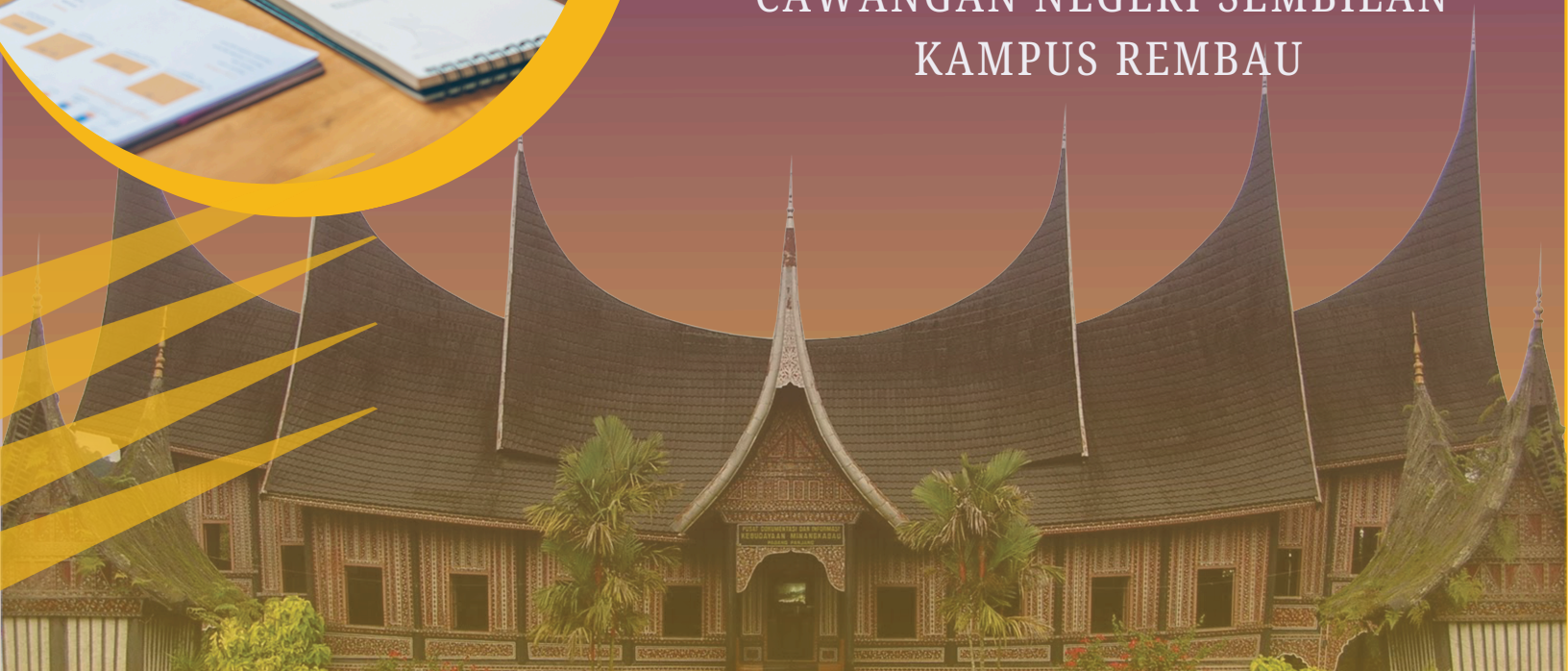


# RONA TINTA

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# SMART ESCAPES: TRAVEL BIG ON A SMALL BUDGET

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When the school year or a stacked work project finally lets up, the first thought on everyone's mind is, "Time for a vacation!" Dreaming of trading endless assignments, Zoom calls, or late-night essays for soft sand, breezy mountaintops, or even just a change of scenery is the best kind of daydream. A getaway is more than relaxing—it's like hitting the reset button so we can come back energized. Still, one little voice always pops up: "Yeah, but can I afford it?"

Travel can snowball into a big number fast. Plane tickets, a roof for the night, three meals a day, and fun excursions can rack up so quickly that a "quick trip" suddenly looks like buying a new gaming system. For families juggling a budget—or anyone just trying to stay smart with cash—the dream vacation can feel like a luxury. The bright side is we don't have to wipe out our savings to enjoy the holiday we deserve. A bit of planning, a dash of flexibility, and a few strategic picks can land us an awesome trip we'll remember forever—without our savings account hating us.



**Pick the right destination.** Paris, Tokyo, and New York are all cool, but they're expensive. Lesser-known places and hidden gems can be just as exciting and far more affordable. Instead of congested Bali, try Lombok or the Gili Islands—tropical views without the tourist crowds. If Phuket is your dream, consider Krabi or Langkawi, which both offer gorgeous beaches and a laid-back vibe. Choosing a smaller town over a capital will also stretch your money further. Go one step further and travel off-peak. You'll skip the crowds, save money, and share photos with more blue sky than tourist heads. Win-win!

**Tackle airfare smartly.** Airline tickets are often the biggest expense, but you don't need to eat ramen all month to afford them. Booking three to four months in advance is ideal, but flexibility saves the most money. Shifting your flight by just two days can mean big savings. Set price alerts on Skyscanner or Traveloka, and sign up for local airline newsletters—AirAsia, Batik Air, and Malaysia Airlines regularly announce flash bargains. Weekend flights fill up quickly and push up prices, so try departing on a Tuesday or Wednesday. Feeling adventurous? Flying into Senai before heading to Desaru or Mersing—or landing in Johor Bahru and taking a bus to Singapore—can be cheaper than direct routes.



**Save on accommodation.** Hotels are the default for many of us, but they're not always the most budget-friendly option. Short-stay rentals through platforms like Airbnb or Agoda Homes are increasingly popular, especially if you're staying several nights. Many come with kitchens, so you can cook simple meals instead of eating out constantly—a huge plus if you're travelling with family.

**Eat like a local.** One of the coolest parts of travelling is the food, and you don't need a huge budget to eat like a star. The best meals are often found at roadside stalls, local markets, or small family-run shops. They're usually cheaper than touristy restaurants and give you a true taste of local flavour. Buying fresh fruit or snacks at the market is fun and affordable. If you're on a longer trip, cooking a few meals

yourself helps cut costs while letting you soak up the local vibe. Of course, splurging on a fancy dinner is a treat—but saving it for one special night makes it feel even more rewarding.

**Enjoy low-cost adventures.** You don't need to drop a ton of cash to have an unforgettable vacation. Some of the best activities cost next to nothing. Relaxing on a public beach is completely free, yet the sun, surf, and good vibes create memories that last a lifetime. Many cities offer free walking tours led by locals whose stories are way better than anything you'll read on a brochure. Museums often have free entry days, and just wandering the streets, browsing markets, or chilling in a park can be as rewarding as any pricey tour. If you're into the outdoors, hiking trails give you epic views without costing a ringgit. Honestly, it's the little things—catching a sunset, chatting with a food cart owner, or stumbling into a cool neighbourhood—that you'll remember most.



**Pack smart.** What you put in your suitcase can also save you money. Bringing sunscreen, a refillable water bottle, and some homemade road snacks helps you skip overpriced airport shops and tourist traps. If your destination is chilly, layering warm clothes from home beats splurging on a bulky jacket you'll use only once. And always leave a bit of space in your bag for souvenirs—so you don't end up paying extra for another checked bag on the way home.

At the end of the day, vacations are about the memories, not the receipts. Later, you'll remember the jokes that had you in stitches, the sunsets that painted the sky, the amazing snacks you tried, and the new friends you made—not the ringgit you spent. With a little planning, some flexibility, and an open mind, you can enjoy a big adventure without breaking the bank. The best trips aren't the most expensive—they're the ones that fill you up, chill you out, and get you pumped for the next chapter.