

Here's why summer flights seem so expensive this year

(Courtesy of David Slotnick, The Points Guy)

It's not yet clear if we're in for another "[sold-out summer](#)," but it's clear that we're in for an expensive one — at least on the airline side.

If you're searching for summer flights, chances are you've run into some serious sticker shock.

Fares for flights across the board are more expensive than they have been since the pandemic began, and in many cases, they are passing pre-pandemic summer levels.

There are two main factors driving prices up, and both mean that if you're planning to get away while the weather is warm, you might want to finalize your plans on the sooner side.

Fares are higher and demand is surging

For myriad reasons, airlines are simply charging more for flights this summer than they have in the past.

Data provided by the Airlines Reporting Corporation, a travel intelligence firm and ticket processor, shows that fares have largely risen across the board for flights this summer compared to both 2022 and 2019, the last full year before the pandemic.

The average price of fares for the top 10 summer travel destinations was 9% to 37% higher than in 2022, according to ARC's data.

Prices increased even more compared to 2019, with average fares for each destination climbing between 23% and 54%.

Rank	Destination (airport)	Average ticket price	Change vs. 2022	Change vs. 2019
1.	Cancun International Airport (CUN).	\$599.	+10%.	+40%.
2.	Seattle-Tacoma International Airport (SEA).	\$478.	+31%.	+38%.
3.	Orlando International Airport (MCO).	\$425.	+12%.	+36%.
4.	Rome Fiumicino Leonardo da Vinci Airport (FCO).	\$1,683.	+13%.	+44%.

Rank	Destination (airport)	Average ticket price	Change vs. 2022	Change vs. 2019
5.	Los Angeles International Airport (LAX).	\$525.	+37%.	+51%.
6.	Daniel K. Inouye International Airport (HNL).	\$787.	+23%.	+23%.
7.	Heathrow Airport (LHR).	\$1,662.	+15%.	+54%.
8.	Boston Logan International Airport (BOS).	\$456.	+19%.	+39%.
9.	Punta Cana International Airport (PUJ).	\$790.	+17%.	+24%.
10.	Harry Reid International Airport (LAS).	\$471.	+9%.	+47%.

The data reflects tickets sold in the U.S. and processed through ARC's systems between Jan. 1 and April 6, 2023, for travel during the summer season — between Memorial Day and Labor Day.

Demand is higher than it has been since the pandemic began. Even as airline capacity broadly remains slightly below 2019 levels, a supply-and-demand mismatch is driving prices sky-high. In fact, the U.S. Travel Association, an industry trade group, says domestic leisure demand has surpassed pre-pandemic levels.

ARC's chief commercial officer Steve Solomon told TPG that the supply-and-demand asymmetry is the main driver of high prices.

"Increased demand is partly driving more expensive airfare as we're seeing ticket transactions for the top summer destinations up year over year," Solomon said. "Demand, coupled with other factors including increased labor costs, jet fuel up around 40% year over year, and not every airline operating at 2019 capacity levels, all contribute to higher prices paid by travelers."

People are booking their vacation flights earlier

Alongside the increase in demand is a return to a pre-pandemic norm — leisure travelers are making their plans further in advance.

During the first two post-vaccine summers, travelers tended to finalize their plans only at the last minute. Uncertainty surrounding case outbreaks, personal illness or infection, travel restrictions and more made consumers wary about committing early. This was particularly true if reservations were nonrefundable or could only be canceled in exchange for a credit.

Plus, business travel was still significantly down. With business travelers more inclined to book close-in flights and typically less sensitive to prices than vacationers, airlines raised fares as departure dates moved closer. With the leisure booking curve shortening, those last-minute prices tended to look more palatable.

Now, airlines are seeing that leisure booking curve elongating again. Coupled with the high demand, that has made for some intense booking cycles.

For instance, Delta Air Lines said earlier this month [that about 75% of seats on international flights this summer](#) were already booked. Many of those bookings were made in February and early March: At a JP Morgan conference on March 14, Delta CEO Ed Bastian noted that the airline was experiencing record-breaking ticket sales.

"In the last 30 days, we've had the 10 highest sales days in our company's history," Bastian said.

"People remember last spring and summer, how hard it was to get those trips that they wanted to go on," he added. "So we've seen a little bit of a pull forward in terms of the advanced bookings."

United, too, has seen "a clear change in seasonality that is causing peak leisure demand months, March through October, to be even stronger," CEO Scott Kirby said during an earnings call this month.

"Both international and domestic are booking further out. International more extreme than domestic," United executive vice president Andrew Nocella added.

ARC's data confirms that people are booking earlier, particularly for international trips. In March, the number of tickets sold for each of the top 10 European destinations increased dramatically over 2022:

Rank	Destination (airport)	Year-over-year change in tickets sold
1.	Rome Fiumicino Leonardo da Vinci Airport (FCO).	+82%.
2.	Heathrow Airport (LHR).	+63%.
3.	Paris-Charles de Gaulle Airport (CDG).	+66%.

Rank	Destination (airport)	Year-over-year change in tickets sold
4.	Athens International Airport (ATH).	+52%.
5.	Josep Tarradellas Barcelona-El Prat Airport (BCN).	+86%.
6.	Istanbul Airport (IST).	+183%.
7.	Dublin Airport (DUB)	+10%.
8.	Amsterdam Airport Schiphol (AMS).	+130%.
9.	Adolfo Suárez Madrid-Barajas Airport (MAD).	+70%.
10.	Keflavik International Airport (KEF).	+74%

That increased demand in Europe, plus earlier bookings, can also reflect greater consumer confidence over 2022. Gas prices are remaining lower, and there are fewer fears of Russia's conflict in Ukraine spilling over to other parts of Europe.

For the top 10 U.S. domestic destinations, the changes compared to 2022 were more mixed, reflecting shifting travel preferences domestically and likely greater confidence in travel abroad:

Rank	Destination (airport)	Year-over-year change in tickets sold
1.	Seattle-Tacoma International Airport (SEA).	+52%.
2.	Orlando International Airport (MCO).	-18%.
3.	Los Angeles International Airport (LAX).	-1%.

Rank	Destination (airport)	Year-over-year change in tickets sold
4.	Daniel K. Inouye International Airport (HNL).	-6%.
5.	Boston Logan International Airport (BOS).	+11%.
6.	Harry Reid International Airport (LAS).	-11%.
7.	O'Hare International Airport (ORD).	+11%.
8.	San Francisco International Airport (SFO).	+2%.
9.	Denver International Airport (DEN).	-1%.
10.	John F. Kennedy International Airport (JFK).	+12%.

Early planners have already snatched up the cheapest fares, and those that are left are pricier.

Looking ahead and planning your summer vacation

Still, there may be good news ahead, according to Hayley Berg, lead economist at flight-booking service Hopper — but it depends on where you want to go.

Fares for domestic flights in July have decreased slightly in recent weeks, Berg said. She noted a pattern that seems "typical of normal summer pricing, which starts high in late winter and early spring, drops in April/May before rising in the last month or so ahead of departure dates."

While overall average domestic fares for June and July are roughly 7% below 2022 levels, they remain 16% higher than they were at the same time in 2019. Berg said that she expects those prices to remain steady before spiking two to three weeks before departure.

However, if you're looking to pay lower fares to fly abroad, you may be out of luck, Berg said.

"International airfare remains significantly higher than pre-pandemic given low supply of seats, high demand and overall higher costs, including high jet fuel prices," Berg said. A report by Hopper forecast airfare to Europe over the next six months to be 24% higher than pre-pandemic, on average. Fares to Asia are expected to surge around 60%.

Even so, there are still sporadic deals, according to Katy Nastro, a travel expert at flight-deals subscription service Going.com.

"Airfare is volatile, and so prices you see today don't necessarily reflect what you see tomorrow," Nastro said. Even as prices climb on a particular flight or deal, "that doesn't mean the flight won't drop again — as we know airfare isn't static — but the likelihood of it dropping majorly ... is less."

If you're hoping to take a trip this summer and haven't found anything for the right price yet, don't lose hope: Stay tuned to TPG for the [latest flight and hotel deals](#), as well as [everything you need to know about traveling this summer](#).