

# The Worst Day to Buy a Plane Ticket

How far in advance you need to buy a flight for the lowest price, according to new data

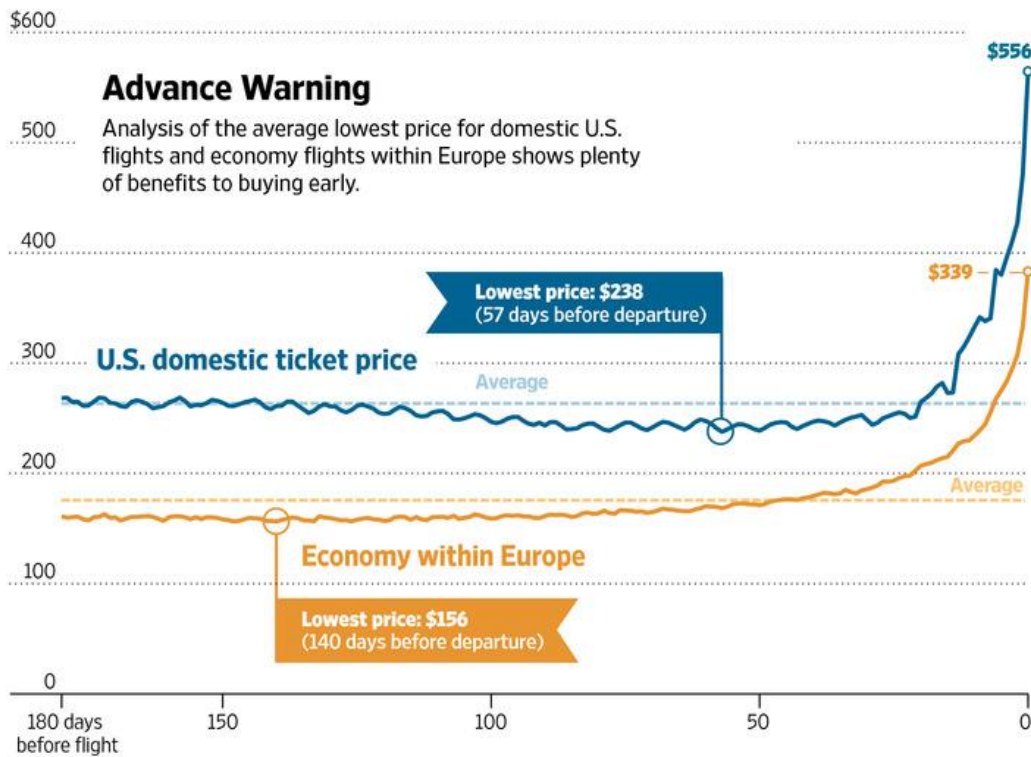
By  
Scott McCartney

It may be tempting to dream of vacations and book some leisure travel as you head into the weekend. Resist. Airline tickets are generally priciest on Fridays.

Average prices for tickets bought on Friday are 13% higher than on Sunday, according to a new analysis of tickets sold world-wide over the past year. One reason: Leisure travelers tend to book discount trips more heavily on weekends, while business travelers typically pay higher fares booking reservations at the end of the work week.

Prices creep up on Fridays. Fare sales typically expire before Friday and many airlines launch their price hikes at the end of the week to see whether competitors all match over the weekend. Also, the inventory of available cheap seats sells down during the week before replenishment over the weekend or early in the week.

“I personally would shop the weekend and the beginning of the week and avoid Friday,” says Greg Schulze, [Expedia](#)’s senior vice president of global tour and transport.



Source: Airlines Reporting Corp.

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Expedia and Airlines Reporting Corp., which processes tickets booked through travel agencies, studied hundreds of millions of tickets purchased over the past year. The study found that airfares globally were 8% lower in October than the same month a year earlier, with a 6% decline for travel within North America and a 16% drop for flights within Europe.

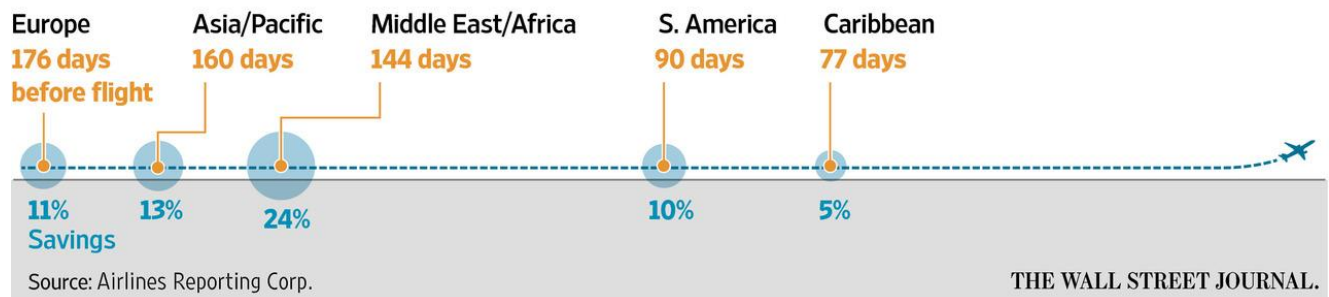
Airlines, especially low-fare carriers, have been adding planes to their fleets and flights to their schedules, increasing competition and reducing fares to fill those added seats. Low oil prices have made it cheaper for airlines to try new flights, helping bring down prices.

The hunt for the lowest fare is a constant source of frustration for travelers. Sometimes they see prices drop as soon as they buy tickets and other times see prices climb when they wait hoping for a better deal. And while there's good news in lower prices for travelers after several years of escalating airfare, the study reinforces the reality that there is no magic formula for getting the best price, other than trying to book early.

How early you buy is the biggest factor in whether you get a good price. The sweet spot is about two months before departure. The study found the lowest-priced economy tickets for a flight within North America were sold, on average, 57 days before departure.

## Continental Divide

Optimal lead times to purchase tickets from North America to international destinations.



For trips from North America to the Caribbean, the cheapest day to buy was 77 days in advance, on average. Trips within Europe showed their lowest price at 140 days before departure. And from North America to Europe, the lowest prices were available, on average, a whopping 176 days before takeoff. That means that right now would be best time to book early summer trips to Europe.

Patrick Surry, chief data scientist at fare-tracking firm Hopper, sees benefits in buying even earlier than 57 days on domestic trips. On many flights tracked by Hopper, the cheapest prices for domestic U.S. trips are about 80 days before departure, and international markets drop to their lowest price about 120 days before takeoff, or roughly four months before you fly.

But chasing the absolute cheapest price can be a trap in the airline pricing game. Airlines don't start actively managing the price of seats on a particular flight until about three months before

departure for domestic flights and five or six months for international trips, says Rick Seaney, chief executive for FareCompare, a search site for flights and hotels. That's when price cutting typically begins.

"You can buy too early," Mr. Seaney says.

[Tuesday used to be considered the best day to buy](#) because you were most likely to catch a sale. Airline pricing executives come to work Monday and look at sales over the weekend. If not enough seats sold, they put together sales and load discounted prices into systems Monday night, posting ads in Tuesday newspapers.

### RED FRIDAY

The average price of purchased airline tickets varies by day of the week, influenced by airline price hikes and discounts plus business travel buying. Here's a look at the differences.

SUNDAY	MONDAY	TUESDAY	WEDNESDAY	THURSDAY	FRIDAY	SATURDAY
<b>\$543</b>	<b>\$588</b>	<b>\$584</b>	<b>\$594</b>	<b>\$589</b>	<b>\$612</b>	<b>\$570</b>
The lowest average prices, lowered by lack of high-fare corporate bookings.	Corporate buying kicks in, but average is still low. Not as good as the weekend, but a decent day to buy.	The cheapest of the weekdays. Still considered a good day to buy.	Discounts are often still in place, though big sales are rare these days.	Sales start expiring and inventory of cheap seats is usually lower.	The most expensive day to book. Avoid and wait for the weekend.	Shop on the weekend. Prices really are often lower, fare experts say.

Source: Expedia/Airlines Reporting Corp. fare report, Oct. 2014-Oct. 2015

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Two-thirds of all sales are still loaded into reservation computers early in the week starting Monday night, and typically last only a couple of days, Mr. Seaney says. But sales these days are full of restrictions—and often only good for travel on unpopular flights. Airlines can target specific markets with flash sales through social media, or just by tweaking prices on individual flights.

"Fare sales as they used to be are few and far between. Airlines are constantly making adjustments up and down," Expedia's Mr. Schulze says.

Knowing that many price-conscious travelers are shopping on weekends, airlines often post their lowest prices on Saturdays and Sundays, which are also days when business travelers aren't likely to snag inexpensive fares.

Airline pricing computers score each flight and measure it against the competition. If a flight has better times or connections, that means it likely will be more attractive to customers and can command higher prices. But if a flight is lagging behind historical buying patterns, computers may shrink the price to fill more seats.

That happens early. The days of last-minute discounts to fill up airplanes are long gone. Airlines are filling close to 90% of their seats. Last-minute fares are high for business travelers, not low for spur-of-the-moment leisure fliers. "It's not like you can show up at the airport with your suitcase and get a ticket for half price," Mr. Surry says. "The sad truth for consumers is there is no golden rule you can use to beat the airlines."

The Expedia/ARC report, which includes data from some airlines on direct sales, as well as tickets purchased through online and traditional travel agencies, shows there is no single clear day to find the cheapest deal for all flights. In most regions, Expedia and ARC data show, cheapest tickets are sold on Sunday or Saturday. But that's largely a function of higher-priced business travel bookings not being made over the weekend.

Expedia's Mr. Schulze says, however, that when business travel is taken out of the mix and leisure tickets are analyzed alone, Expedia sees the same overall trend: The weekend tends to be cheaper.

Tuesday is still the least-expensive weekday, and Fridays average 3% higher prices than Tuesday for trips within North America. But the bottom line is that fares bounce around so much, each day may be different. When you see a good price, grab it.

"Deals are available all the time," says Chuck Thackston, ARC's general manager of data and analytics. ●

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