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Cheap fare for flying? That boat has sailed

Deals tough to find
for holiday flights

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There's no place like home for the holidays — but, for some fliers, the best time to buy a ticket might already have passed.

"The sobering fact is that if you're looking for cheap travel for Thanksgiving, you're probably too late," said Mark Drusch of online travel-booking website Cheapoair.com.

Budget-minded travelers who know how to play the game, Drusch said, already have booked fares for any Christmas and New Year's travel, too.

"For peak travel days, the airlines' cheap, cheap seats are sold nine months out," Drusch said. "So if you don't have your tickets, you should immediately start looking for the flights you want."

Overall this year, holiday fares are up about 3 percent from a year ago because of airline consolidation and reduced numbers of flights, said Brian Ek of Priceline.com.

Fares for domestic flights close to Thanksgiving are averaging \$393 round trip, compared with \$382 in 2011, according to Priceline. Travelers flying during the Christmas holiday should expect to pay about \$430 round trip, \$10 more than last year.

George Hobica, founder of fare tracker Airfarewatchdog.com, said that fliers who aren't picky might want to wait for a preholiday mark-

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down, although the strategy is risky.

"A couple of weeks before the holiday," Hobica said, "we usually see the 'leftovers' go on sale." Yet be forewarned, he said: The leftover seats are "like the colors and sizes in the bargain bin that

nobody wants."

They are fine if you don't mind flying at 6 a.m. in a middle seat on a connecting flight, he said. But if you want to fly at a certain time or in a certain seat or without stops, you should probably book as early as possible.

Travelers can find lower fares and less-crowded airports by traveling on the holiday, Hobica said.

Thanksgiving, Christmas and New Year's Day flights are all in less demand than those on surrounding days, he said.

Budget-conscious Thanksgiving travelers who must arrive before the holiday should try to fly the previous weekend, Drusch said.

"Then return on Saturday (after Thanksgiving), or don't try to return until the following Wednesday. Actually, the

smartest thing might be to fly out on Friday morning and celebrate Thanksgiving late."

Christmas falls on a Tuesday this year, Drusch noted.

Budget travelers should avoid flying out the weekend before the holiday, when fares and airport crowds will be at their peak. But "choosing a return day after Christmas isn't so important this year," because return trips

will be spread out over the rest of the week, he said.

Those seeking low fares, Drusch said, should also consider nearby airports. Some online booking sites will allow a traveler to search fares from several airports at once.

"If you're going to Miami, look for flights to Fort Lauderdale, too. If you're going to Lauderdale, consider

flying into West Palm Beach."

Fares change daily, so fliers should check for bargains often, Drusch said.

Travelers can sign up for fare alerts at websites such as Airfarewatchdog.com.

Travelers can also work through a trusted local travel agent to find the best fares.

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