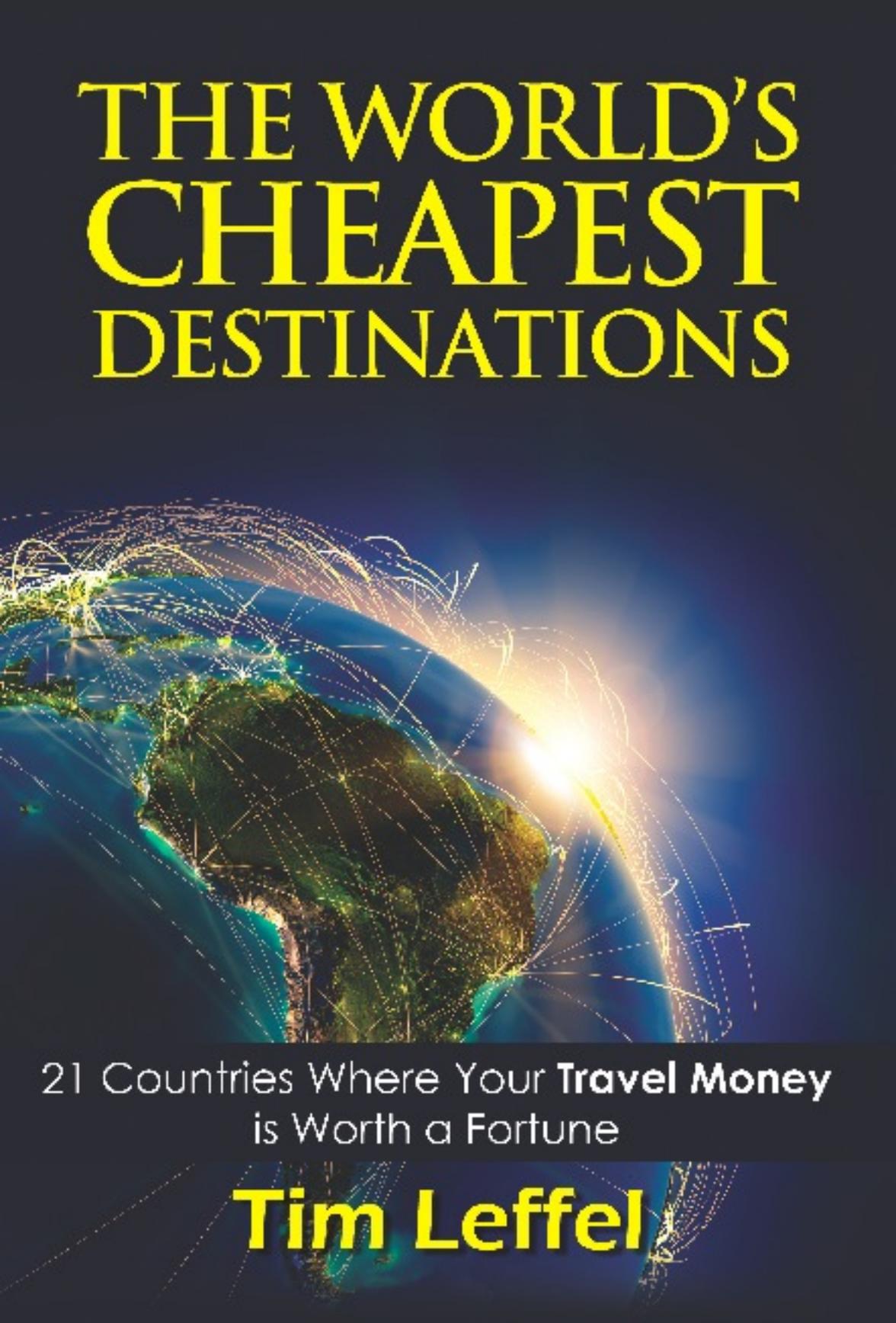
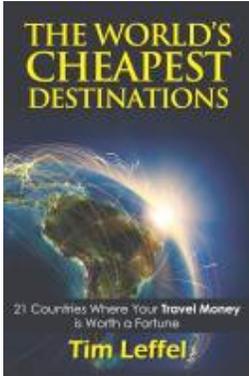


THE WORLD'S CHEAPEST DESTINATIONS

A stylized globe of the Earth is shown from a low angle, with a bright sunburst effect on the right side. The globe is overlaid with a network of glowing white and yellow lines representing flight paths or travel routes. The background is a deep blue gradient.

21 Countries Where Your **Travel Money**
is Worth a Fortune

Tim Leffel



Fourth edition of the popular guide to the world's best travel values on five continents. Country by country comparisons of costs for both budget and mid-range travelers. From award-winning travel writer and destinations expert Tim Leffel.

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The World's Cheapest Destinations

21 Countries Where Your Money is Worth a Fortune

Fourth Edition

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ISBN: 978-1-62141-947-1

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Published by BookLocker.com, Inc., Bradenton, Florida.

Printed in the United States of America on acid-free paper.

Booklocker.com, Inc.
2013

Fourth Edition

The World's Cheapest Destinations

21 Countries Where Your Money is Worth a Fortune

Fourth Edition

Tim Leffel

What others have to say:

"Tim Leffel has long been a guru of balancing the practicalities of cheap travel with a keen sense of judgment about the aesthetic value offered by varied countries around the world. In this newly researched and expanded edition, Tim's easy conversational style turns the book into a page-turner, leaving you hungry to set off on the many paths he opens up to the traveler's imagination."

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"The very first step to saving money when on the road is to figure out where you can stretch your money the furthest. Due to the ebb and flow of international finance, wars, and natural disasters... the cheapest places are always changing. Tim offers a great way to hit this moving target."

- Doug Lansky, author of more than 10 travel books including *First Time Around the World*

"Leffel wastes no time outlining some of the world's cheapest destinations in a concise and honest fashion. Refreshingly pointed, this compact guide is an ideal handbook for those looking to stretch their money further."

- Stuart McDonald, editor of Travelfish.org

"This is a great book for new travelers or for want-to-be backpackers. Tim gives a great rundown of destinations that are easier, safer and tastier than you may think. The local tourism board may not always agree with his honest assessments, but you should appreciate them. Update your passport before you read this book because you will want to hit the road afterwards."

- Chris Christensen, *Amateur Traveler* and *This Week in Travel* podcasts

“Want to know where it’s cheap to travel and how do it for less than \$100 a day? Then *The World’s Cheapest Destinations* is the book for you! Tim Leffel makes me want to pack up my bags because in most of these places it's cheaper than staying home.”

- Johnny Jet DiScala, editor of Johnnyjet.com

“There are two ways to travel overseas: You can visit overpriced countries, or you can go to equally exciting destinations on the cheap. Tim Leffel is a master storyteller who graciously informs us on how to maximize our travel experience the inexpensive way. This latest edition updates the best locations worldwide where you can stretch your travel budget to the fullest!”

- Brad Olsen, author of *World Stompers* and *Future Esoteric*

“In Tim's 4th edition of *The World's Cheapest Destinations*, he scoured the world again to help travelers make the most of their travel dollars. Even though I've been studying travel writing and guides for 15+ years, I always learn something new with each edition of Tim's book.

- Sean Keener, CEO of Bootsnnall.com

“With a little ingenuity, a bit of creativity and this book, you'll be able to travel many places in the world you never thought possible. *The World's Cheapest Destinations* is hands down the best guide to traveling the world on a budget.”

- Beth Whitman, editor of WanderlustAndLipstick.com

“If the size of your travel budget is your starting point (after all, whose isn't?), the practical advice in this updated edition will make it much easier to design an affordable trip. The actual prices quoted look spot on in the countries which I have recently visited.”

- Susan Griffith, author of *Work Your Way Around the World* and *Gap Years for Grown-ups*

“Tim is correct: where you travel has more to do with saving money than how you travel. The cheapest hostel dorm bunk in Zurich will be more expensive than a large, quality hotel room in Bangkok. I've been to most of the countries outlined by Tim and can attest that they are great value destinations. This book is a must for affordable travel planning.”

- Gary Arndt, editor of Everything-Everywhere.com

“A succinct, useful guide to the less expensive countries of the world.”

- Rolf Potts, author of *Vagabonding*

“As dollars get ever tighter, this book becomes all the more precious. But what's most brilliant about it is that Leffel really doesn't just think ‘cheap’—he thinks ‘smart.’ As valuable a travel book as you'll find today, in ways too numerous to even count, no matter what your budget.”

- Chris Epting, author of *Led Zeppelin Crashed Here* and *Marilyn Monroe Dyed Here*

“Tim manages to use his considerable knowledge of travel to put to rest the myth that travel has to be expensive by highlighting 21 destinations in the world where your money goes far. His tips and suggestions will prove invaluable for someone who desires to travel but has a limited budget.”

- Nomadic Matthew Kepnes, author of *How to Travel the World on \$50 Per Day*

“Take it from a travel editor who has spent many years reading about destinations and talking to writers who have traveled everywhere. This book is full of great advice and steers you with practical and useful tips to the cheapest places on earth. So many travel books are full of generalizations; this one stands out for specific tips, specific places, and the kinds of details that can help you make a vacation even if you're close to broke.”

- Max Hartshorne, editor of GoNOMAD.com

“Warning: this book is hazardous to your ability to stay in one place. With your copy of *The World's Cheapest Destinations* in hand, you can see the world while leaving your savings account untouched.”

- Chris Guillebeau, author of *The \$100 Startup*

“This is the book I wish I had before I went traveling. It would have saved me a lot of money and provided better insight on what to expect.”

- Michael Tieso, editor-in-chief of Art of Backpacking

“It's no fluke that the world's cheapest destinations are often also the most amazing to visit. This valuable guide inadvertently attests that money can't buy happiness by recommending countries where the locals smile without it. “

- Bruce Northam, author of *The Directions to Happiness: A 125-Country Quest for Life Lessons*

“Buy this before you buy a plane ticket--it's the best first investment for a budget traveler. Leffel provides real numbers and practical money-saving tips, and he wisely weighs the appeal of a country as well. As a result, *The World's Cheapest Destinations* are places you really want to go.”

- Zora O'Neill, author of *The Rough Guide to Cancun & The Yucatan* and *Moon New Mexico*

“This is the book that anyone planning a vacation should read because it's exactly what travelers who circle the globe all year long already know: it can be really cheap to travel, you just have to know where.”

- Christine Gilbert, editor of almostfearless.com

"*The World's Cheapest Destinations* is an entertaining read sharing the secrets that long-term travelers and backpackers have known for years. No room for excuses now, with this book you'll have the tools and information you need to travel the world in comfort on a budget. It's an excellent resource for planning and researching your next vacation destination or around-the-world trip and is something that we'll be using regularly for reference whenever we do our own travel planning."

- Deb and Dave, editors of ThePlanetD.com

"A great book if you're on a budget. Even better if you're looking for a more authentic travel experience."

- Peter Moore, author of *No Shitting in the Toilet* and *The Wrong Way Home*

"Tim Leffel has done it again! With this new edition, *The World's Cheapest Destinations* continues to be the most useful, comprehensive book I've ever seen about traveling cheaply. Leffel thoroughly breaks it down for strategic-minded, value-seeking travelers. I recommend this book for shoestring travelers, flashpackers, and glampers alike, or to anyone looking to milk the most from their travels. This book is useful from the very beginning dreaming and planning phases of your upcoming journeys."

- Joshua Berman, author of *Moon Nicaragua* and *Maya 2012: A Guide to Celebrations in Mexico, Guatemala, Belize & Honduras*

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(Co-written with Rob Sangster)

For Alina

May her third passport have many stamps.

Tim Leffel

ASIA



Laos

I once wrote: “Laos is one of those rare destinations where travelers can still feel like they’ve beaten the pack.” Alas, all good things must come to an end and now this former backwater is a full-blown backpacker magnet.

Vientiane is still one of the sleepest capital cities around, but it is growing fast and more motorbikes hit the nice, new roads each week. This is the only real city, with Luang Prabang being the main tourist stop, and Vang Vieng being the must-visit backpacker town for boozing it up at riverside bars and floating down the river on inner tubes. After at least 27 people died in 2011 doing that and other not so bright acts (like swinging on rope swings into rocky waters when the water was low), the government cracked down and shut a whole slew of bars. Time will tell if we hit a happy medium between the way it was (when tourists were rare) and the way it got (travelers outnumbering locals 15 to 1 and having no sensibility about local norms or culture).

In general, still-communist Laos has been content to sit quietly in the corner, forsaking the mad rush for tourism and investment dollars pursued by Thailand and Vietnam. Tourism still seems like kind of a hobby here: the official Laos Tourism website looks like it was put together by a high school student. They’re not buying glossy ads in magazines or bringing loads of

writers over on press junkets. Most of the marketing has been word of mouth.

If you get off the well-worn trail, most of this sparsely populated nation is still wild and undeveloped, with rustic bamboo villages dotting nearly all of the countryside. Sometimes too wild: this is not a place where you want to ride a motorbike alone, looking wealthy, in the middle of nowhere.

The country is picking up the pace on its own terms, however, especially in terms of facilities for visitors. In the 1990s you couldn't find a hotel in the whole country that charged more than \$100 per night. Now the jet set is spending ungodly sums for the best properties in Vientiane and Luang Prabang. Vang Vieng has become a pure backpacker ghetto and has little of Laos left in it, but you've got to admit, they showed they could build to meet demand.

Otherwise, commercialism is still pretty rare. Apart from loudspeakers blasting communist anthems in the morning in some towns, you're not assaulted by much of anything. Few billboards or in-your-face advertisements for anything are around, and there are even fewer touts or scams to avoid.

The countryside scenes are like something straight out of an old explorer's drawing and some areas outside of Vang Vieng are reminiscent of old Chinese paintings, pointy peaks and all. Perhaps best of all, you can observe a country where tourism has not had a huge impact, where everyone hasn't learned to view you as a walking dollar sign—yet. You need to bargain regularly to avoid getting ripped off: communist countries tend to instill a sense that it's okay to soak the foreigners whenever possible.

There are no huge monuments or "must see" attractions, but the whole city of Luang Prabang is a UNESCO World Heritage site. It's a small, pleasant city made for walking and biking, filled with beautiful Buddhist temples and monks galore. There are some interesting side trips from here as well.

The capital city of Vientiane also has its share of temples and a bizarre Buddha sculpture park that's definitely worth experiencing.

Tim Leffel

Two people can tour the country for \$20 to \$40 per day as budget travelers, much less in the villages, where both standards and costs take a dive. This is a country where a single traveler can still get by for less than \$15 a day if being really frugal.

The excellent food is a serious willpower test, however, so a little more money will make life more pleasant—and your sleep after dinner less sweaty at night. Outside the three main tourist areas and maybe Pakse, it would be hard for a mid-range couple to spend much over \$60 to \$80 a day unless going on a lot of adventure tours. Spending \$100 per person per day would only be possible if staying at the fanciest hotels, eating at the most expensive restaurant, and ordering imported French wine with lunch and dinner. If you book yourself on a tour that costs \$350 a day per person (as I've seen advertised), be assured that at least half that money is going to the tour agency.

The Lao currency, the kip, has gotten more stable the past few years, but the Thai baht is considered a hard currency here. At around 8,800 kip to the U.S. dollar as this book was being put together, you might want to carry around a calculator and wear P^{cubed} pants with big pockets. The largest bank note is barely worth \$10 and you'll have trouble finding change for it. You need to bring ample cash as well, or spend some time hanging out at banks: as hard as it may be to believe this day and age, there are only a handful of ATM facilities in the main cities and the daily limit is restricted to around \$70. The machines frequently run out of cash. You can use U.S. dollars for many purchases and banks themselves can distribute higher sums inside.

Accommodation:

Throughout Laos, it pays to travel with a partner; there are not all that many single rooms, and dorms are almost nonexistent. For a double room, the capital is much more expensive than the rest of the country. While \$8 will get you a

dingy hotel with troubled plumbing in Vientiane, it will get you a lovely hotel room with a four-poster bed in other towns.

Basic guesthouses start at around \$4 for a double with shared bath. There are plenty of places under \$7 that will provide a private bath with hot water and maybe even throw in maid service and towels. For \$10 and up you'll start getting air conditioning and other nice additions. In the dirt road villages, however, facilities are limited. You might only pay a dollar or two a person, but your guesthouse will charitably be described as "spartan." All over the country choices are opening up all the time. While any old hovel with spare rooms could get business before in Vientiane, now they actually have to clean the place.

At the middle and high ranges, Laos is one of the world's great bargains. For the price of a budget motel at home, you'll get something special. Many mid-range properties are atmospheric French Colonial mansions or former royal residences, loaded with amenities for \$25-\$75 per night. Shelling out \$10 more than the standard rate will often put you into a suite.

If you're paying the equivalent rate of a 4-star airport hotel at home, you should be in a palatial room, in an elegant hotel, and have people waiting on you hand and foot.

Food & Drink:

It's not famous, but the food in Laos is often fantastic. It has been influenced by Chinese, Thai, French, and Vietnamese cuisine, so there are always some interesting combinations of meat, rice, vegetables, and noodles. Even the street food is fresh and delicious—usually some kind of noodle soup, often for a dollar or so. You can always find crusty baguettes.

A great meal in a simple restaurant will often come in under \$5 for two people. In Vientiane, you can find similar cheap meals, but you'll probably be tempted to go up a notch at least once. Here you can get a full-fledged French dinner for two for under \$20, including drinks. The scores of foreign aid workers have definitely upped the level of refinement, and

Tim Leffel

there are plenty of choices where you can easily spend the equivalent of a local worker's monthly salary if you want.

You can also find some great bakeries, which is a rarity in this part of the world. For the road-weary traveler, a cup of good coffee and a pastry in the morning can do wonders, especially when your bill is less than two bucks.

The national beer, Beerlao, is thankfully more interesting than its name. It's usually around \$1.50 for a 20-ounce bottle and can sometimes be found on draft for a buck. Imports are rare and double the price, except for the odd Chinese beer brought down the river.

Lao Lao is homemade rice liquor that could probably double as motorcycle fuel in a pinch. It's ridiculously cheap at around \$1.50 a liter—cheaper than bottled water sometimes—and goes into all kinds of punches and mixed drinks at backpacker bars.

Service has traditionally been laughably bad in restaurants, especially outside the capital, but it's getting better as a younger generation grows up being around lots more tourists. If you're in a hurry, eat at a street stall. Otherwise, settle in for a leisurely meal, even if you're the only customer in the place.

Transportation:

Transportation costs have gone up with the price of fuel rising, so keep that in mind if looking at old guidebooks or articles.

Travel is primarily by speedboat or barge on the Mekong River, by rickety airplane, or on buses that range from express VIP air-conditioned buses to seats on the back of a pickup truck. None of the options are known for being too comfortable, but the scenery and insight into local culture usually make up for it.

Barely over half of the country's roads are paved, but the main ones get better each year. The mountain road between Luang Prabang and the capital is now relatively smooth sailing. Several buses make this trip each day and if you can spare a

few more dollars, it's worth it. Figure on around \$1 per hour of travel for the worst bus and about \$2 an hour for the very best VIP one, if it's available. Minivans offer door-to-door service from traveler hotels for a bit more money.

On less traveled routes, however (including the hill tribe areas in the north), expect to bounce around on the back of a converted pick-up truck for hours, breathing in lots of dust. Ironically, prices go up according to time in transit and the scarcity of travelers; the worse the ride, the more it will probably cost you for remote areas.

The two-day slow Mekong barge trip from Huay Xai to Luang Prabang (\$15 to \$30) isn't all that comfortable, but it's a highlight for many visitors. A noisy speedboat can do the trip in a day for double the price. As roads get a bit better and buses offer cheaper rides, these boats are becoming more of a tourist trip than a local one. You'll need to find other backwater routes to really feel like an explorer. In general the other long ones are \$12 to \$15.

Local flights are quite reasonable, usually \$40 to \$100 one-way. Popular routes fill up fast, so booking ahead is essential.

City buses in the capital cost only 20¢. Bike rentals everywhere average \$1 to \$4 per day. (Many of the Chinese bikes have "Highly Dependable" embossed on the frame, but don't bet on it.) Motorcycle rentals are \$4 to \$10 where they are allowed. Bargain for tuk-tuk style taxis, which are generally \$1.50 to \$3 to get where you need to go. Hiring a car and driver is generally far cheaper than renting a car yourself: commonly \$20 to \$35 a day, depending on your bargaining skills and the current price of fuel.

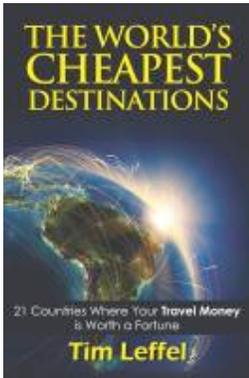
You can fly into the capital or arrive at the Thailand/Laos border by bus or train in several places. Crossing from Vietnam is much more expensive, but is another option.

What Else?

- In Luang Prabang you can get a massage and a sauna visit for about \$5 and hour-long massages for \$5 are easy to find.

Tim Leffel

- Marijuana grows wild all over the country and sells for less than \$3 an ounce. (It's often sold by old ladies in the market, who also change money—one stop shopping!) It can show up in shakes and pizzas sometimes, along with magic mushrooms. The police don't seem to be too bothered about it, but technically the penalties can be harsh. Opium has been dealt with more seriously by the government, but is still a staple of blank-staring men in small villages.
- Things to buy: t-shirts with nonsense English on them, baskets, woven and embroidered clothing, and Buddhist amulets.
- If you'd like to stick around for a while, you can rent a house in the capital for under \$200 per month, even less further afield.
- What you can get for a buck or less: a noodle soup lunch or two at a street stall, two cups of coffee, three servings of six-chili papaya salad (som tam), two gigantic pineapples chopped up, two bunches of bananas, a large fruit shake or two, bike rental for half a day, a short tuk-tuk ride, a bottle of lao-lao, a haircut and a shave, a kilo of laundry washed and dried, admission to almost anything.



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