

Plane Tickets Are Super Cheap Right Now – But Should You Buy Them?

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With air travel all but stopped right now, several airlines are offering really cheap tickets, including cross-country fares that are well below \$100 for a round trip.

Even if you don't plan on taking a trip in the immediate future, should you take advantage of those cheap airline tickets right now?

According to Malori Asman, owner of Amazing Journeys, a Pittsburgh-based travel company, it ultimately depends on your level of comfort with traveling.

“The dedicated traveler is itching and ready to go,” she said. “There is a lot of travel planning going on. Families are sitting down together and even having Zoom calls together saying, ‘When this is lifted, where should we go?’”

All airlines have cut their schedules, while some based in other countries have stopped flying altogether. The International Air Transport Association says the number of flights globally is down 80% from last year and airline passenger revenues will drop by \$314 billion this year, a 55% decline from last year. Even with government relief plans in place, some airlines will not survive.

But many of the airlines can't stop flying. Their planes are carrying cargo, which is the big moneymaker right now, Asman said. And those cargo-carrying planes still have seats to sell.

That means cheap seats are available for people who have to travel.

Those travelers will see changes when they board their flights. Many airlines say they're eliminating middle seats to spread people throughout the cabin and allow for physical distancing.

In addition, meal and beverage service has been reduced or, in some cases, eliminated. Boarding processes are different. Many airport lounges and other amenities are closed.

Despite this, airlines are doing what they can to keep people flying and entice them to come back once travel restrictions are lifted, with many offering incentives to past customers for future travel.

What Should You Consider Before Buying Plane Tickets Now?

Asman says she thinks travel will rebound, bringing good deals with it; it's just a question of when.

“Summer is going to be iffy,” she said, adding her company has canceled all trips through August. Since COVID-19 might come back in the fall, she’s working with vendors to arrange trips later in the year and will cancel them if necessary.

Whether you can change a ticket or collect a refund depends on each airline’s policy, Asman said. And even though airlines and other travel companies are relaxing their normally strict rules about refunds and rescheduling right now, that doesn’t necessarily mean customers will get money back on credit cards. Many travel companies are offering vouchers towards a future trip instead of refunds.

“I would say take advantage [of the good deals] as long as you have a backup plan and you can get out of it, and as long as you don’t mind that your money might end up sitting with the airlines,” Asman said.

Hotels and cruise lines are also changing their terms and conditions to allow changes and cancellations.

“As long as you’re OK with those terms, go for it,” Asman said.

But she also says travelers should look at what’s happening at the time in terms of the pandemic, as well as what’s actually open at the destination.

“Don’t just look at the ‘great fare’ side,” she said. “Know that anybody on that plane could be carrying the virus.” She points out that efforts in place right now are meant to slow the virus’ transmission, not eliminate it altogether, and that travelers could still contract it.

Asman says she expects fares to stay low or get even better when people begin traveling again, especially once the airlines, cruise lines, and hotels figure out what space they really have available.

“I don’t think we’ve seen the best deals that are out there yet,” she said.

Tiffani Sherman is a contributor to The Penny Hoarder.