



TravelChannel.com

November 19, 2012

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# DEALS AND REWARDS



## Last-Minute Holiday Travel Deals

The last few months of the year tend to blur by. The Halloween pumpkins have barely been kicked to the curb before Thanksgiving prep starts. And don't be surprised to see Christmas decorations at the grocery store while you're crossing off your Turkey Day shopping list. Planning an affordable vacation or flights to join family and friends over the [holidays](#) can seem like one more impossible task. But it's not too late. With some insider advice on [deals and rewards](#) you can still concoct a wallet-friendly last-minute escape in time for Thanksgiving, Christmas or New Year's Eve.

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**1**

## Use Flexible Travel Dates

"It's only too late if you're not flexible," says John DiScala of [JohnnyJet.com](#), who always recommends using the "flexible dates" option when searching for flights around the busy holiday travel weeks. "There will be days that are much cheaper to travel on if you're just flexible by a few days," says DiScala, pointing to the dead weeks -- the weeks after Thanksgiving and the week after New Year's -- as the best time to score cheaper airfares. If you have miles and points, the holidays may be a good time to use them as well. While reward availability during peak travel periods can be scarce, your willingness to be flexible with dates (and airports) can pay off.

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**2**

## Incorporate Off-Peak Travel Days

Sometimes incorporating just 1 off-peak day of travel into your fare can significantly decrease the cost. Even if you need to travel on an airport-crazed day to reach your destination (in the few days leading up to Christmas, for example, or on the day before Thanksgiving), consider booking your return for New Year's Eve night or the Saturday after Thanksgiving (instead of Sunday), when most travelers would prefer to be celebrating than navigating airport security. And if you're flexible enough to fly on Christmas Eve or Christmas Day and return on New Year's Eve or New Year's Day, airfare savings can be greater still, sometimes by as much as 25 to 50%.

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**3**

## Look Beyond Nonstop Flights

Booking flights with 1 layover instead of nonstop flights also helps reduce the overall fare. And consider flying into an alternative airport (BWI instead of Washington's Dulles or Reagan airports, for example, or Ft. Lauderdale/Hollywood instead of Miami) to further cut costs.

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**4**

## Snag Deals at Travel Sites

Travel Expert Stefanie Michaels of [Adventure Girl](#) recommends the website [Yapta](#) to track fluctuating airfares before booking and to receive alerts when your fare drops after you book (the website helps gauge if it's worth changing your fare, considering the airline's change fees and amount of the price drop). [SkyScanner](#) is another favorite budget travel tool, says Michaels: "It not only highlights deals on mainstream airlines but it basically shows you all the airlines out there offering fares to your destination." Tim Leffel, author of *The World's Cheapest Destinations*, recommends looking at [Farecompare.com](#), which shows you a map with fares from your home city. For airline fare comparisons, check out [Kayak](#) or [Hipmunk](#). And to research reward flight options, check out [MileWise](#).

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## Consider Off-Peak Travel Destinations

Cities that regularly host conventions can be good places to find last-minute hotel deals over the holidays, says Tim Leffel. "Sometimes you can find a last-minute deal in cities like Orlando or Las Vegas just because there are so many hotels to fill and no conventions going on (at this time of year)," he says.

And for beachside lounging, don't limit yourself to Florida. Consider sandy (and cheaper) spots in other warm destinations along the Georgia and Texas coastlines, including towns like Tybee Island near Savannah and Galveston. Many hotel rooms in Galveston sell at or below \$100 per night in November and December; you might find even lower rates by using [Hotwire](#) or [Priceline](#). The winter months are also the off-season in European travel hot spots such as London, Paris, Berlin, Venice and Rome, and offer a good chance to find deeply discounted hotel rooms.

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**6**

## Buy 2 One-Way Tickets

Don't be afraid to piece together 2 one-way tickets on multiple carriers when it's cheaper, versus limiting yourself to a roundtrip on a single carrier. Instead of searching for a roundtrip flight on a site like [Orbitz](#), for example, do 2 separate searches to and from your destination using the 1-way option. Often, the total price can amount to less than when you're booking a return simply due to the different options that pop up.

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**7**

## Check Fares Early Morning

The time of day you actually sit down to book your flight can also affect the cost of a fare, says Mark Drusch of [CheapOair](#). Drusch recommends checking airfares early in the morning since airlines update their inventory and prices overnight. The more carriers servicing a destination the more competition, and, in turn, the lower the fares are likely to be. Los Angeles and Denver are among the top 4 domestic destinations for Christmas travel, with Cancun, Aruba and Nassau among the most popular international destinations. "All these destinations have lots of flights from multiple airlines, making travel easily accessible from anywhere in the country," says Drusch.

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**8**

## Check Hotel Loyalty Programs

When it comes to booking a hotel room over the holidays, don't forget to check in with your hotel loyalty program. "Many loyalty programs have eliminated blackout dates for points redemption, so you can get free nights even during peak season," says Mark Drusch. [Holiday Inn's loyalty program](#) is one such example with no blackout dates, and the same goes for the [Hyatt Gold Passport rewards](#) program, as well as the [Starwood Preferred Guest Program](#) and [Hilton's rewards program](#).

And while most airlines don't have blackout dates for award travel, there are usually limited seats available for holiday travel to people purchasing with miles, which makes them difficult to snag. Members of credit card programs like [Chase Ultimate Reward Points](#), [Citi Thank You Points](#) and [American Express Membership Rewards](#) can also use their points to book nearly any available airline ticket. Keep in mind that this may not always be the best use of your points, however, as values are quite high for transferring points to hotel or airline partners compared to when you purchase using your frequent flier miles.

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The holidays might be the most hectic time of the year, but you can seriously up the cheer factor when you land a last-minute escape that doesn't break the bank.