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Holidays

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This isn't the holiday travel season to procrastinate. Book your tickets this month.

Christopher Elliott Special to USA TODAY

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Key Points

Booking your holiday travel now is the safe way to go.

Last-minute airfare bargains might materialize, but this holiday season, it's doubtful.

The best time to book a ticket is September, found one analysis.

No, it's not too early to start planning holiday travel.

It might seem early. Thanksgiving and winter holidays are months away. But experts predict the record demand that turned this summer into a chaotic travel season will carry over to the holidays. If you don't start planning your trip now, you may be going nowhere.

"Book everything now," said Tim Hentschel, CEO of HotelPlanner, a travel technology company. "This will ensure availability and act as a hedge against inflation and ongoing cost increases. If you wait until November and December, your winter holiday travel will only be more expensive."

Demand for travel remains strong. Analysts at CBRE Hotels Research expect hotel rates to fully recover to 2019 levels this fall. The average price of a room in the U.S. will rise almost 7% from last year to \$134. Airfares soared by an astounding 33% between August 2021 and 2022. Fare-watchers expect the trend to continue, fueled by inflation and a pent-up desire to travel.

'They should've helped me': Booking through platforms like Expedia leaves some travelers stranded

Which day is the cheapest to fly?: When is best to book? Google Flights data shows cost trends

The airfare app Hopper predicts domestic airfares for Thanksgiving departure dates are averaging \$350 round-trip, an increase of 22% compared to the same time in 2019. For Christmas departures, fares are up 31% to \$463.

Booking now is the safe way to go. But there are times when you'll want to push the "buy" button and times when you're better off waiting, experts said. And there are a few new rules for holiday travel.

When you shouldn't wait to plan your holiday trip

If you're thinking of doing something popular during the holidays, like skiing in the Rockies or visiting the Christmas markets in Germany, you're not too early.

Ben Julius, founder of Tourist Journey, started seeing 20% higher search volumes for his holiday tours during the early summer.

"We're tracking an upward trend of week-on-week average price increases of 3% for the week between Christmas and New Year's," he said. "The main reason for this is that hotel prices are increasing dramatically due to the higher booking volume this year."

If you're headed somewhere everyone else wants to go, don't wait.

But how about those last-minute airfare bargains? They might materialize, but this holiday season, it's doubtful, experts said.

'I don't think these charges are worth it': Why hard times may prompt new hotel fees

How to avoid cruising mistakes: 'People are not paying attention to final payment dates'

"It's crazy how many people seem to leave things up to chance," said Jeremy Hulls, a senior editor at Family Destinations Guide. "I already hear from people who think they can book flights later and can only shake my head in disagreement."

Those travelers will probably end up taking a staycation this holiday season.

Shabi Najafov, a frequent traveler and tech executive from Alpine, New Jersey, loves waiting until the last minute for a deal, but after this summer's travels, she's having second thoughts.

"I've already started planning our holiday getaway," she said.

Story continues below.

When you should wait to plan your holiday trip

But good things can come to those who wait, even during a sold-out holiday season.

"There are always last-minute deals," HotelPlanner's Hentschel said. "So if you are more adventurous, you can wait to book everything until just a few days before you leave."

Where are those deals? It's too soon to tell. Look for destinations that fall out of favor. Also, places that are unpopular during the holidays, like a beach resort in a colder climate, might have a last-minute sale to fill empty hotel beds.

But you should also wait to travel if you have health and safety concerns. If you're immunocompromised, this might not be the time to think about a New Year's getaway. And if you do, make sure you have a travel insurance policy to cover you.

Expert advice for traveling during the holidays

There's no one-size-fits-all advice for making your holiday plans. But timing is important. For certain parts of the trip, you'll want to jump on any deal you find now. For others, it may be too soon.

Analysis by ARC, which handles airline ticket settlements, suggests the best time to book a ticket is September. It found passengers are waiting until closer to their travel dates to book. Before the pandemic, people booked their holiday travel 49 days out. That number shrank to 40 days in 2020 and 42 days in 2021.

"We're not seeing any meaningful trends of people buying tickets earlier for holiday travel this year," said Chuck Thackston, ARC's managing director of data science and research.

Story continues below.

Research by Expedia shows the typical sweet spot for booking is about 30 days in advance for domestic travel and 90 to 120 days for international trips. Expedia's data suggests prices tend to be higher when you're more than 60 days from travel for domestic flights.

But for hotels – especially popular resorts – you might have a tighter deadline. Some resorts are already sold out for the busy Christmas and New Year's weeks.

"If you are starting to plan holiday travel now, it's already too late," said Stephanie Goldberg-Glazer, owner of Live Well, Travel Often, a boutique travel agency.

In other words, this isn't the holiday travel season to procrastinate. Start thinking about your holiday trip now, unless you just want to be home for Christmas.

Holiday travel planning: Here's the best time to buy your plane ticket if you're flying for the holidays this year

What has changed for 2022 holiday travel

► **Minimum stays:** Many resorts are imposing minimum stays for their guests during busy holiday periods. "Our clients are surprised by these," said Kate Johnson, owner of KJ Travel in Houston. She has seen minimum-stay requirements of five to seven nights and sometimes as high as 10 nights during the peak holiday season. Also, some hotels have 90-day cancellation windows during that period. In other words, their rates are more or less nonrefundable.

► **Changeable schedules:** I've heard from several readers who say their carefully planned holiday vacations are already in peril because of airline cancellations. Experts say you need to be extra flexible this holiday season. "Choose the type of holiday that you want, such as a ski trip or tropical vacation, and be flexible with the destination rather than setting your heart on a specific one," advised Lauren Gumport, a vice president at Faye Travel Insurance. "That way, you can choose what fits your budget."

► **Inflation:** Prices have been rising across the board. The prices of activities, restaurant meals and tours are all going up as inflation spreads within the travel industry. "Don't forget to align your maximum budget with your destination of choice," advises Oluwaseyi Aladeselu, travel adviser with tmd Escapes, a luxury travel agency. Failing to do so will stress you out on your holidays, and that's no fun.

