



WORDS AND THEIR STORIES

What Does 'On a Shoestring' Mean?

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And now, *Words and Their Stories*, from VOA Learning English.

On this program we explore words and expressions in the English language. We give you definitions, examples, and notes on usage. Sometimes we even use them in conversations.

Today we talk about a common object. Shoestrings are very useful for keeping our shoes on. But they are also useful for describing a situation where money is **tight**, meaning there is not much of it.

A budget is the amount of money available for some purpose. So, if you are on a shoestring budget, you do not have a lot of money. You have just enough to get by. If you can get by on very little money, you are able to live on a shoestring. Sometimes we shorten this expression and just say “on a shoestring.”

We have other ways of describing this situation. For example, you might say you are living paycheck-to-paycheck. This means you get your paycheck but by the time your next one comes, you have used all your money to pay your bills.

Living paycheck-to-paycheck can also be called living hand-to-mouth. The money goes right into your hand and then you must buy the most **basic** of **necessities** – food. You do not have money to spend on extras. Everything you **earn** goes to pay for your immediate needs – things like, food, shelter, medicine, and transportation.

But now let’s go back to our shoestrings. You can do a lot of things “on a shoestring.”

For example, if you can travel on a shoestring, you travel very **cheaply**. You do not spend money on costly hotels. You look for good deals. You might use **coupons**, **discount** offers or other ways to save money. And you may plan to travel at less costly times. People who travel on a shoestring are often called budget travelers.

I learned how to travel on a shoestring when I studied in China. As a student, I did not have much money. So I traveled everywhere by train and stayed at universities. Traveling on a shoestring let me go to many more places.

But how did shoestring come to describe a tight budget – one with little money? Well, some word experts say it comes from people who sold small items on the streets. These items often included shoestrings.

Now let's hear two friends use this expression.

A: Hey, I hear you're going on vacation next week. Where are you off to?

B: First, I'm going to Paris and then heading to Barcelona. Finally I'll finish up my trip in Milan.

A: That is some trip! You must have saved up for a long time to have enough money for that kind of travel budget.

*B: Not at all! I am an expert at traveling anywhere on a shoestring. In Paris, I'm staying with friends. In Barcelona, I found a cheap **dorm room** at a university. And in Milan, I'm working on a farm in exchange for a free room and meals.*

A: Wow, you are REALLY good at shoestring travel. By not spending a lot of money on hotels, you're able to go to more places.

B: Exactly!

And that's all the time we have for this *Words and This Stories*.

Are you learning English on a shoestring? If so, keep listening to VOA Learning English. Our high-quality content is free!

Until next time ... I'm Anna Matteo.

Anna Matteo wrote this lesson for VOA Learning English.

Words in This Story

tight – *adj.* characterized by such difficulty

basic – *adj.* of, relating to, or forming the base or basis

necessity – *n.* something that is necessary

earn – *v.* to receive money in return for effort and especially for work done or services completed

cheaply – *adv.* available at low cost or at less than the true value

coupon – *n.* a voucher entitling the holder to a discount for a particular product

discount – *adj.* selling goods or services for less than their regular

dorm room – *n.* a large sleeping room containing several beds in a college of university