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At the Holidays, Few Gifts for Travelers

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RENEÉ COON, a travel agent in Erie, Pa., has some advice for her clients who want to take a trip the week between Christmas and New Year's Day: Don't go. She rattles off the realities of traveling during the holiday crunch, including packed flights, long minimum-stay requirements imposed by resorts, bustling crowds at prime family destinations and, more than ever, sky-high prices.

"This year everything has gone up," said Ms. Coon, who works for North Coast Travel, adding that traveling around the holidays "will cost at least 50 percent more than the rest of the year."

It's not just rising gas prices (the national average cost of a gallon of regular or unleaded gas is up about 75 cents from this time last year) that is causing sticker shock for holiday travelers. Room rates are higher, booking a rental car will cost more, and even those low air fares are on the rise, particularly on domestic flights. Fares from New York to Los Angeles, for example, are up 15 percent since this time last year, while flights from New York to Las Vegas have risen by 25 percent since October 2004, according to **Harrell Associates**, a research firm that tracks fares on the top 40 routes flown by each of seven major airlines. And for the weeks surrounding Christmas, the pricing scenario is even worse: According to **Harrell**, the average round-trip advance-purchase fare between New York and Los Angeles was \$238 in the two months leading up to the Christmas holidays last

year. This year, in mid-October, a search for an American Airlines ticket on that route in the last week in December turned up a round-trip fare of \$360.

"Tickets are as low as they are going to get," said Terry Trippler, the airline industry analyst at Cheapseats.com. "If you see a good price, take it."

The rise is expected to continue as higher jet fuel prices are reflected in the cost of a ticket and as airlines in financial trouble trim capacity on domestic routes. One of the most recent announcements on cutbacks was from Delta, which said that it would trim its domestic capacity by up to 20 percent while it adds service on more profitable international routes. The struggling low-fare carrier Independence Air is ending service to five airports this fall including Kennedy Airport in New York and Stewart International in Newburgh, N.Y., and is eliminating its once-daily flights to San Francisco, San Diego and Seattle, though continuing to fly to Las Vegas.

Part of the problem is that a lot of the best deals are already gone, taken by travelers who were making their Christmas plans around Labor Day. Both Expedia and Travelocity report strong early bookings for Thanksgiving and Christmas. Flights on some routes over the Thanksgiving holiday were already filled by early October. On the Sunday after Thanksgiving, for instance, all three JetBlue flights from West Palm Beach to La Guardia Airport in New York were filled; Southwest Airlines' eight flights between Fort Lauderdale and Baltimore were also sold out for that day, and nearly all seats on the airline to Philadelphia from Orlando, Fort Lauderdale and Fort Myers were filled, according to the airline.

Travel agents who handle prime ski destinations also report that flights are filling up fast. Flights into Aspen -- up to 18 a day -- are mostly booked the two days after Christmas and after New Year's Day.

For those willing to snap up remaining seats, be prepared to pay the price. A ticket from Kennedy Airport to Fort Lauderdale on JetBlue leaving two days before Christmas and returning Jan. 1, costs \$467, compared with round-trip fares as low as \$158 at other times of the year.

Tom Parsons, the president of Best Fares, said lower prices would be especially hard to find this year because Christmas and New Year's Day fall on a Sunday. "The worst three days to travel will be Jan. 1, 2 and 3," Mr. Parsons said. "All those people who took off the week after Christmas will want to come back New Year's Day or the day after."

Air fares aren't the only variable travelers must contend with. Hotels and resorts are pricier and busier than they have been in recent years. Bjorn Hanson, head of the hospitality and leisure practice at PricewaterhouseCoopers, estimates that occupancy rates over Thanksgiving will be the highest since 1999 and that room rates over the holiday week in December will be 5.2 percent higher nationwide than last year.

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