

Now's the time to book holiday flights

By Laura Bly
USA TODAY

Bah, humbug: A combination of soaring fuel costs, financially strapped airlines and steady consumer demand is translating to higher airfares this holiday season — and procrastinators waiting for last-minute bargains could be left out in the cold.

"The trend for leisure fares has been upward all summer (averaging 16% more than a year ago), and it's continuing through the fall," says Bob Harrell of New York-based Harrell Associates, which tracks airline pricing.

Since both Christmas and New Year's Day fall on a weekend this year, travel will probably be compressed over a shorter time frame, making deals less likely. And while airlines typically trumpet deep discounts for travel on Thanksgiving or Christmas day, availability is highly restricted, notes Harrell.

Vacationers with more time — and

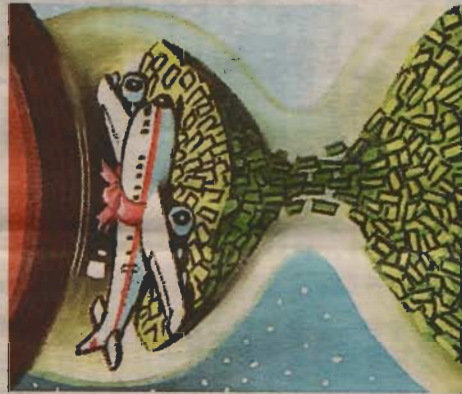


Illustration by Keith Simmons, USA TODAY

with a hankering for such popular holiday destinations as Hawaii, Florida and the Caribbean — "are probably going to be paying double or triple the lowest sale fare," says Tom Parsons of

Bestfares.com.

What's more, Harrell says, the psychological fallout from this year's string of destructive hurricanes "could increase the demand for holiday travel, because people want to be home with their families."

Delta and Northwest filed for Chapter 11 bankruptcy protection last week, joining Aloha, ATA, United and US Airways, which is merging with America West in a deal scheduled to close next week.

"I would be surprised to see any airlines go under before New Year's, but holiday schedule disruptions could be problematic," warns Edward Hasbrouck, a San Francisco-based travel expert. "When flights are already fully booked at the holidays, it can be difficult or impossible to accommodate passengers if a flight is canceled. If the airline decides to reduce its frequency of service on the route, a refund is small consolation."

Some tips for scoring the best holiday airfare:

- ▶ Get a benchmark fare through such sources as FareReport.com, Cheapflights.com, Expedia.com's Fare Compare or Travelocity.com's flexible search option.
- ▶ Check alternative airports and low-cost carriers such as Southwest, whose fares aren't available through online travel agencies or search engines.

- ▶ If you buy tickets on a bankrupt carrier, check for any schedule changes or cutbacks, and research alternative flights, airlines and airports. Federal law requires U.S. carriers to honor tickets from a bankrupt or insolvent airline on a space-available basis for no more than \$50 one way, but the law expires Nov. 19.

- ▶ If a fare goes down after you've purchased a ticket, most airlines will give a voucher for the difference as long as your original plans meet the restrictions for the lower price, notes Terry Trippler of CheapSeats.com.