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When is the Best Time to Travel?

By Pete Peterson
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First, I wanted to wish everyone a very happy holiday season!

During this time of year, I'm often asked, "Are there any specials for the holidays?" However, the most-asked question I get is, "When is the best time to travel?"

The general rule of thumb to remember is that when school is out, demand and prices go up. It's the time when families plan their vacations, and since more people are traveling, the favorite travel destinations and cruises raise their prices to take advantage of the demand.

Let me cover the holiday period first, since this is one of the busiest travel times of the year. If money is not an issue, the holidays are the best time to travel. You'll have all the decorations, music, food, cheerful passengers and the look of wonderment in the eyes of children.

But if your budget is tight, specials are going to be limited. This holds true for hotels, resorts, airfares and cruises. In fact, using cruises as an example, the difference in price to travel during the holidays can be double or triple what it would cost to travel before or after the holidays.

We've had many clients who will keep their children out of school an extra week to take advantage of the difference. We have a family of four going on a cruise the week after New Year's. They found that a Christmas/New Year's cruise would cost them \$2,000 more than if they waited one week. If you can be flexible, shifting cruise dates a week or two may offer big savings. Always check the period immediately before or after your preferred dates.

As for the best time to travel, well, that's a loaded question. It really depends on your definition of "best time" and what you're looking for; best weather, best price, least crowded, less children or younger crowd.

We sell all types of travel, but we specialize in cruises, so I'll use them as an example. Because of the demand, cruises follow the sun, visiting destinations during their best weather. For some exotic destinations and seasonal cruises, such as Alaska, the British Isles, Canada and Antarctica, you have only a two- to five-month window of opportunity. For other areas, such as the Caribbean, Mexico, Hawaii, the South Pacific and the Orient, cruises are available year-round.

So when should you book your vacation? Let's begin by dispelling one major myth: The best time not to book your vacation is at the last minute. Yes, occasionally good deals can be had at the last minute. But have you tried to book airfare at the last minute and seen the prices? Whatever you save on the vacation, you'll spend in airfare.

If you're very flexible and don't care if specials are offered or if they sell out and you can't go, then wait until the last minute to book. But if you're like most people, you'll want to ensure you have a reservation so you can make plans and arrangements for your trip.

The best time to book your vacation is as far in advance as possible. During peak times, trips can sell out many months before the departure date, even up to a year or more. Travelers who wait until the last month or two before making their reservations are often disappointed. Besides, if you book early enough, as in the case of a cruise, you not only get the best cabins, but if a special is offered, your travel agent should be able to still get the reduced rate for you in most cases.

As for the best times to cruise based on price, it really depends on where you want to go. That's where a good travel agent becomes invaluable. You could spend hours searching for the perfect trip at the best price, or you can contact a professional travel agent and let them do the work at no additional cost to you. I'll talk about this in a future article.

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