declines, and travelers’ satisfaction surveys, with extra emphasis placed on tourists’ perceived value. For apps we focused on those that saved users money, then tested each to see how they performed.

For a full methodology, go to money.com/besttravel.
San Diego - California

WHY IT WON: The best combination of outdoor attractions, cultural landmarks, great weather, and affordable hotels in the country.

The best weather of any big city in the country (363 sunny days a year). The best zoo in the world (sorry, Bronx). Gorgeous beaches, acclaimed theaters, and new foodie destinations all over town. All that and average four-star hotel rooms go for less than $200 a night. San Diego may be overshadowed by the City of Angels 120 miles to the north, but it's pretty heavenly too.

And this year San Diego is shining brighter than ever. Overall, the city ranked No. 3 on our list of the best parks and outdoor venues in the country. On May 14, the San Diego Zoo celebrates its centennial with free events. The baseball All-Star Game comes to the city in July. And March saw the opening of the Liberty Public Market (libertypublicmarket.com), a 30-stall food hall located in a renovated, '20s-era warehouse in the Liberty Station neighborhood. Not that the city needs more food options. With more than 9,000 bars and restaurants, San Diego ranks No. 5 on our list of top eateries (and drinkeries).

In a town known for its Mexican food, it may be surprising that San Diego's Little Italy has also become a culinary pit stop. The Baja-inspired Bracero Cocina de Raíz (bracero cocina.com) makes a great carrot aguaçita ($17) and offers $1 off beers during happy hour.

You won't have trouble finding great, affordable hotels. San Diego has more top-rated hotels than Chicago, San Francisco, and Las Vegas. At the retro Pearl Hotel in Point Loma you'll pay as little as $126 a night.