

It's less risky to book future travel right now than you might think

Brekke Fletcher, CNN • Updated 15 April 2020

(CNN) — Oh, remember the good old days of travel? The ease of picking dates and booking flights, hotels and home rentals? Well, those days are gone, for now.

The Covid-19 pandemic has put all but essential travel on hold, and no one can yet answer when we'll be free to go away again. But should we be planning future travel now?

Risk-free cheap flights -- for now

The short answer is yes.

You can start planning and booking today, depending on your flexibility, risk tolerance and willingness to take an active role in following the latest developments.

Jesse Neugarten, CEO and founder of the million-plus member discount subscription service Dollar Flight Club, has seen his members booking travel from July onward.

"What we're telling our customers is that they book flights now for future travel, because prices are going to be as cheap as you've seen since 2001, and then they're going to increase sharply when demand rebounds."

The deals are pretty astounding. "For peak summer, peak New Year's Eve and Christmas flights, we're seeing flights to Europe and South America for a few hundred dollars round-trip. And people are actually booking them."

The next interesting thing is the cancellation policies, which are usually very strict. Every time you have to change or cancel a flight, you'd expect to pay a few hundred dollars to change plus any fare difference.

"Now, the majority of major US carriers are offering free change fees and cancellations," he said.

And it's important to remember that if a flight is canceled and there's no reasonable rebooking option, airlines are required by law to issue you a refund.

Don't take a voucher or a credit when you're entitled to get your money back. Airlines may entice you to take the credit, by offering bonuses, but the choice is yours.

Hotels and homestays also offering more flexibility

Hotels, too, are loosening up their relatively fair cancellation and rebooking policies.

Arne Sorenson, president and CEO of Marriott International, wrote to customers on April 8, "For guests making new reservations for any future arrival date, including reservations with pre-paid rates, between March 13 and June 30, 2020, we will allow the reservation to be changed or canceled at no charge up to 24 hours before your scheduled arrival date."

This is important because pre-paid rates are usually discounted and nonrefundable.

Airbnb has been in the news for its initial Covid-19 cancellation restrictions, which did not cover bookings that weren't in countries that were on lockdown.

They've since expanded their "extenuating circumstances" policy to include all bookings that were made before March 14 for travel through May 31. Any bookings outside of those parameters remain under their standard cancellation policy, "except where the guest or host is currently sick with Covid-19."

What are travelers planning?

Misty Belles, managing director of global public relations at Virtuoso, an international travel agency network with 1,100 agency locations, reports that their clients fall into one of three groups: "About one-third are canceling outright, a third are postponing and a third are in 'wait-and-see' mode."

The last two groups are, for the most part, going to travel nine months from now, most people are looking to rebook within a year. "The people who are wait-and-see mode are actually closer in and who aren't canceling or postponing because if the trip is canceled for you, you are entitled to more benefits."

Virtuoso advisers are bracing for an influx of bookings in the next six to eight weeks. And those bookings are likely to be for travel during the winter holiday season, late November to early January.

As to where travelers might be headed when the time comes, Belles says, "People will need the opportunity to unwind and clear their head -- so we're anticipating spa, wellness, beach vacations, places with wide open spaces, ranches in Wyoming or national parks."

Making plans will make you happy

Saving money and added flexibility are alluring incentives to book now for travel later in the year. But there's another benefit: Planning a trip can make you happy.

According to an Applied Research in Quality of Life study, published in 2010, "For most, the enjoyment starts weeks, even months before the holiday actually begins."

So, if you decide to make travel plans, you're very likely to experience this "pre-trip happiness."

The study goes on to report, "Need theory can explain the pre-trip high if one assumes that we have an innate need for wandering, possibly a leftover of our hunter-gatherer past and that this need can already be partially gratified by anticipation."

Belles, who had to cancel a family spring break vacation, says that once it's safe, she and her family are heading straight to the beach. "I need the zen of sitting there, exhaling, watching my kids play in the surf."

Policies at a glance

Delta Air Lines has extended fee waivers through the end of May and just put an extension on using those credits to two years instead of the end of 2020.

United Airlines website states that "customers now have until April 30 to make changes to, or cancel, any travel they have booked through the end of the year without fees."

Spirit Airlines is waiving cancellation and change fees for any travel affected by Covid-19 and credits are valid for one year.

American Airlines' travel policy is straightforward: Any ticket purchased from March 1 at 4:30 p.m. CT through May 31 at 11:59 p.m. CT will not incur change fees prior to travel.

Marriott allows that all new reservations made between April 6 and June 30 can be canceled within 24 hours with no penalty, including prepaid, previously nonrefundable rates

Hilton has a similar policy in place for any new bookings. "Any individual reservations you make — even those described as "non-cancellable" ("Advanced Purchase") — that are booked between [April 6] and June 30, 2020, for any future arrival date can be changed or canceled at no charge, up to 24 hours before your scheduled arrival day."

Airbnb is definitely one to keep an eye on, as their extenuating circumstances policy is a bit more complicated. Reservations for stays and Airbnb Experiences may be canceled before check-in only if the reservations were made before March 14, but this only applies to stays through May 31, 2020.

The last analysis

Travel companies are constantly updating and revising their Covid-19 travel policies.

It is imperative for anyone who is booking travel to apprise themselves of these policies and to know what their options are regarding refunds, waivers and rebookings.

Taking a proactive approach to protect your travel investment is the wisest course.