

Expect 'sticker shock' when booking holiday flights, professor says

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Record-high fuel prices and new fees added by many air carriers will make the cost of flying home for the holidays significantly higher than last year, says a Purdue University professor.

Dale Oderman, an associate professor of aviation technology, says people looking to book flights now for the Thanksgiving and Christmas holiday seasons will experience "sticker shock," especially if they haven't tried to book a flight since this time last year.

"Airlines have not only raised their prices due to the cost of fuel, but they also have reduced capacity in order to drive ticket prices up to try to recover their losses," he says. "Also, many are charging for services that were free in the past, such as checked baggage, food and soft drinks. The result is a significant increase in the cost of a flight that many people won't be expecting."

Oderman says that while the airlines aren't trying to hide these additional charges, they don't show up when you book the flight. The baggage fees are paid at the airport, and the food is paid for in-flight. He says that some carriers are charging for all checked bags, but some are charging only for the second checked bag. These costs are usually \$25 to \$50 per bag per round trip.

Because of the reduced seating, especially during high-demand holiday times, Oderman advises to book now.

"There are still some deals to be had, but not nearly as many as in the past and not during holiday times," he says. "If you can travel at a time other than the holidays, that would be ideal. If not, consumers will have to either pay more or take another mode of transportation."

He recommends checking the Web site Farecast.com, which finds the cheapest fares between cities and also makes airfare predictions for the next seven days. At another Web site, www.airfarewatchdog.com, consumers can register and receive e-mails when there are good deals.

Oderman says even if fuel prices drop, don't expect the added fees to disappear.

"The old image of flying as a luxury experience is gone," he says. "Now it's just a means of getting somewhere, like a bus or a train, with no frills. Instead of like a cruise, flying will be more like taking a ferry."

Provided by Purdue University

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