

Free Real Cloud Practice — The 2026 Guide

A B4LCILC guide · verified 13 August 2026

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Free Real Cloud Practice

Everything verified on 13 August 2026. The free-practice landscape changed more in the last twelve months than in the previous five, and most guides on the internet are now wrong. This one tells you what actually works today, what quietly died, and the exact order to do things in so you never start a countdown clock before you can use it.

The headline: **you can get real, hands-on AWS and Azure console time, with no credit card and no academic email, for free, from anywhere in the world.** That was barely true a year ago. It is true today, and the reason is a service that launched last month.

The five things that changed in 2026

Before anything else, unlearn these — they appear in almost every tutorial and course still online:

What most guides still say	What is actually true now
“AWS gives you 12 months free”	Gone since 16 July 2025. New accounts get \$100 credits at signup plus up to \$100 more earned — \$200 maximum, over a 6-month window — and the account closes automatically at 6 months or when the credits run out, whichever comes first.
“Use the free Microsoft Learn sandbox”	Discontinued. Microsoft’s own FAQ now says: <i>“Sandboxes are no longer available.”</i> Learn exercises require your own subscription.
“Practise on Play with Docker”	Shut down 1 March 2026. Docker now points people to iximiuz Labs and Google Cloud Shell instead.
“Oracle gives you 4 CPUs and 24 GB free forever”	Halved to 2 OCPU / 12 GB on 15 June 2026, with no announcement. Accounts over the new limit were shut down until manually resized.
“Get free DigitalOcean credit with the GitHub Student Pack”	Retired 1 August 2026 — and already-claimed credits were revoked.

The best answer: AWS Builder Center Sandboxes

This launched in July 2026 and it is the single most important free-practice development in years.

AWS now hands you a **real, pre-provisioned AWS account** — full console and CLI — attached to an eligible workshop, with **no credit card, no personal AWS account, and no possibility of a bill**. AWS’s own words: it removes “the need for a personal AWS account, credit card, or concerns about unexpected charges.”

Where	https://builder.aws.com/workshops
What you get	A real AWS account, console + CLI, inside a guided workshop (serverless APIs, VPCs, containers, AI services on Bedrock, and more)
Credit card	No
Academic email	No
Limits	8 hours per sandbox, one sandbox per week (resets Sunday), ~15 minutes to provision, everything auto-deleted afterwards
Best for	Your weekly real-AWS session. This is the backbone of a zero-cost practice routine.

How to get the most out of 8 hours: don’t spend them reading. Plan and rehearse the work *before* you launch — script it locally against LocalStack (below), write your commands into a file, then open the sandbox and execute. Eight focused hours a week is more real console time than most working engineers get.

Microsoft’s equivalent: Applied Skills

For Azure, the closest thing is **Microsoft Applied Skills** — and it is better in one respect, because you finish with a credential rather than just practice.

You get a **Microsoft-hosted live Azure environment** (no subscription of your own), a scenario delivered as simulated emails from a fictional employer, and 30–45 minutes to complete real configuration tasks that are automatically graded.

Where	https://learn.microsoft.com/en-us/credentials/applied-skills/
What you get	Real Azure console time in a hosted lab, plus a shareable credential
Credit card	No — no Azure subscription needed

Tracks	Azure Administrator, Developer, Network Engineer, Security, DevOps, Data Engineer, DBA, AI Engineer
Watch out	You cannot save and resume — launching counts as an attempt. Prepare first.

One honest caveat: Microsoft never states a price on the Applied Skills FAQ pages. Every secondary source reports them as free, and they have always been free, but treat “free” as verified-by-practice rather than verified-in-writing.

The no-card, no-academic-email set

These work for anyone, anywhere, with nothing but an email address. **This set alone is a complete curriculum.**

Resource	What you get	Link
AWS Builder Center Sandbox	Real AWS account, 8 h/week	https://builder.aws.com/workshops
Microsoft Applied Skills	Real Azure lab + credential	https://learn.microsoft.com/en-us/credentials/applied-skills/
Google Developer Program – GEAR	35 Google Skills credits every month, forever — real GCP labs in provisioned projects, roughly one skill badge a month. The most under-used free offer in the industry.	https://developers.google.com/program
AWS Skill Builder (free tier)	900+ free courses, free microcredentials (serverless, agentic AI, incident response), Cloud Quest Cloud Practitioner role	https://skillbuilder.aws/
AWS Educate	Free courses and badges from age 13, email only	https://aws.amazon.com/education/awseducate/
Killercoda	Free browser Kubernetes and Linux labs, pinned to the exact K8s version in the current CKA/CKAD/CKS exams	https://killercoda.com/playgrounds
Google Cloud Shell	Full Linux VM in the browser, 5 GB persistent home directory , 50	https://shell.cloud.google.com

Resource	What you get	Link
iximiuz Labs (free tier)	hours/week, gcloud + kubectrl + terraform + docker preinstalled 1 playground at a time, 1 hour daily, excellent container-internals material	https://labs.iximiuz.com
KodeKloud free tier	200+ free labs, 75+ free playgrounds; watch for their periodic “Free Learning Week”	https://kodekloud.com/free-courses
GitHub Codespaces	120 core-hours + 15 GB storage per month free on personal accounts — a full VS Code Linux box with Docker. No payment method required; it simply stops at the quota.	https://github.com/features/codespaces

A note on AWS Educate. AWS’s official page says anyone aged 13+ with any email address gets free hands-on labs. Independent reports say the lab sandbox is in practice limited to students at participating institutions, and that self-taught learners get a read-only portal. We could not resolve the contradiction. Sign up — it costs nothing — but test before you rely on it.

Practise real tooling with no cloud account at all

This is where most of your hours should go early on. These run on your own machine, cost nothing, expire never, and teach the same skills.

Tool	What it does	Link
LocalStack (free tier)	Emulates 30+ AWS services locally — S3, Lambda, DynamoDB, SQS, SNS, IAM, CloudFormation. Drive it with the real AWS CLI, then with Terraform/OpenTofu. Note: the old Community edition ended 23 March 2026 — the free tier now needs a (free, no-card) account and is non-commercial only.	https://www.localstack.cloud/pricing
Azurite	Microsoft’s official emulator for Azure Blob, Queue and	https://learn.microsoft.com/en-us/

Tool	What it does	Link
Cosmos DB Linux emulator	Table storage. Free, open source, no account. Cosmos DB NoSQL API locally, Docker, x64 and ARM. Still preview.	azure/storage/common/storage-use-azurite https://learn.microsoft.com/en-us/azure/cosmos-db/emulator-linux
Azure Functions Core Tools	The full Azure Functions runtime on your laptop, all triggers and bindings.	https://learn.microsoft.com/en-us/azure/azure-functions/functions-run-local
AWS SAM CLI local	Runs Lambda functions and API Gateway locally in Docker.	https://docs.aws.amazon.com/serverless-application-model/latest/developerguide/using-sam-cli-local.html
kind / minikube / k3s	Real Kubernetes on your own machine. The skill transfers directly to EKS and AKS.	https://kind.sigs.k8s.io/ · https://minikube.sigs.k8s.io/ · https://k3s.io/
Podman / Rancher Desktop / Colima	Container runtimes with no Docker Desktop licence question.	https://podman.io/ · https://rancherdesktop.io/
OpenTofu	The open-source fork of Terraform, no licence restrictions. Point it at LocalStack for the canonical zero-cost infrastructure-as-code lab.	https://opentofu.org/

Free tiers that genuinely never expire

Service	What is permanently free	Card?
Cloudflare Workers	100,000 requests/day, plus R2 object storage 10 GB (S3-compatible) and D1 5 GB. The best always-free serverless + storage combination available.	No
AWS always-free services	30+ services with no time limit — Lambda 1M requests/month , DynamoDB 25 GB , CloudFront 1 TB egress ,	Yes at signup

Service	What is permanently free	Card?
	SQS, SNS, CloudWatch basics, IAM, CloudFormation. ⚠️ S3, EC2 and RDS are NOT always-free — a very common mistake.	
Azure always-free services	65+ services — Functions 1M requests/month, App Service F1, Cosmos DB free tier, Azure DevOps free for 5 users with 1,800 CI minutes/month , Entra ID.	Yes
Google Cloud always-free	1 e2-micro VM (US regions only), Cloud Run 2M requests/month , Cloud Functions 2M invocations, BigQuery 1 TiB queries/month.	Yes
Oracle Cloud Always Free	2 OCPU / 12 GB ARM (halved in June 2026, still the most generous permanent free VM anywhere), 200 GB block storage, 2 autonomous databases, 10 TB/month egress. Runs k3s comfortably. Expect signup friction and “out of capacity” errors on ARM — retry across regions.	Yes (~\$1 hold)
Render	Permanent free tier for a small web service (512 MB, cold starts).	No

Dead or not worth your time in 2026: **Fly.io** (free tier replaced by a 2-VM-hour trial), **Railway** (trial only), **MinIO Community** (admin console stripped out, project in maintenance mode — use Cloudflare R2 or LocalStack instead).

If you are a student

Two offers change everything, and both need only a school email — **no credit card**:

- **Azure for Students** — **\$100 credit, valid 12 months, renewable every year you remain a student**, plus 65+ always-free services. The single most forgiving cloud offer in existence. <https://azure.microsoft.com/en-us/free/students>

- **Azure for Students Starter** — for those who don't meet the full-time-university test (age 13+ /16+). No credit, but a **\$0 spending limit**, so overspending is literally impossible. Available in 100+ countries.
<https://azure.microsoft.com/en-us/pricing/offers/ms-azr-0144p>
- **GitHub Student Developer Pack** — \$100 Azure credit, Heroku \$13/month for 24 months, and — the real prize — a **free LocalStack licence** giving you the paid-tier AWS emulator. <https://education.github.com/pack>

If you are unemployed or underemployed

AWS re/Start is the highest-value free option on this entire page, and almost nobody outside the industry knows it exists.

It is a **free, full-time, roughly 12-week cohort programme** with instructor-led training, real labs, employability coaching, **free certification exam vouchers**, and **introductions to employers**. No cost, no card, no tech background required. It runs through local partners in many countries — the UK, France, Australia, India, Uganda, South Africa, the US and more.
<https://aws.amazon.com/training/restart/>

If you have a company or a nonprofit

- **Microsoft for Startups Founders Hub** — up to \$150,000 in Azure credits, self-serve, **no equity and no funding required** to enter.
<https://www.microsoft.com/en-us/startups>
 - **AWS Activate** — up to \$5,000 for self-funded startups; up to \$200,000 with an accelerator or VC referral. <https://aws.amazon.com/startups/credits>
 - **Google for Startups Cloud** — \$2,000 at the Start tier, up to \$200,000 at Scale.
<https://cloud.google.com/startup/benefits>
 - **Nonprofits** — AWS gives up to **\$5,000/year** via TechSoup, Microsoft gives **\$2,000/year** in Azure credit. Both available globally through TechSoup's partner network.
 - **Hackathons** — Devpost and MLH events hand out \$50–\$500 promotional codes constantly. No card, global, and endlessly repeatable.
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The recommended order — and why order matters

Two of these offers start countdown clocks that **cannot be paused**: AWS's six months and Azure's thirty days. Everything in Phases 1 and 2 has no clock at all. **Do all of it first.**

Phase 0 — accounts to open today (no clock, no card, no risk)

1. A **GitHub account** — unlocks 120 free Codespaces core-hours a month.
2. **Google Developer Program**, then enrol in **GEAR** — 35 lab credits a month, forever.
3. An **AWS Builder ID** (this is *not* an AWS account and starts no clock) — unlocks Builder Center sandboxes.
4. **AWS Skill Builder** free account and a **Microsoft Learn** account.
5. If you're a student: the **GitHub Student Pack**, for the LocalStack licence.

Phase 1 — build real competence with no cloud account (weeks 1-4)

Docker or Podman plus **kind/k3d** for Kubernetes. **LocalStack** for AWS, driven by the AWS CLI and then OpenTofu. **Azurite + Cosmos emulator + Functions Core Tools** for Azure. **Killercoda** and **Google Cloud Shell** for anything you can't run locally. By the end of this phase you can write real infrastructure-as-code and real serverless applications — and you have spent nothing and started nothing.

Phase 2 — real consoles, still no card, still no clock (weeks 4-8)

Your **weekly AWS Builder Center sandbox** (8 hours, planned in advance). **Microsoft Applied Skills** assessments for real Azure time plus a credential. **AWS Cloud Quest** Cloud Practitioner role. **Google Skills labs** with your monthly GEAR credits. By the end of this phase you have real console hours on all three major clouds and verifiable badges — and still no card.

Phase 3 — permanent infrastructure

Cloudflare Workers (no card) for something real and permanently online. **Render** for a free web service. If you have any card at all, **Oracle Cloud Always Free** gives you a permanent 2-CPU/12 GB ARM server — run k3s on it and you have your own Kubernetes cluster for life.

Phase 4 — start the clocks, deliberately, one at a time

- **Students: Azure for Students first.** Twelve months, renewable annually, no card. Use it for the official [Microsoft Learning AZ-104 lab repos](#), which are the exact labs used in Microsoft's paid instructor-led courses, free on GitHub.
 - **Then the AWS free account — and only when you have a specific 4-6 week project ready to build.** The six-month clock starts at signup and cannot be paused. Sign up on a Monday with the plan already written. Set a **\$0.01 budget alert and Cost Anomaly Detection before you create anything**. Do **not** join AWS Organizations, Control Tower, or the Partner Network — each silently upgrades you to the paid plan.
 - **The Azure free account last.** \$200 over **30 days** is the most brutal clock here, and you must decide before day 30 whether to convert to pay-as-you-go — the twelve months of free services are forfeited otherwise, permanently, on that identity.
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The three things that will cost you money if you are careless

Every accidental bill we could find traces back to one of these:

1. **Things that bill by the hour whether or not you use them** — NAT gateways, load balancers, Azure Firewall, managed Kubernetes control planes, and public IP addresses. No free tier covers them. A NAT gateway left running for a month is a real bill.
2. **Orphans** — unattached disks, unused public IPs, old snapshots, and stopped-but-not-deleted VMs. They bill silently and forever.
3. **Data egress** — data leaving the cloud costs money while data going in is free. A large download surprises everyone exactly once.

The habit that prevents all of it: set a budget alert *before* you create your first resource, and run your teardown commands at the end of every session. Every lab in the B4LCILC courses ends with teardown for exactly this reason.

Verified 13 August 2026 against primary sources. Free offers change often and without warning — five major ones changed in the last twelve months alone. Check the linked page before relying on any figure here.