

The Best (and Worst) Days to Fly for Thanksgiving

(Courtesy of Peter Thornton, SMARTERTRAVEL)

The leisure travel industry has rebounded from the pandemic more than expected in 2021 and with more Americans comfortable traveling this year, it should be expected that the typical busy travel days around the Thanksgiving holiday will, once again, indeed be busy.

In 2020, the Transportation Security Administration (TSA) screened more than one million passengers in a day only one time between mid-March and the week leading up to Thanksgiving. In contrast, more than one million passengers have passed through TSA screening every single day since mid-March 2021.

While the numbers are still lower than 2019 levels, airports around the country will be more crowded than we've become accustomed to since the start of the pandemic. [Hopper](#) is forecasting a daily throughput of about 1.9 million travelers for Thanksgiving, which is about 75% of 2019 levels and nearly double 2020 levels.

When to Fly for Thanksgiving 2021

Having flexible travel dates is the key to finding cheap flights any time of the year but this is even more apparent when traveling around a fixed holiday such as Thanksgiving. Historically, the Wednesday before and the Sunday after Thanksgiving are two of the busiest (and most expensive) travel days of the year for U.S. domestic travel.

With many kids back in school, it's looking like this will be the case again in 2021, though if you're able to flex your travel dates by just a few days or extend your trip to fly a week early or return a week later, you can save some money and avoid the largest crowds at the airport.

What Are the Worst Days to Fly for Thanksgiving 2021?

Of course, the best and worst days to fly for a holiday are subjective. Some might prefer to pay whatever it costs to maximize time with family while others will prioritize cost in order to make the trip a reality. From an airfare perspective, it's best to avoid the busiest travel days.

- Wednesday, November 24th
- Sunday, November 28th

Data from both Hopper and [CheapAir](#) indicate that domestic airfare is averaging around \$300 roundtrip for Thanksgiving travel, with flights returning on Sunday, November 28th about \$90/ticket more expensive than returning on Monday and \$180/ticket more expensive than returning on Tuesday. This average is rising as we get closer to the date of travel and the actual price depends heavily on the route and which dates you choose to travel.

For instance, take these examples of roundtrip flights from New York-JFK to Los Angeles searched on October 14, 2021. *Note: Prices will likely change before publication.*

- Wed, Nov. 24 – Sun, Nov. 28: \$712 nonstop on Delta
- Mon, Nov. 22 – Sun, Nov. 28: \$632 nonstop on Delta
- Wed, Nov. 24 – Tue, Nov. 30: \$418 nonstop on United
- Mon, Nov. 22 – Tue, Nov. 30: \$325 nonstop on United

As you can see, adjusting your return travel date will likely have a bigger impact on price than adjusting your departure travel date. If you're only flexible on one end, choose to return later after the holiday rather than depart earlier.

Other travel dates that are trending on the expensive side for Thanksgiving travel include:

- Saturday, November 27th
- Monday, November 29th

What Are the Best Days to Fly for Thanksgiving 2021?

Flying on the holiday itself will be one of the cheapest days to fly. Although this may not be ideal for many, if you're just looking for an affordable way to see the family for Thanksgiving dinner, this may be an option to consider. Otherwise, extending your trip to leave and/or return on off-peak travel days can help reduce the cost of your flight. The cheapest days to fly for Thanksgiving 2021 include:

- Sunday, November 21st
- Monday, November 22nd
- Thursday, November 25th (Thanksgiving Day)
- Friday, November 26th
- Tuesday, November 30th

Thanksgiving Travel Deals for International Travel

Since most Americans are focused on domestic travel around the Thanksgiving holiday, it is actually a great time to score a deal on international travel. Options are still limited due to travel restrictions, but it's now possible for vaccinated travelers to fly to several destinations in Europe and a few more South American countries are opening their borders this fall.

You may be surprised to find that it's cheaper (or only slightly more expensive) to fly your family across the pond than it is to fly across the country during Thanksgiving weekend. And you can usually find the cheapest international fares departing on the Tuesday or Wednesday before Thanksgiving, which are typically expensive days to fly domestically.

Book Thanksgiving Travel Before Halloween

Whether you choose to fly domestic or international, it will be best to book your flights at least three weeks in advance, which is when airfares tend to rise even more. This means you'll want to try and purchase tickets before the end of October. Hopper is forecasting that domestic airfares will increase around 40% if you wait to book until November and an additional 25% for last-minute bookings.

There have been last-minute sales for Thanksgiving travel in the past but with airlines flying fewer seats this year, it's less likely that seats will need to be filled at the last-minute. And these types of sales in the past have typically been on ultra-low-cost carriers like Frontier or Spirit and/or have only been for very limited off-peak travel dates/times.

Since most airlines are offering free changes to even the most basic tickets booked for travel through 2021, you can book now with the peace of mind that you can change your travel plans in the future without paying any extra fees. Bottom line, be flexible with your travel dates and book your Thanksgiving trip sooner than later for the best deals.