

Travelers are waiting until the last minute to book trips. Here's when that works — and when it can backfire.

Travel chaos and economic uncertainty have people booking at the 11th hour. Sometimes it pays off.

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Travelers are booking vacations later than usual this year — and many are finding savings on airfare and hotel stays.

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Referenced Symbols

↓ **ULCC -1.73%** ↑ **CSGP +0.74%** ↑ **ALK +0.23%** ↑ **JBLU +3.14%**
↓ **AAL -1.02%** ↓ **UAL -0.99%** ↑ **RCL +1.42%**

When Cory Peeler received the invitation to his friend's destination wedding near Tulum, Mexico, one of the first things he did was type the dates into Google Flights so he could track prices.

The 26-year-old knew he didn't want to pay more than \$300 for the round-trip flight from his home in Philadelphia, so when he saw a \$140 one-way Spirit Airlines flight to Cancun and a \$160 return flight on Frontier Airlines ↓ **ULCC -2.05%**, he jumped on it. The wedding was 37 days away.

"If I'm flying on a budget airline, like Spirit or Frontier, I usually find that booking those four to eight weeks out, that usually works better for me," Peeler said. "The longer you wait, in my experience, the better deal that you get."

Peeler isn't alone in playing a waiting game with travel reservations. As travelers face more frequent [airport delays](#) like recent ones at Newark Liberty International Airport, the official rollout of federal [Real ID requirements](#), and general [economic uncertainty](#), many are waiting until the last minute to book vacations. In some cases, procrastination can lead to significant savings — but travel experts have a few tips to make sure you don't lose that coveted airplane window seat or hotel-room balcony with a view.

A 'travel season unlike any other'

Many travelers are waiting anxiously to see which direction the economy will turn as trade tensions spark recession fears. When American consumers are feeling uncertain, their confidence in spending drops and they tend to wait longer to make a decision on booking a vacation, said Jan Freitag, national hospitality market analytics director at commercial-real-estate analytics firm CoStar ↑ **CSGP +0.74%**.

Sometimes, the waiting game can pay off. When the booking window is closing and airlines, hotels or cruise lines aren't seeing the expected demand, that's when they offer deals or lower prices to fill seats and rooms. The booking window is generally two to 11 months before a flight and a few days to a year before a hotel stay, depending on the property.

“The consumer might say, ‘I was going to do this anyway, but now it’s even more enticing,’” Freitag said.

Katy Nastro, travel expert and spokesperson for the travel app Going, has also noticed the trend of consumers waiting to plan their trips. And travelers are reaping the rewards: There is more late-in-the-game availability than in previous years, she said, with competitive prices for flights to Europe, Canada and some destinations across the U.S. still available for peak summer dates.

But travelers shouldn’t expect these deals to stick around throughout the summer.

“This travel season is unlike any other. Even with the fluctuations and last-minute availability we’re still seeing, we want people to take advantage of the deal when it’s available now,” she said. “We don’t know if that’s going to be the case in July.”

Last-minute hotel bookings are increasingly common. Here’s when they can pay off.

Last-minute reservations have become more common in recent weeks for travelers seeking a hotel room, according to Lori McNaught, vice president of revenue management at Olympia Hospitality, which operates boutique hotels and restaurants across the U.S.

“Across the industry, there’s a little bit of concern about perhaps some slowdown in summer travel,” McNaught said. “We’ll go into a weekend with rooms to sell, and then we’ll come out of the weekend and we will have sold out. But it just is happening very, very short term, which just makes it difficult to really forecast and anticipate what that demand will be.”

The best time to book depends on the type of hotel, she said. High-end leisure resorts have a long booking window, meaning guests tend to reserve stays months to a year in advance, while business or urban hotels see reservations come in as close to three days before the stay. In other words, you’re more likely to get a deal if you book a spur-of-the-moment weekend trip to a city than a stay at a luxury hotel abroad.

Hotels consider anticipated demand when pricing rooms, McNaught said, using bookings from the previous year to guide rates, but it’s not an exact science.

In booking too early, travelers risk paying more if the rate drops, but waiting too long can result in losing the type of room they want or not getting a room at all. Travelers can also miss out on promotional fares or seasonal discounts that are offered closer to the time of the trip, according to Paul Jacobs, a general manager and senior vice president at travel site Kayak.

“Airlines and hotels do occasionally slash prices to fill unsold inventory,” Jacobs said. “Especially on weekdays or less popular routes.”

McNaught’s advice is to reserve your hotel once you find a price point you’re comfortable with.

“I’ve worked in [hospitality] revenue management for 25 years, and when I’m booking a hotel for myself, I don’t even know when is the best time,” she said. “There are so many factors that go into it, between the supply, the demand, what the competition is priced at, weather, all of those things.”

See also: [Why going to Disney’s Abu Dhabi theme park may actually be cheaper than visiting Disney World in Orlando](#)

Want to book a flight last minute? Keep the airline in mind.

Getting a last-minute deal on a flight can depend on which airline you’re using. The cheapest options are typically offered by budget airlines, according to a May [report](#) from the travel site Upgraded Points. Spirit and Frontier offer the most cost-effective last-minute flights, at just \$150 or \$160 on average, respectively — similar to what Peeler paid for his Mexico flight.

Short-notice flights on Alaska Airlines ↑ ALK +0.23%, while still more expensive than those on budget airlines, are nearly 23% cheaper than advance bookings, according to the report.

Also read: [Airlines collect \\$33 billion in baggage fees — and they’re looking to get more](#)

If JetBlue ↑ JBLU +3.14% or American Airlines ↓ AAL -1.02% are your go-to airlines, you’re better off buying a one-way flight more than a week in advance. Both will set you back around \$300 on average if you book just one week before departure, with JetBlue charging 30% more for airfare purchased at the 11th hour.

Buying a plane ticket too early before a planned trip — a year or more in advance — can also result in missing out on the best deals.

“We have recency bias, if it’s better than the deal we got last year,” said Nastro, Going’s travel expert.

Nastro recommends purchasing peak-season trips for the summer or over the winter holidays during a “Goldilocks” window. For her, that means three to seven months out for domestic flights and four to 10 months out for international flights.

“Some booking platforms will provide you with a day estimate of, ‘OK, for this summer it’s 56 days out,’” Nastro said. “There is no rhyme or reason to that, and a lot of that is based off of historical data.”

Flexibility in booking can help you lock in a cheaper price, too, said Kayak’s Jacobs. Travelers willing to skip in-demand flight days or shift their trip by 24 to 48 hours can secure savings.

It’s possible, but riskier, to book a last-minute cruise

Joe Martucci, a retired accountant from Orlando, travels frequently with his wife. He’s not afraid to buy flights at the last minute because he flies United ↓ **UAL -0.99%**, which doesn’t charge change fees. Cruises, however, are another story.

“Cruises I don’t book last minute,” Martucci said. “Airfare, I do.”

A last-minute deal on a cruise can yield significant savings, but passengers might miss out on the best cabins and dining options. Excursions can fill up, too. When booking a last-minute cruise, it helps to [have a lot of flexibility](#), one expert previously told MarketWatch.

Still, Martucci monitors prices and sometimes scores a last-minute price break. He’s leaving for a Royal Caribbean ↑ **RCL +1.42%** cruise in Alaska this week that he’s had planned since March 2024. In November, he found another cruise with the same type of cabin that was cheaper. He called his travel agent to switch tickets and saved \$1,600.

When and where to score a last-minute vacation deal

For travelers who are flexible on date and destination, it’s not too late to book a summer vacation, Jacobs said, even one over a holiday.

Those looking for a Memorial Day weekend escape can find round-trip economy tickets for \$324 on average if they fly out the Wednesday before the weekend or \$288 if they wait until Saturday. Fort Lauderdale has emerged as an affordable beach destination for the weekend, he said.

Fourth of July getaways are nearly 10% cheaper than they were last year, according to Kayak data. If you’re eyeing an Independence Day vacation, the cheapest move is flying out Tuesday, July 1, when the average round-trip flight is \$356. Routes to Raleigh and Atlanta are standing out with competitive pricing for the holiday week, Jacobs said.

From the archives (May 2024): [Spirit and Frontier just scrapped some fees, but brace for extra charges on these 10 U.S. airlines](#)

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