



The Infamous Question: How Much Does A Guide Make?

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Throughout the course of the year, we receive hundreds of inquiries through our school about the wages one can expect to earn in the guide industry. Many folks have considered a career change or start in guiding, but are uncertain as to whether they can make a decent living. Because of the complexity of putting a career together in the guiding industry, we decided to author this article to help guide candidates understand the various aspects of what one can expect to earn and how to plan a career in the guide industry.

There are several key points that must be established before you start the exercise of determining how much you can make as a guide. They are as follows:

- ? Hunting guiding is seasonal, and the seasons vary state by state. The only exception to this is game ranches that operate with non regulated species. Determine which state you think you will guide in and find out the exact dates and duration of the season. Most seasons consist of a combination of various seasons based on a succession from archery to rifle. For example Montana can employ people from September 1 to November 30 for fall hunting and April 15 to June 30 for spring hunting.
- ? To build a career in guiding into a year round job, candidates will have to target different types of guiding opportunities for the various seasons. Each season has different types of "guiding" opportunities, examples would include:
 - o Winter: ski area, dog sled, hunting/fishing in southern hemisphere, fishing in warm climates in North America, ice fishing, trapping, trail ride wrangling in deserts, snow mobiling
 - o Spring: spring bear or turkey hunting, wet fly fishing
 - o Summer: trail ride wrangling, pack trips, fishing of all types, whitewater rafting, mountaineering
 - o Fall: All aspects of hunting
- ? Guide wages are normally paid in one of two ways: monthly or daily rate. In almost all instances, room and board is included and is an important aspect of determining not only how much you are really making, but perhaps more importantly, how much you are not spending.

- Tips are a critical component of overall pay, but determining how much you can count on is difficult. So much of it depends on what you are doing, where you are doing it, what history the outfit has, what clientele it serves, etc. In a considerable number of cases, tips will often materially exceed wages.
- There are as many scenarios for job combinations as there are guides. Few if any outfits can offer full time employment throughout the year. Some hunting outfitters only offer hunting in the fall, and then supplement their own income with something completely different in the off-season such as ranching or farming. As a guide, you will have to do the same. Examples of how working guides have settled in on a living that works for them are as follows:
 - Example #1: 31-year old guide with wife and two kids, works for an outfitter from April 15 to December 15, does pick-up construction in off season as well as runs lion dogs.
 - Example #2: 32-year old guide is a union heavy machinery operator January through August, quits each year and guides hunting from September through November
 - Example #3: 27-year old fishing guide, guides blue ribbon waters in Montana March to September, guides fishing trips in Chile from October to February
 - Example #4: 55-year old married home owner, log smiths all months outside of May, September through November
 - Example #5: 35-year old married no children, ski patrol in winter, whitewater raft guide in summer, fall hunting guide
 - Example #6: 40-year old married two kids, works year round for an outfitter that offers four seasons of services on a guest ranch
- People in this line of work do it because they love it, not because they will become wealthy. It is impractical to try to compare the wage structure of guiding to any other industry, especially if you try to calculate an hourly wage. You need to determine what you need and where your life goals are. Only then can you determine if this will be enough for you

For as many different types of guide jobs and seasons there are, there is an equal number of pay grades. Additionally, pay will vary greatly from state-to-state. There are many other factors that go into the guide pay decision. Some of these include: does an outfitter use horses/mules or trucks/ATVs; length of season; private property hunts versus public land, and; level of experience and reputation in the guide industry.

To start your planning you have to decide what seasons you will work as a guide versus doing a trade or earning higher wages in traditional industries. You also have to decide where you want to live as wages are dramatically impacted by what part of the country you are looking.

The following table serves as a rough guideline of wages offered:

Job Description	Typical Season Duration	Day Rate or Monthly Salary	Estimate of Monthly Tips	Room & Board?
Winter sport guiding	December 1 to April 15	\$75 to \$225 a day	\$1,000	Not typically
Spring Bear/Turkey	April 1 to June 30	\$75 to \$150 per day	\$2,500	Yes
Spring/Summer Float Fishing Guide	March 1 to September 30	\$100 to \$250 per day	\$1,500-\$2,000	No
Trail Ride Wrangler	Summers in Mountains, Winters in Desert	\$1,000 to \$1,800 per month	\$1,800-\$2,500	Yes
Pack Trip Packer/Wrangler	Summers in Mountains	\$800-\$1,500 per month	\$800-\$1,200	Yes
Whitewater Raft Guide	Summers	\$800-\$1,500 per month	\$1,000 to \$2,000	Yes
Fall Hunting Guide	September-December (varies considerably by state)	\$75 to \$325 per day (important to know how many days you'll get)	\$2,400-\$4,800	Yes

So then the big question becomes, can I make a living doing this? There are so many factors that go into answering this question. A great deal of these factors are personal in nature. For some people, being single and moving around to different parts of the country or perhaps even between countries is the precise life style they are looking for. For others, there is a strong desire to settle down in one area, and perhaps buy a home and start a family. Finally, there are many people that only want to do this a portion of each year, perhaps to “scratch the itch”, and will still look to a more traditional industry in order to meet their personal financial goals. There is no question that the answer for you should be based on what your own personal goals are both in the near future as well as the long-term.

As you begin your planning, you need to consider what we call the “net-net” analysis of earning a living as a guide. The mistake that is often made is that folks evaluating a career in guiding often miscalculate their true net disposable income after expenses. If you only compare the gross income to other industry wages, you are only getting half the picture. To illustrate, the following example puts forth a very typical comparative situation.

Facts:

Jack Smith is 24 years old and has been working various jobs since he left high school. He has always hunted and fished his whole life. It seems this is truly been his life's passion, and when he reads magazine articles or views hunting shows, he always wonders why he isn't making a living doing what he loves to do. Even though he lives in a relatively small community, Jack has tired of living in the city and being caught up in the rat race. Jack has a job that pays \$20 an hour. He lives in an apartment, has to pay all the regular expenses associated with renting, plus he incurs several expenses that seem to be ordinary when living in a town or city. Jack is trying to assess whether a career in guiding makes sense for him, so he made a few calls and has determined that there are a couple of options he would consider to work given the seasonality of the industry. Jack's options can be best depicted in the following series of tables:

Table 1. Income Comparison

Description	Winter	Spring	Summer	Fall	Total
Option 1: Current Job	<u>\$9,600</u>	<u>\$9,600</u>	<u>\$9,600</u>	<u>\$9,600</u>	<u>\$38,400</u>
Option 2: Guiding					
Ski Lift Operator @\$10 per hour	\$4,900				\$4,900
Spring Bear Guide at \$100 per day (24 guiding days), \$750 tips per hunt (4)		\$2,400 + \$3,000			\$5,400
Summer Wrangler at \$1,100 per month, \$200 tips/week			\$3,300 + \$2,400		\$5,700
Fall Hunting Guide at \$100 per day (75 guiding days), \$600 per hunt tips (8)				\$7,000 + \$4,800	\$11,800
Total Income Option 2	<u>\$4,900</u>	<u>\$5,400</u>	<u>\$5,700</u>	<u>\$11,800</u>	<u>\$27,800</u>

Table 2. Expense Comparison

Description	Winter	Spring	Summer	Fall	Total
Option 1: Current Job					
Rent/Utilities	\$2,100	\$2,100	\$2,100	\$2,100	\$8,400
Truck/Ins/Gas	\$3,500	\$3,500	\$3,500	\$3,500	\$14,000
Food	\$2,000	\$2,000	\$2,000	\$2,000	\$8,000
Misc.	\$1,000	\$1,000	\$1,000	\$1,000	\$4,000
Total	<u>\$8,600</u>	<u>\$8,600</u>	<u>\$8,600</u>	<u>\$8,600</u>	<u>\$34,400</u>
Option 2: Guiding					
Rent/Utilities	\$2,100	\$1,000			\$3,100
Truck/Ins/Gas	\$3,500	\$3,200	\$3,100	\$3,100	\$12,900
Food	\$2,000	\$1,000	\$500	\$500	\$4,000
Misc.	\$1,000	\$600	\$600	\$600	\$2,800
Total	<u>\$8,600</u>	<u>\$5,800</u>	<u>\$4,200</u>	<u>\$4,200</u>	<u>\$22,800</u>

Table 3. "Net-Net" Computation

Description	Winter	Spring	Summer	Fall	Total
Option 1: Current Job					
Income	\$9,600	\$9,600	\$9,600	\$9,600	\$38,400
Expense	\$8,600	\$8,600	\$8,600	\$8,600	\$34,400
Net-Net Total	<u>\$1,000</u>	<u>\$1,000</u>	<u>\$1,000</u>	<u>\$1,000</u>	<u>\$4,000</u>
Option 2: Guiding					
Income	\$4,900	\$5,400	\$5,700	\$11,800	\$27,800
Expense	\$8,600	\$5,800	\$4,200	\$4,200	\$22,800
Net-Net Total	<u>(\$3,700)</u>	<u>(\$400)</u>	<u>\$1,500</u>	<u>\$7,600</u>	<u>\$5,000</u>

Certainly this is a very simple example but it illustrates that a even though wages over all will likely be lower, the amount of money that you can save by not incurring the typical expenses incurred living in a community can actually put you ahead of the game. Several of these assumptions would change if your goals are different then Jack. But if you are like Jack, and actually can be disciplined in keeping your living expenses to a real minimum, then you can actually put money away easier. It is hard to spend money when you spend all your time in the woods. I know of one guide who is now averaging \$150 per day in guide pay and \$1,000 a week/hunt in tips and has been stockpiling savings in order to build his own cabin on some land he bought. This year he saved nearly \$12,000.

In the final analysis, there are people who make things happen and there are those that watch things happen. There are several people that work as a guide and are reaching their financial goals and are doing what they truly love to do. But it didn't happen by accident, they didn't just fall into a lucky spot, they worked hard and made good decisions. So is there enough money in this line of work for you?