



Plane Tickets Buy Early or Wait

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Published: 2011-03-23

Buying an airline ticket is always something of a gamble — prices go up and down, and trying to figure out how far in advance to book to get the best fare can be tricky. Recent world events have been causing oil prices — a major factor in ticket prices — to fluctuate, making the calculation of when to buy even more challenging. Earlier this month, the price of a barrel of oil, which had skyrocketed to as high as \$104 in response to events in Libya and the Middle East, dropped below \$100 a barrel when disaster hit Japan.

So far this year airlines have raised rates six times, compared with just three increases last year, partly to keep pace with rising oil prices, according to Farecompare.com, which tracks ticket prices. Overall, fares are up about 18 percent for travel in late May through early June, compared with the same period last year, according to Bing Travel, which offers predictions on whether fares will go up, down or hold steady on a given route.

On certain routes, prices are particularly volatile. From Seattle, a round-trip United Airlines flight to London in mid-March that cost \$718 on Feb. 15 jumped 35 percent to \$966, just four days later, according to Yapta.com. Later that month it dropped to \$772, and by March 13 it was back up to \$976.

“It’s always a quagmire,” said Joel Frey, a spokesman for Travelocity.com. “There will be fare sales, but it’s hard to predict those.”

So what’s a traveler to do? I put that question to some avid fare-watchers for their take on the best strategy for travelers looking to nab the best fare at the right time. Here is what they had to say:

Book now if traveling in the near future. The professional crystal-ball gazers all agree you should not wait to book your flight if traveling in April or May. Rick Seaney, chief executive of Farecompare.com, points out that despite recent fluctuations, rising oil prices have been on a trajectory very similar to that of 2008, when airlines raised rates five times by early March and tried to increase rates by about \$10 each week in April. Four of those increases stuck.

But the advice is mixed for summer flights. "I would suggest buying your airfares for summer as soon as you can," said Krista Pappas, global travel industry director for Bing, citing high fuel prices, tight seating capacity and strong consumer demand as a recipe for rising rates.

Mr. Seaney of Farecompare, however, recommends waiting just a bit. "Right now, airlines aren't releasing the cheapest seats and I don't expect them to start doing that until later on this month," he said in mid-March. An attempt to raise prices earlier this month by American Airlines, which increased domestic round-trip fares by \$10 on many routes, was not matched by competitors, he pointed out on his blog, RickSeaney.com, forcing the carrier to roll back the increase to remain competitive.

It's also possible that if fares get too high, travelers will say enough is enough and pull back on travel spending as they did in late 2008, forcing airlines to cut prices as the holidays neared and many seats were unsold. "People who locked in fares during the summertime for Thanksgiving and Christmas 2008 were very unhappy," Mr. Seaney said.

Book now for business class to Europe. Several airlines, including Aer Lingus, Continental and Delta, have introduced business class sales to Europe for spring and summer travel. One of the best deals: \$1,198 (not including taxes or fees) to London on Delta from Boston, Miami or Tampa, if purchased by March 31. "I think they've overestimated the business traveler's appetite for business class and have had to put more seats on sale than they would have thought," said Joe Brancatelli, publisher of the travel Web site JoeSentMe.com, who regularly alerts members to such sales. Business class fares to Scandinavia on SAS are particularly attractive, he said, with rates from Newark, Chicago and Washington to Copenhagen, Stockholm, Oslo or Helsinki from \$1,998 round trip — as much as 40 percent off. The airline has also cut rates on its Economy Extra class, which offers meal service and more legroom than coach, with rates from \$1,398 round trip for the same routes.

Hedge your bets. Another option is to book early and watch for price drops in an attempt to get a refund. Most airlines have long offered to refund the difference in their fares (minus a rebooking fee) in the form of a voucher to customers who ask. Using your confirmation number, Yapta.com will track the price of your ticket, taking the airline's rebooking fees into consideration, which generally range from \$75 to \$150. (Two airlines that don't charge rebooking fees are Alaska and JetBlue.) If the difference in price exceeds the fee, Yapta will send you, without charge, an e-mail or [Twitter](#) alert notifying you of the lower fare. You can then claim the credit, as long as you booked directly with the carrier rather than through a travel agent or online agency.

While refund opportunities have declined as fares have risen, the savings remain considerable when refunds do apply. In the first quarter of last year, 14.7 percent of flights tracked by Yapta qualified for a refund, compared with 13.1 percent so far this year. The average refund during that time (after factoring in fees) was \$179 last year versus \$125 this year.

Orbitz.com also offers a refund service called Orbitz Price Assurance for airline tickets, with refunds of \$5 to \$250 a traveler, if another Orbitz customer books the same ticket on the site for less.

Still not ready to commit? At least one carrier — Continental — now offers travelers the ability to lock in a fare for 72 hours for a fee of \$5 or for seven days from \$9, depending on the itinerary, with no obligation to buy. Travelers can purchase the ticket at any time before the so-called FareLock expires.

Look for sales at the last minute. Airlines sometimes slash rates at the 11th hour, so it pays to keep checking. Look for sales at sites like Airfarewatchdog.com and Farecompare.com, which track fares, but be prepared to act fast. On March 15, for example, Farecompare posted that Southwest Airlines was offering “3 Days of Deals,” including \$151 one-way fares from Chicago to West Palm Beach, Fla., and \$168 from Los Angeles to New Orleans for travel through June 8. The catch: Travelers couldn’t fly on a Friday or Saturday and had to book by March 17. JetBlue offers “JetBlue Cheeps,” which go on sale on Tuesdays via Twitter. In recent weeks it offered \$29 weekend fares between Long Beach, Calif., and Las Vegas, and \$79 fares between Long Beach and Portland, Ore., but the deals usually sell out quickly.

Check package deals, which I wrote about last month. When travelers obsess over the right time to pull the trigger on air fares, they can miss out on other opportunities to save. For example, when booking airfare and hotel separately, the best price available for a seven-night trip to the Excellence Punta Cana in the Dominican Republic with flights on American Airlines from New York was \$4,375 for two people. The same trip, booked as a package, was available for \$3,208 on Travelocity.com, or \$1,167 less.

A version of this article appeared in print on March 27, 2011, on page TR3 of the New York Times edition.

Source: <http://travel.nytimes.com/2011/03/27/travel/27prac-fares.html>