

Travel to Increase 1.7 Percent for Christmas-New Year's Holiday, Says AAA

2005-12-13

Increase Comes Despite Spike in Travel Costs; Orlando, Las Vegas Top aaa.com Hotel Bookings for Holiday

Americans will travel in potentially record numbers this Christmas-New Year's holiday, despite travel costs that are up nearly across the board, according to AAA. AAA estimates that 63.50 million Americans will travel 50 miles or more from home this holiday, a 1.7 percent increase from last year's 62.42 million travelers.

"Double-digit increases from last year in hotel rates, air fares, and gas prices won't keep Americans from traveling in record numbers over the holidays," said AAA CEO and President Robert L. Darbelnet. "Even with two great Christmas getaway spots - Cancun and New Orleans - still recovering from hurricanes, more than 63 million of us will hit the skies, seas, and highways for the holiday."

Approximately 51.54 million travelers (81 percent of all holiday travelers) expect to go by motor vehicle, a 1.7 percent increase from the 50.68 million who drove a year ago.

Holiday auto travelers will find gas prices nationwide currently averaging \$2.18 for a gallon of self-serve regular gasoline--down nearly 90 cents from the records set over Labor Day weekend, but still 31 cents higher than a year ago.

Another 8.75 million (14 percent of holiday travelers) plan to travel by airplane, up 1.6 percent from the 8.61 million that flew over the holidays last year. A projected 3.21 million travelers (5 percent) will go by train, bus, or other mode of transportation, up slightly from 3.13 million a year ago.

"Airports will stay busy across Christmas, Hanukkah, and New Year's as Americans visit family, escape to tropical islands, head for cruise ships, hit the ski slopes, and more for the holidays," said Darbelnet. "Unlike the obligatory trips to visit relatives at Thanksgiving, December offers a chance for people to take real vacations."

In addition to highest-ever yuletide pump prices, travelers will face much higher prices for hotels and airfares, according to AAA's Leisure Travel Index. Holiday hotel rates are up 14 percent for AAA-rated Three Diamond hotels, as strong demand allows hoteliers to raise rates to near their Christmas 2001 peak. Airfares are up 11 percent from last year, but remain below their peak levels during the 2000 holidays. Rental car rates are down on average about 2 percent from their top prices last Christmas.

"Travelers waiting to make Christmas plans until the last minute are finding much higher rates and fewer options," said Darbelnet. "Hotel, airline, and car rental reservations made at aaa.com for this holiday period were booked an average of 53 days in advance - nearly double last year's 29-day lead time."

Where are travelers headed? The top 10 destinations for hotel bookings at aaa.com for the last two weeks of December are: 1. Orlando; 2. Las Vegas; 3. Los Angeles/Anaheim; 4. New York City; 5. San Francisco; 6. San Diego; 7. Chicago; 8. Ft. Lauderdale; 9. Boston; and 10. Nashville.

The greatest number of Christmas-New Year's auto travelers will originate in the Southeast with 13.34 million, followed by the West, 13.11 million; Midwest, 10.35 million; the Great Lakes, 8.19 million; and the Northeast, 6.54 million.

The Southeast is expected to produce the largest number of air travelers with 2.59 million, followed closely by the West with 2.54 million; then the Northeast with 1.68 million; Midwest with 1.06 million; and Great Lakes with 870,000.

Most travelers will avoid the high hotel rates, with 69 percent of holiday travelers expect to stay at a friend or relative's home. Hotels and motels are a distant second at 22 percent, followed by cabin/condo, 4 percent; camper/trailer/RV/tent, 1 percent; other, 1 percent; no overnight stay, 1 percent; and didn't know, 2 percent.

Small towns and rural areas are the expected destination for 37 percent of holiday travelers, followed closely by cities, 35 percent. Oceans and beaches should see 11 percent of travelers, followed by mountain areas, 8 percent; 2 percent for lake areas, 2 percent for state/national parks and 2 percent for theme/amusement parks. Another 3 percent responded with other and 1 percent didn't know.

Research for Christmas-New Year's holiday travel is based on a national telephone survey of nearly 1,400 adults by the Travel Industry Association of America, which conducts special research for AAA.

As North America's largest motoring and leisure travel organization, AAA provides its more than 48 million members with travel, insurance, financial and automotive-related services and member-only savings. Since its founding in 1902, the not-for-profit, fully tax-paying AAA has been a leader and advocate for the safety and security of all travelers.

This article comes from Hotel News Resource

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