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From the Los Angeles Times

Book ahead or you'll pay more

Travelers are making summer plans much earlier, which leaves procrastinators with pricier fares and rooms.

By Jane Engle

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THIS is not the year to get lazy about making summer vacation plans. Airfares, gas, hotel rooms — nearly every trip expense is going up.

Except for occasional last-minute sales, travel experts agree, the rule of thumb is, the sooner you book, the better the deal.

Even if you start planning now, surveys show, you're behind the curve: Many summer vacationers have been snapping up plane tickets and hotel rooms for months. That means fewer for you — and you may pay more.

Nearly two-thirds of Americans this year are booking their summer trips at least two to three months ahead, according to an online survey of 2,327 adults; 8% started more than six months ago. The survey was done April 5 to 7 by Harris Interactive, on behalf of Expedia.com.

American Airlines sees the same trend: "We're seeing an incredible, robust demand for travel this summer," said Kurt Stache, president of AAdvantage marketing programs for the airline.

As for costs, a family of two adults and two children this summer can expect to spend an average of \$261 per day for food and lodging, based on prices at more than 55,000 hotels and restaurants in AAA TourBook guides. Hotels will average \$141 per night, up 9% from last year.

Some popular destinations will cost far more. The most expensive state will be Hawaii, AAA said, where a family of four will pay \$599 per day for food and lodging. The per-day cost in Nevada and New York will be well over \$300.

Those totals, of course, don't include gas for the car, which Tuesday averaged nearly \$2.92 per gallon of regular in the U.S., up more than 31% in a year, AAA reported. Several states, including California and Hawaii, broke \$3.

Several forces are driving up gas prices, according to U.S. Department of Energy. They include growing demand, a seasonal transition to more expensive fuel blends, decreased refining capacity because of last year's hurricanes and high oil prices, which earlier this month set a record, more than \$75 per barrel of crude.

Costly fuel is hurting the already financially troubled airlines too. They have responded with several rounds of fare increases, and fares are approaching the peak of 2000, American's Stache said.

So far business travelers have borne the brunt. The average domestic business fare for the week of April 17 was up 19% from last year, versus 5% for leisure fares, according to **Harrell Associates in New York**, which tracks airfares.

Airlines have the leverage to raise domestic fares, experts say, because seats are harder to come by. You'll find 4% fewer flights and 4.6% fewer seats this summer, based on weekly schedules compiled by eSkyGuide, an electronic flight guide.

Internationally, the picture is mixed. Overall, you'll find slightly more seats on these flights than last year, according to eSkyGuide. Depending on the route, some fares are up, some down.

From LAX, **Harrell Associates** reported, the lowest published international fares for summer, when booked earlier this month, were more than last year to Paris (up 6%) and London (up 4%) and less to Rome (down 5%). But don't expect big bargains for summer, Europe's peak travel season. The lowest Rome round-trip in **Harrell's** survey was nearly \$1,000.

How to save:

- To get the best fares and room rates, reserve well ahead of time and be flexible on travel dates; midweek prices are usually cheaper.
 - Packages may save you money too. Be sure to price the hotel and flight separately to make sure you're really getting a deal.
 - When booking a weekend in a big city, consider staying in the financial district, where hotels may drop rates on weekends.
 - If you're adventurous and flexible about where to vacation, check out last-minute fares and packages, letting the price determine your destination.
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