

It may not be worth what it once was, but \$100 can still buy you plenty of splurge—if you know where in the world to spend it.



# the power of \$100

90 Budget Travel



**Kathmandu** You're never going to get to Mount Everest if you wait to be invited on a mountaineering trek. So the next time you're in Nepal, hail a one-hour sightseeing flight on Buddha Air. Everyone gets a window seat for the awesome fly-by—five miles away, the world's "peak" peak juts starkly into the icy skies while you snap pictures from

that hovers over the thundering mists of the American side. Your basic sky-soaring Kodak moment costs \$18 for about 10 minutes, but splash out for a ride on Friday nights in summer—you'll get a rocket's-eye view of the weekly fireworks show held over the Falls. \$30 adults, \$15 kids, 716/278-0824, [www.thegreatamericanballooncompany.com](http://www.thegreatamericanballooncompany.com).

## TAKU SMOKERIES' WILD ALASKAN SALMON

**Juneau, Alaska.** On three acres of downtown waterfront property, Taku Smokeries prepares over 6 million pounds of wild salmon each year. The salmon are bought directly from local fishermen—and not farmed using questionable chemical processes; you can get everything from steaks to caviar, and the finely marbled meat is flavored over alderwood smokers. Taku's signature flavor is the scarlet-colored hot smoked salmon, but its jerky—in regular or peppered—is the real catch. \$98 for three pounds of hot smoked, \$56 for a pound and a half of jerky, 800/582-5122, [www.takusmokeries.com](http://www.takusmokeries.com).



The Hotel Hershey spa

## Chocolate indulgences for the tragically hip (and thighs)

**Chicago** With the recent opening of the Peninsula Chicago's new bar, Chocolate at The Pen, on the Magnificent Mile of Michigan Avenue, indulging after-dinner desires is a piece of cake. Petite delicacies include chocolate coffee tart, chocolate moelleux raspberry compote, brownie key lime pie, and chocolate pot de crème, plus unlimited coffee, cappuccino, and espresso. Such decadence is available Fridays and Saturdays from 8 P.M. to midnight and is highlighted by a luscious chocolate centerpiece. \$19.50, 312/573-6695, [www.peninsula.com](http://www.peninsula.com).

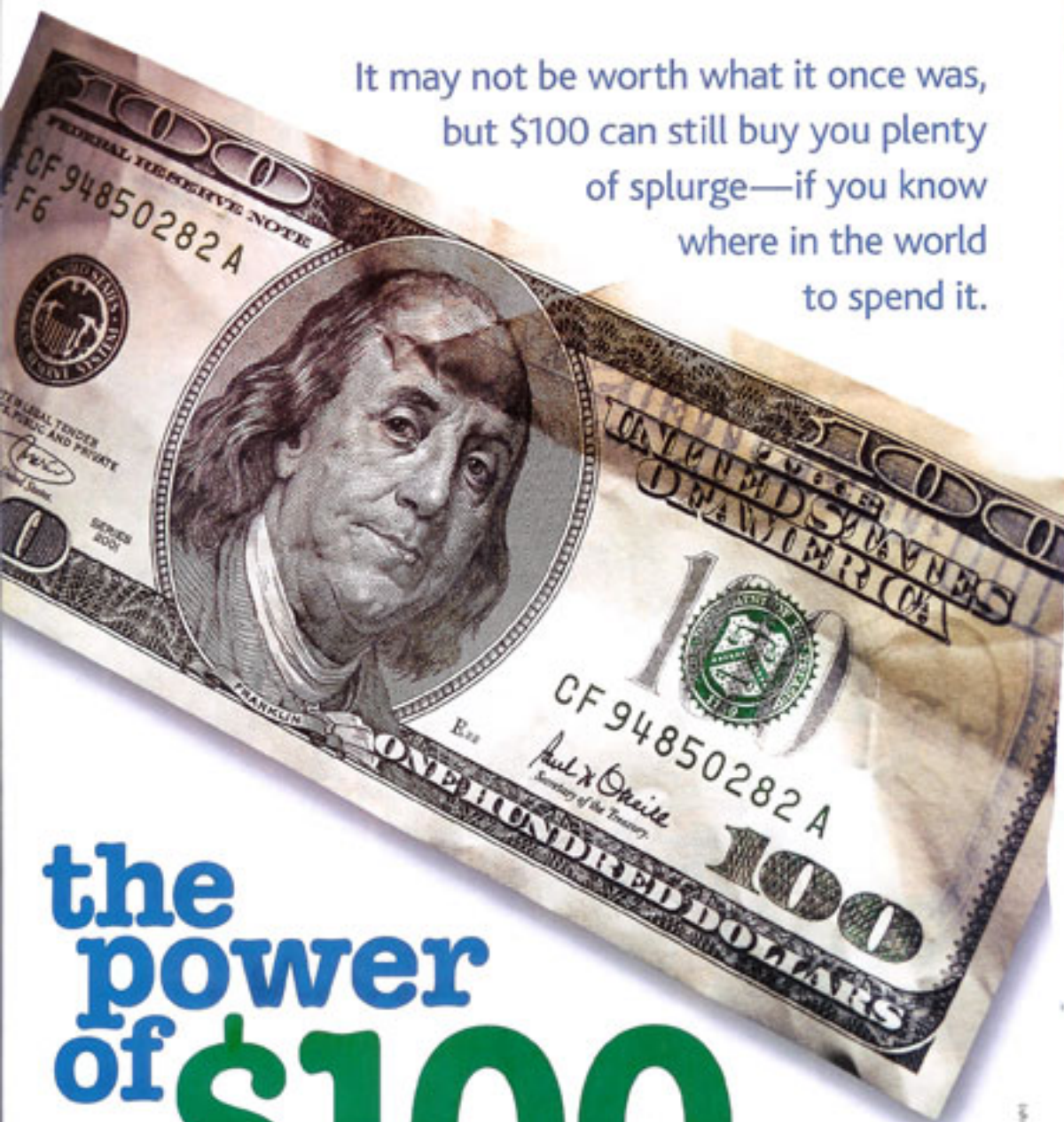
**Boston** "I'll have the Mexican chocolate soup to start, the chocolate lasagna for my main course, and for dessert, hmmm...I guess I'll have everything else." So goes an order at the Langham Hotel's all-you-can-devour chocolate buffet every Saturday, September to May. The menu typically includes chocolate croissant bread pudding, bitter-sweet mousse cake, molten fondant, marble cheesecake, brioche, truffles, dark-caramel butter tart, and chocolate coconut dacquoise. \$23; children 4–12, \$12.50; 617/451-1900, x7125.

**Oaxaca** At the lush courtyard restaurant El Naranjo, chef Iliana de la Vega shows you how to cook up seven traditional Oaxacan moles featuring local chocolate, chiles, and spices. Students also learn how to make spiced-up regional side dishes, desserts, and drinks. The half-day class includes a market tour and the festive three-course lunch that you've created together. \$60, 011-52/951-514-1878, [www.elnaranjo.com.mx](http://www.elnaranjo.com.mx).

**Hershey, Pa.** In this candy-crazy town, people dip everything in chocolate—including their bodies. The Hotel Hershey spa is the place to indulge in mouthwatering, calorie-free treatments such as a 30-minute Chocolate Bean Polish (a gentle exfoliation of cocoa bean husks and walnut shells, \$60) or an hour-long Chocolate Fondue Wrap (featuring warm moor mud with essence of cocoa, \$100). People with zero self-control around the brown stuff throw themselves into the 25-minute Whipped Cocoa Bath (a skin-softening soak in a tub of foaming chocolate milk, \$45). 877/772-9988, [www.spaathotelhershey.com](http://www.spaathotelhershey.com).

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has a Ph.D. in wetlands ecology and has lived on the swamp for more than 30 years. His tours use nimble,

## Florida manatees



quiet boats that come within yards of gators, egrets, herons, nutria, feral hogs, and snapping turtles. The price includes narrated, round-trip shuttle transportation from New Orleans,

35 miles away. \$45, 985/641-1769, [www.honeyislandswamp.com](http://www.honeyislandswamp.com).

**Fort Lauderdale** The 80-minute Ride the Ducks tour cruises waterways and streets in 35-passenger amphibious bus-boats similar to those used to invade Normandy in World War II. While tooling past yachts and lavish estates, passengers blow on “wacky quackers” to annoy—er, greet—pedestrians. \$21 adults, \$13 kids under 12, 954/467-8225, [www.lauderducks.com](http://www.lauderducks.com).

**Oakland** Hop in an authentic Venetian gondola run by Gondola Servizio. You and your *amore* will be serenaded by a dashing gondolier during the 25-minute trip around Lake Merritt, the first wildlife sanctuary in the country. The ride is most

atees are justifiably scared of speedboats, so to see them, take an American Pro Diving swimming and snorkeling tour. You might find the gentle creatures begging for a belly rub. These “sea cows” congregate in the warm waters of the Homosassa River and are at peak numbers in the morning—slither into your wet suit for the 6:30 A.M. swim to get the most manatee for your money. \$70 including equipment, 800/291-3483, [www.americanprodiving.com](http://www.americanprodiving.com).

**New York City** Visit one of 15 working theaters—eavesdrop on rehearsals, see designers in action—on a two-hour Broadway Open House Tour. Guides gossip about the Great White Way, with juicy tidbits on the architecture, history, and big-name talent. \$25, 800/223-7565, [www.livebroadway.com](http://www.livebroadway.com).



Sunset Ranch

**Burbank, Calif.** Only about 250 people a day are privileged to explore the sets, scene shops, and back lots of Warner Bros. in an over-size golf cart on the two-hour Studios VIP Tour. Peek at working sets used in classic (*Casablanca*, *The Dukes of Hazzard*) and current (*ER*, *The West Wing*) hits. Star sightings are not unusual, and you may even be invited to attend a taping. \$35, 818/846-1403, [www.wbsf.com](http://www.wbsf.com).

**Hollywood** It's normal to take a bus tour of the City of Angels, but few can claim they've seen it from a saddle.

Sunset Ranch offers a three-hour ride through sage-covered trails in the Hollywood Hills. Highlights include close-ups of the HOLLYWOOD sign, celebs' homes, and panoramas of downtown L.A., Santa Monica, and Burbank. \$45, 323/464-9612, [www.sunsetranchhollywood.com](http://www.sunsetranchhollywood.com).

**Houston** Each year, Space Center Houston attracts more than a half-

million visitors, who pay \$18 to climb aboard the tram for a 90-minute prerecorded audio tour. But for \$63, 12 people each day are allowed to join the Level Nine Tour, a four-hour behind-the-scenes extravaganza that visits New Mission Control, otherwise inaccessible; the Space Environment Simulation Lab, where spacecraft are tested against extreme heat and cold; and the Robotics Lab. The tour also includes a hot lunch in the Astronaut Cafeteria. Tang, anyone? Reservations required, ages 16 and older, 1601 NASA Pkwy., 281/244-2100, [www.spacecenter.org](http://www.spacecenter.org).

**San Francisco** Chef, author, and tour-guide operator Shirley Fong-Torres will lead you around Chinatown, plying you with breakfast, dim sum snacks, and lunch. \$75, 415/981-8989, [www.wokwiz.com](http://www.wokwiz.com).

**Sydney** City tours can be so unglamorous, so tart yours up with a Farrah wig and work it! Hire a drag queen of your own to lead you on a fabulous motor-coach whirlwind—the surf boys of Bondi, the steps of the Opera House (careful in those heels!), and, of course, the pubs and



Shirley Fong-Torres

boutiques of Oxford Street, home of Priscilla, Queen of the Desert. The cheapest seats on Sydney By Diva's tours are \$42, but it's all about looking good, honey, so spring for first class up front, where Kylie songs are sung and the champagne flows so freely that your mascara may smear. \$57, 011-61/2-9360-5557, [www.sydneybydiva.com](http://www.sydneybydiva.com).

## WALT DISNEY CONCERT HALL

**Los Angeles** Don't just admire Frank Gehry's spectacular creation from the outside. Tickets for the Los Angeles Philharmonic generally start at \$35, but if there's no chorus in an upcoming show, \$15 choral bench seats are released at noon on the Tuesday two weeks ahead of time. The Philharmonic plays October through June (its summer home is the Hollywood Bowl, where seats can go as low as \$1). 323/850-2000, [www.musiccenter.org/wdch](http://www.musiccenter.org/wdch).

Courtesy of American Pro Diving Center (lower left); Marc Lecureuil (bottom); Robert Holmes (right)