Holiday airfare is hitting a 10-year high, 6 ways to avoid overpaying for flights

Kyle James, Reporter, October 23, 2026
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If you're planning to fly somewhere for Thanksgiving or Christmas, you might want to sit down before checking ticket prices. Holiday airfare is shaping up to be the most expensive it's been in a decade.

According to a new CBS report, citing travel booking platform Hopper, the average domestic round-trip Thanksgiving ticket is running about $402. That's $95 more than last year.

Christmas is even worse, with the average domestic round-trip ticket climbing to $452, an $85 increase. Rising jet fuel costs are a major factor, and airlines are passing those higher expenses along to travelers.

But here's the good news. While you can't control airline prices, you can control how you shop for flights. And a few strategic moves could potentially save you hundreds of dollars, especially if you're buying tickets for an entire family.

Here are six ways to fight back against expensive holiday airfare.

1. Book your holiday flights now, not in November
If you've been waiting for prices to drop, the calendar could be working against you. According to Google Flights' latest analysis, the lowest Thanksgiving fares have historically appeared about **34 days** before departure.

For Christmas, the sweet spot has been approximately **56 days** before departure.

That puts both booking windows right around the **end of October**.

Google's findings are based on five years of aggregated airfare data, so they're historical averages rather than guarantees about what will happen on your particular route.

If your holiday travel dates are firm, start comparing fares today rather than waiting for Black Friday or Cyber Monday travel promotions. While you might find a promotional fare later, there's no guarantee it'll beat what's available right now.

Pro tip: Use Google Flights to see whether the current price is considered low, typical, or high for your route. If the fare you find is reasonable and the schedule works, booking now could be smarter than trying to predict the absolute lowest price.

2. Avoid the Sunday after Thanksgiving
This might be the single most valuable tip for holiday travelers. Thanksgiving falls on Thursday, November 26th this year, which means millions of travelers will be trying to fly home on Sunday, November 29th.

And airlines know it. Hopper economist Hayley Berg told CBS News that travelers could pay roughly $250 more per round-trip ticket to fly home that Sunday compared with less popular return dates. For a family of four, that could mean spending approximately $1,000 extra. Instead, if at all possible, consider returning on Black Friday, Saturday, Monday, or Tuesday.

Money-saving tip: Before buying, compare return flights on November 27, 28, 30, and December 1 against November 29. Even if you need to take an additional vacation day, the airfare savings might make it worthwhile.

3. Leave a day or two earlier than everyone else

The Wednesday before Thanksgiving is another notoriously expensive travel day. This year, that's November 25. If your schedule allows, try flying Monday, November 23, or Tuesday, November 24, instead.

Both dates may offer lower fares and a less stressful airport experience. And if you're willing to travel on Thanksgiving Day itself, you might find an even better deal on certain routes.

The same principle applies to Christmas.

CBS News reports that December 18, 19, and 20 could be particularly expensive departure dates, while December 27 is another day worth avoiding.

Money-saving tip: Use the date grid or price graph in Google Flights to compare the cost of leaving one or two days earlier or later. Don't assume the most convenient travel day is worth the premium until you've seen the actual difference.

4. Check nearby airports before booking
One of the easiest ways to overpay for airfare is to search only for the airport that you typically fly out of. Depending on where you live, another airport an hour or two away might offer substantially cheaper flights and be worth the extra drive.

For example, someone flying out of Sacramento might also compare fares from San Francisco or Oakland. Travelers in Southern California could compare Los Angeles, Burbank, Ontario, and Long Beach.

And it’s also smart for families heading to major metro areas to check alternate arrival airports as well.

Money-saving tip: Use Google Flights' airport selection tool to include multiple nearby airports in the same search. But don't forget to factor in parking, gas, tolls, and transportation to your final destination. Saving $100 on airfare isn't much of a deal if it costs you $150 more to reach the alternate airport.

5. Book a flight you can reprice later
Here's a strategy that many travelers overlook. Just because you book a flight today doesn't necessarily mean you're stuck paying that price if fares drop later.

Many major U.S. airlines have eliminated change fees on eligible tickets. That means you may be able to change your reservation to the same flight at a lower fare and receive the difference as a travel credit, depending on the airline and ticket rules.

But there's an important catch: Basic economy tickets often have stricter restrictions, and a travel credit isn't the same as getting cash back.

Money-saving tip: Before purchasing, check whether your ticket can be changed without a fee and whether you'll receive a credit if the price drops. After booking, keep tracking the fare and if it drops, check the airline's change-flight options before assuming you've missed out on the savings.

6. Compare the total ticket price, not just the advertised fare - That $199 holiday flight might look like a fantastic deal until you discover it doesn't include the baggage or seat-selection options your family needs. For example, a family of four paying $35 each way for one checked bag per person could add $280 to the round-trip cost.

Money-saving tip: Before checking out, always calculate the full cost of the trip, including checked bags, carry-on restrictions, seat selection, and other optional charges.

If you're traveling with family, compare whether a slightly more expensive fare includes benefits you'd otherwise have to purchase separately.

One more trick: Set a price alert, even after you book.

If you're not quite ready to purchase, price alerts can help you avoid constantly checking fares. Google Flights lets you track specific routes and travel dates, notifying you when prices change.

You can also use services such as Hopper or Going to watch for airfare deals.

But price alerts aren't just useful before booking. They can also help you spot opportunities to reprice eligible tickets if fares drop.

Pro tip: Set an alert for your exact holiday itinerary, then another for dates one or two days earlier or later. This is an easy way to quickly find the itinerary that saves you the most money, especially if you have some flexibility in your travel dates.