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Practical Traveler

For Low Fares, the Waiting Game May Not Pay

By [CHRISTOPHER ELLIOTT](#)

A ROUND-TRIP air fare from [Los Angeles](#) to [Dublin](#) this June cost Stu Watson \$630 when he booked it in January — and he is relieved that he did.

A few days later, Mr. Watson, a retired bank vice president who lives in Redondo Beach, Calif., rechecked the price online. "The same flight now was \$800," he said. "By mid-March it was up to \$940."

When it comes to buying airline tickets for a summer vacation, late winter and early spring is a time of uncertainty. Do you book now, and lock in what may be a higher fare? Or do you wait until the summer fare sales that normally take place just before Memorial Day, and hope there are still seats left?

This year the decision is particularly agonizing for [Europe](#)-bound travelers because prices are higher than they were at this time last year. The average one-way economy fare from the [United States](#) to Europe — booked in February for summer travel — was \$455, compared with \$428 for the same period in 2005, according to [Harrell Associates, an air-fare analysis firm](#). In some cities, rates are dramatically higher. The one-way fare from [Newark](#) to [Rome](#) was 21 percent higher, at \$455, while the \$670 fare from [San Francisco](#) to Frankfurt was 49 percent higher than last February's \$450 ticket.

If the cost is already beyond your budget, you aren't out of options. Inexpensive flights may still be available online, through creative routing or by buying special packages that include an airline ticket. Regardless of how you buy a ticket, experts say, it is still a gamble.

"It's almost like the dilemma of refinancing a mortgage," said [Bob Harrell, a principal with Harrell Associates](#). "Do you want to lock in a higher rate than last year now? Then again, the fares haven't gone on sale yet. But when they do later in the spring, will seats still be available?"

Take Mr. Watson's search. "I knew the timing was critical," he said. "I expected fares to go up, but I wasn't sure by how much."

American Airlines, the carrier on which he had bought his tickets, acknowledged through a spokesman

that its fares have been rising but said Mr. Watson's strategy is one of the most effective ways to get a low summer fare. "If you start looking early, and if you keep an eye out for fare sales, you can still find a deal," said the spokesman for American, Tim Wagner. He said Mr. Watson also made another shrewd move: he selected a city other than [London](#) as a destination. "Being flexible is important — not only on times and dates but also on destinations," said Mr. Wagner. "If you need to go to [Great Britain](#), you might consider flying into airports outside of London, like Manchester."

Experts predict that fares to Europe will be pricier this year than in the recent past.

"If you're looking for a fare this summer, I would buy now," said Raymond Neidl, an airline analyst with Calyon Securities. "I doubt if there will be many last-minute bargains."

Why not? European routes are more profitable because there is generally less competition and because airlines can charge more for flights, according to experts.

So that is where airlines are adding capacity. American Airlines, for instance, says 25 percent of its flights were international in 2001; this year, it estimates that the proportion will rise to 35 percent. American launched new service from [Boston](#) to Shannon, [Ireland](#), and between [Chicago](#) and Dublin within the last year.

But the airlines have carefully calculated their moves so that they don't add too much capacity, which could cause prices to drop. That has kept load factors — the airline equivalent of hotel occupancy rates — high.

American's load factor on European routes was 81 percent in 2004 and 82 percent in 2005. "When load factors are above 80 percent, then that's where we want to be," said Mr. Wagner.

If fares to your favorite destination are already sky-high — and odds are, if you have not booked a ticket yet, they will be — all is not lost, according to fare-watchers. Airlines often negotiate with tour operators and travel agents to sell discounted tickets at bulk rates, and it may still be possible to find a low price through other channels.

"There is more aggressive pricing on package deals, which actually may be better for U.S. travelers because of high hotel costs," said Michael Miller, an airline analyst with the Velocity Group. "In the past, shopping for air fare was the most important aspect of a trip. But with the higher euro and higher hotel prices, the hotel can cost more than the air fare."

MR. Miller recommends the big three online travel agencies — Expedia, Travelocity and Orbitz — which allow travelers to take advantage of discounted flights and to create highly customized itineraries that include inexpensive hotels. For example, recently a round-trip economy-class ticket between New York and Frankfurt in early July cost \$1,014 through the United Airlines Web site. On Expedia, the same flight was roughly \$100 cheaper — \$909. Add six nights at the Best Western Hotel Domicil, in

Frankfurt's banking district, to the flight, and the room rate was about \$75 a night (not including taxes and fees), a savings of \$133 from what Expedia normally charges. There is another way of sidestepping higher fares this summer. Alex Cruz, a transportation expert with Accenture in London, says competition within Europe is growing. "The European market is currently under great pressure from multiple low-cost airline competitors, and low fares are fairly easy to find between major hub cities and regional cities," he said.

For example, you could fly round-trip economy class from New York to [Vienna](#) on British Airways this summer for \$1,036, including taxes and fees. Or you could just fly to London on British Airways for \$796, and then fly to [Austria](#) for an additional £82 (about \$147, at \$1.79 to £1) on the discount carrier Ryanair. But the \$96 saving comes at a price: instead of flying out of Heathrow Airport near London, Ryanair departs from Stansted, which is about twice as far from the city center. And you arrive in Graz, about 120 miles southwest of Vienna.

Of course, one of the best options may be to pay nothing. Vada Crosby began fare shopping for a late summer flight between New York and Rome last September, almost a year before his scheduled departure. But prices remained stubbornly high.

"Sure, it's the height of the summer travel season," he said. "But paying more than \$1,000 for a round-trip ticket from [Hartford](#) to Rome is outrageous."

Mr. Crosby, a page designer for a newspaper in Hartford, cashed in 100,000 Delta Air Lines frequent flier miles for the ticket instead of waiting for an inexpensive fare.