

How to catch the lowest airfares

BY GEORGE HOBICA
Tribune News Service

Let's get one thing clear from the start: airfares are volatile. While it's true that flying on a Tuesday or Wednesday is cheaper than on a Friday or Sunday, there is no magic time of day, day of week or month of year to book a low airfare.

Airfares can change in a heartbeat, high one minute and low the next, and the trick is to buy when a fare on your route becomes a bargain.

FARE DROP ALERTS

First, sign up for airfare price drop alerts. Many websites now offer these at no charge, sending out lists of unusually cheap fares (some of them "fat finger" mistake fares), that while valid for travel over several months, usually expire quickly.

Take a look at theflightdeal.com, hitlistapp.com, secretflying.com, exitfares.com and Fly4free.com. They often have the same deals but I suggest signing up for all of them and to follow them on Twitter if you use it.

Other sites, such as Kayak.com, Yapta.com and GoogleFlights.com, will track fares on specific flights and dates and alert you to price drops.

When you see a great deal buy it (you can always change your mind and cancel within 24 hours, per U.S. D.O.T. regulations).

HERE'S WHAT I USE

My go-to sites when I arrange personal travel are Kayak.com (I love using its flexible month and flexible weekend options) and two Google offerings: Google.com/flights/explore and Google.com/flights.

The "explore" site allows you to choose a trip length, departure city and an arrival city or region (such as "United States," "Europe" or "Boston") and then displays a selection of the lowest fares available over the next few months. It's perfect for anyone with flexible travel dates and destinations.

The "flights" site asks you to choose origin city and destination along with specific travel dates so it's more geared to those with less flexibility.

However, none of these sites include Southwest Airlines, so you also need to compare at Southwest.com. If you're date-flexible, use Southwest's low-fare calendar option.

DON'T FORGET ONLINE TRAVEL AGENCIES (OTAs)

It may be cheaper to fly out on one airline and back on another using one-way fares, and OTAs such as Expedia and Priceline are a good place to find out.

They also sell air plus hotel packages that usually cost less than buying separately and they sometimes have fares that are much lower than the same flights and dates sold directly by the airline sites (I recently saw fares on Priceline to South Africa on Dutch airline KLM that were hundreds less than if bought on KLM.com and fares on Delta to Italy that were much cheaper on Expedia than on Delta.com).

MAKE SURE THE SITE COVERS DELTA

And speaking of Delta, that airline restricts where its airfare data appear on some popular third-party sites such as Hopper, Hipmunk, TripAdvisor and FareCompare.com so beware. JetBlue recently removed its fare data from several "meta search" sites as well.

CHOOSE "BASIC ECONOMY" FARES WITH CARE

Copying ultra-low-cost airlines such as Spirit and Frontier, now Delta, American and United also sell bare-bones economy class fares.

On domestic routes, they typically cost \$40-\$60 round-trip less than regular economy, although the savings can be greater to international destinations. Buy one of these fares and, except on Delta, you'll pay even for a carry-on bag unless it's small enough to fit under the seat in front of you; you won't be able to choose a specific seat before check-in (which means you'll end up in a dreaded middle seat), and your fare will be entirely non-refundable and non-changeable.

Although I'd never buy one of these airfares, my millennial friends, who apparently travel with just a change of clothes and a toothbrush stuffed into a backpack that slides under the seat, tell me that they're worth the inconvenience.



Dreamstime / TNS

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Elizabeth Nida Obert / enida@postbulletin.com

Mount Rainier in Washington is the center of the nation's fifth oldest national park. The mountain is 14,410 feet and the tallest volcano in the Cascade Mountain Range. The park is an international attraction and draws nearly two million people annually.

By the foot

Mount Rainier park offers a feast for the hiker's eyes

BY ELIZABETH NIDA OBERT
enida@postbulletin.com

At 14,410 feet, Mount Rainier in Washington state naturally grew grander as we drew closer.

Preserved in the nation's fifth-oldest national park, the mountain is the tallest volcano in the Cascade Mountain Range. And it is still active.

Our visit to Mount Rainier National Park began with a fairly rigorous hike in the foothills surrounding the Henry M. Jackson Visitor Center at Paradise. It was late summer and the meadows were populated with colorful wildflowers. A marmot feasted on greens just feet from the trail. And a black bear

was spotted at a healthy distance as he foraged for food.

About 10,000 people attempt to climb Mount Rainier each year. And about half reach the summit. Climbing permits are required for travel above 10,000 feet and/or on glaciers; Mount Rainier is the most glaciated peak in the continental United States.

While we were in no condition or mood to scale the mountain, we did save enough energy for the short and glorious Grove of the Patriarchs Nature Trail, which leads through what has been described as "some of the richest and most productive ecosystems on earth." The trees, enormous in height and girth, towered.

If you go

ABOUT THE WRITER: Elizabeth Nida Obert is a Post Bulletin senior staff photographer.

GETTING THERE: Flew Delta into Seattle-Tacoma International Airport and drove a rental vehicle from there.

WHERE YOU STAYED: We camped outside of the park but there are two inns and numerous camping options within the park.

WHERE TO EAT: The Paradise Inn, which is open during the summer, has a restaurant and cafe.

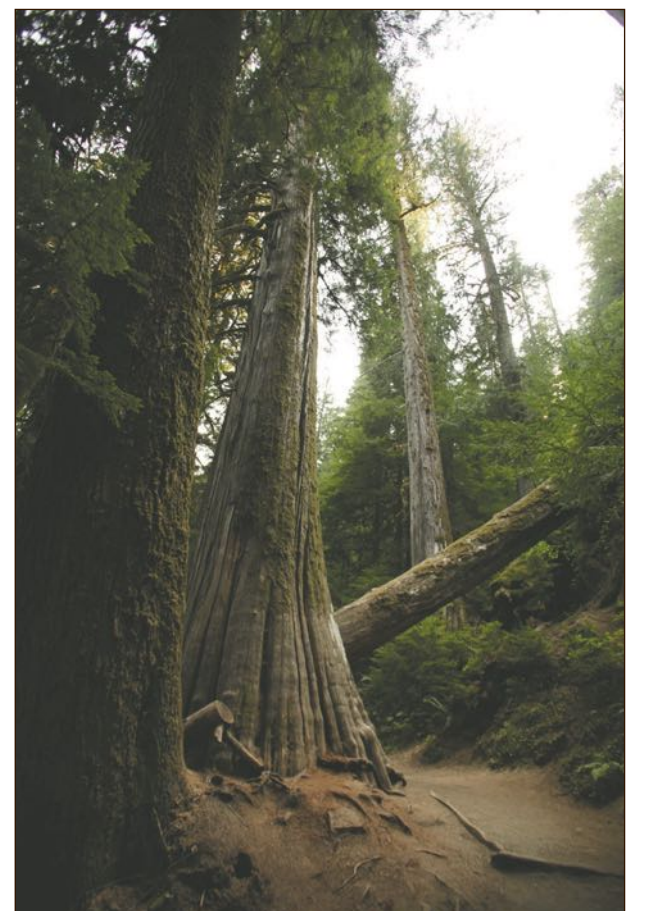
SIDE TRIPS: Tacoma, Olympic National Park and Seattle.

YOUR TRAVEL TIP: A wide range of awesome hiking options exist in the park. Know your limitations, plan accordingly and enjoy those summer wildflowers.

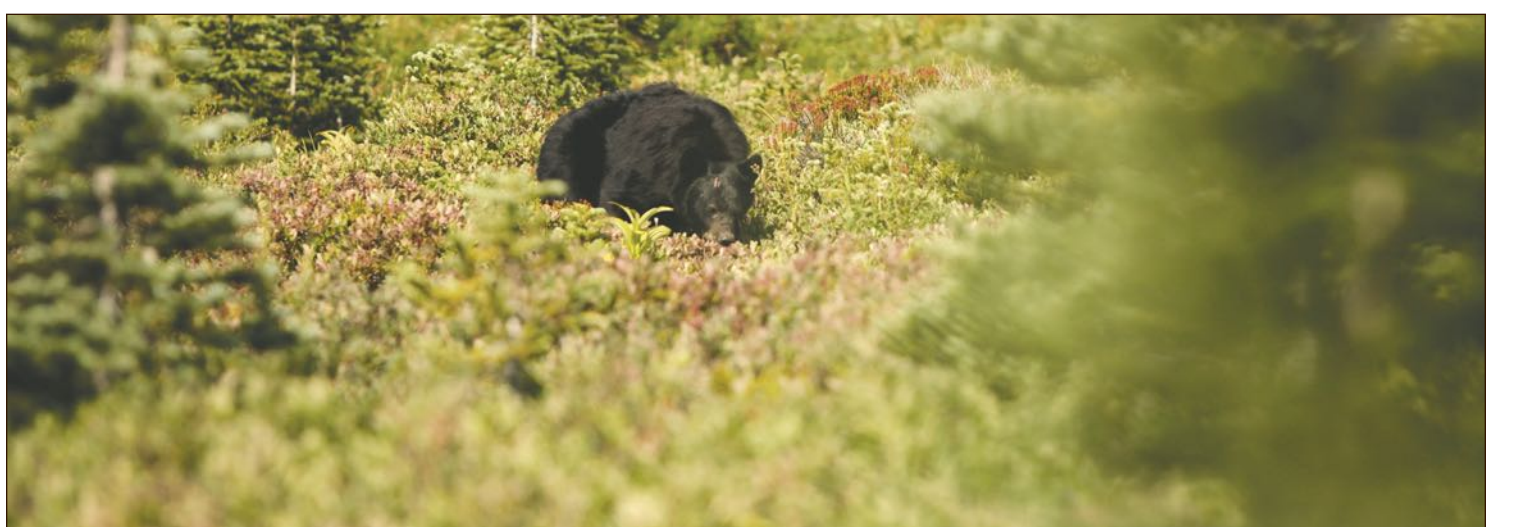
FOR FURTHER INFORMATION: www.nps.gov/mora



A marmot feasts on greens near a hiking trail. Wildlife, including black-tailed deer and mountain goats, make the region their home.



The Grove of the Patriarchs Nature Trail leads through what has been described as "some of the richest and most productive ecosystems on earth."



A black bear forages for food near a trail in the park. It is advised to stay at least 100 yards away from the bears, which number between 25,000 and 30,000 in Washington.