



SCOTT'S AIRFARE DEALS

During the semi-post-covid era, domestic airfares have dramatically increased. Up to 2/3 the cost of your mission trip will go to an airline. It is important, therefore, to find the best deal you can. Let me offer a few suggestions.

Wait on a Sale and then Buy! I like to check out Matrix for my options matrix.itasoftware.com. Then, I will go to the airline that Matrix says has the best fare, and book direct with the airline. Also, sign up for Travelocity's FareWatcher. This can also alert you to sales from your city to Alaska. I am also a big fan of Clark Howard. www.clarkhoward.com/travel/national-travel-deals. Also check out Clark's Advice page for getting the best deals. www.clarkhoward.com/travel-booking-and-planning-guide. Also check out the app "Hopper" which will let you know WHEN is the best time to get cheapest airfare for a flight routing.

If the airfares seem too high, then wait a while. Timing your purchase kinda requires a crystal ball. If you buy too soon, you pay too much. If you wait too long, you pay too much. If you are coming from the South or East Coast for a summer trip, a fair deal is between \$700- \$900. Generally it is best to buy tickets for your Alaska mission team in January- March. If you get a price under \$800, I suggest you go ahead and buy. Fares of course should be cheaper from cities in the West and upper midwest.

Once I was looking for tickets for a mission team I was sending to Western Romania. I found an unbelievable fare of \$695 r/t from Atlanta to Budapest on British Air. I did not even leave the site. I bought tickets immediately! The next day the fare had jumped to over a thousand. *You snooze, you lose!*

Scott's Plan for Getting the Best Airfare (not good plan for large groups over 15).

1. The best fares are only obtained if you are willing to buy NOW on an airline website when you find your price. That means you already have money from your team members, or you have a VERY FIRM commitment from them so that you can buy on credit card on their word. Big problems can result when you buy non-refundable tickets (and they will by far be the cheapest) and then your team member does not pay and you or the church is left holding the bag. This makes the church become a bill collector and that can get ugly. So be sure you get your money in order first. Also you must have their names as they appear on their drivers licence (or passport), and birthdate.

2. Ok, now you have all the info above and clearance to spend money. Go to www.orbitz.com, type in your dates and check prices. Let's say they show a \$750 r/t fare on United. I then go direct to the United Airlines web site. I prefer to buy from the airline direct rather from an agency like Orbitz or Expedia or Travelocity. Orbitz or Expedia are no problem if you don't have to make changes or cancel. But if you have to make changes or cancel, it is much easier to do business direct with the airline.

3. Also in the past couple of years I have been finding that it is often cheaper to buy two one-way tickets than a round-trip ticket.

4. Also when you are searching, do an incognito search. The airlines track your cookies, so when they see you are interested in something, they often will up the price on you. Search incognito or use a different computer.

5. I type in my flight request information at the airline website -- looking to buy their maximum number of tickets (6 or 9). It will either give me the same price or a higher price. If the price is higher, then I lower the number of tickets to 1 and work up from there to buy as many at one time at my \$650 price I found on www.orbitz.com.

Ok, what if you cannot find that price at the airline website? Then I get the exact flight numbers from the www.orbitz.com site - both coming and returning. For instance, maybe Orbitz is showing the \$650 airfare as United from Houston to Denver flight 88 and then Denver to Anchorage Flight 99. On the return showing Anchorage to Denver flight 98, and Denver to Houston flight 87. I go back to the airline website buy now I click "MultiCity instead of Round Trip." I manually put in each segment and flight number. This should pull up your desired fare. If you just can't make it work, go back and buy from Orbitz or Expedia.

6. Now, you are ready to buy. Remember this is a nonrefundable ticket so be prepared. Buy as many on your first booking as the site will allow. Preferable six to nine the first time. Why? Often, the airline computer shows you making a purchase and ups the price the next time you try to buy more tickets. They track your computer cookies. You will notice that on the second batch of purchases, the price goes up dramatically. So get as many as you can the first purchase. Or also use a different computer to buy more tickets.

However, here are some things to do if they jump the price when you try to make a second purchase of tickets. First, clear your cookies on your computer and try again. Second, try booking more tickets from a DIFFERENT computer. Thirdly, wait a few days and try again. Lastly, call the airline direct, give the agent the flight bookings and flight numbers and she may be able to get your the original price plus \$25/ticket commission.

OK, now my disclaimer: There is a RISK using *The Scott Plan*. I've been doing tickets this way for a long time. Generally, I get my great deal the first purchase of tickets. Usually after that I have to pay more for the other tickets. But never what it would have been if I had not used my plan. They may go up \$50, but that is still way less than what group fares want to charge. Your other risk is them not having enough seats to sell. So, check the seating chart on the plane and see how full it actually is.

Trends. The last two years airfares have tended to be higher than before to Alaska. If you are not happy with the price, WAIT! But... don't wait too long. You need to buy your tickets by early April. Of course the more tickets you have to buy, the bigger problem you have waiting. Also note that a lot of airlines add summer flights to Alaska to their schedules usually in March. For instance, Delta adds a nonstop from Atlanta each Summer. If you are able to book right when those new seats on that new flight get added into the system, you probably will score a very good price and also a great direct flight.

Also, you can sign up and get fare alerts here: www.airfarewatchdog.com/fare-alerts/ Put in your departure and destination cities and dates and they will send you email alerts when the fare dips significantly lower than normal. Also check out the HOPPER app for this.

Travel Agents. I am generally not a fan of travel agents. They are slowly becoming extinct. Recently I had a church group call me to cancel because their travel agent was offering a \$1,400 fare to Alaska. They used the agent because he was a member of the church. I told them to fire their travel agent. They should have been finding a fare about \$700 not \$1400. The agent did not know what he was doing or was not working for them.

Frequent Flyer Miles. This is the best thing going. If you can find seats, you can fly to Alaska for the same mileage it would take to fly to Alabama – 25,000 miles. The problem is getting seats when you want them. For this to work, you got to do it waaaaay in advance.

If you have not yet joined a frequent flyer program, go to the airline website that you most often fly and sign up. Then be sure to give this number every time you fly. Also, get a credit card that will earn you air miles. As a general rule, three trips to Alaska and a and ... presto... you got a free ticket! Do note, however, that Delta has changed their rules. They are now giving frequent flyer miles based up on the *price of the ticket* and *not on the miles flown*. My last trip I flew 7,758 miles but only got 2,255 miles credit. So Delta is actually NOT good now for accruing miles from miles flown. Interestingly, the latest survey of mileage programs ranks Alaska Air as the best in the country. Also, if you or your church is purchasing all the tickets for the group, can you imagine how many frequent flyer miles you can earn off that airline credit card? For sure, you can fly somebody for free ...maybe more.

Also, most airline affinity credit cards will give you 25,000 - 50,000 miles just for signing up. Heck, use the card for a year, get the frequent flyer tickets and then cancel the card if you wish. If you are planning to come to Alaska regularly, it is worth getting the Alaska Air Bank of America Visa. In addition to a lot more miles earned when you use the card to buy tickets, they give you a buy one, get one free coupon and also free baggage check.

Group Fares? If you are bringing a large group, you may want to contact the airline group sales. You can find this on their web page. However, *you always pay more booking as a group*. The benefit, however, is that all your team is on the same plane and you know there will be enough seats for all your group and you don't have to pay immediately when you book or connect names to your reservations. If you have a big group, you almost are forced to go this way. But if your group is small, the cheaper way is to wait and buy your tickets online once you have the money gathered from your team.

With large groups, do not feel that you have to get all your team on the same plane. Insisting on the same plane may cost you a lot more money. Consider splitting your group into two or three groups

going different flights. No worry. GraceWorks is happy to pick your folks up at the airport in Anchorage.

When to Buy? When is the best time to buy? When should you wait longer? Go to hopper.com and this amazing site will tell you when to buy and when to wait. You should be buying your group tickets by mid April. However, if you are just buying a few tickets, you may wait longer.

Smaller Airlines. There are some great deals out there with smaller airlines trying to break into the Alaska market. **Sun Country Airlines** was offering r/t fares from Las Vegas to Anchorage for most of the summer 2019 around \$300/rt. Check out their other gateway cities such as Seattle, Orlando, Minneapolis and others. **Jet Blue** also has some amazing West coast fares. For many folks, it will still save you a ton of money if you spit-ticket -- i.e. buy a r/t ticket to one of these cheap gateway cities and then buy another r/t ticket to Anchorage. Newark and Chicago are amazingly cheap gateway cities to Europe. Realize that most of your search engines will not list smaller airlines like Southwest, Sun Country, Allegiant, and Jet Blue. Also look for Frontier to begin flying to Alaska again.

Comparison Shop the Airlines. Sites like www.orbitz.com, www.travelocity.com and www.expedia.com give you a clue to who is offering the best deals. Several airlines fly here to Alaska. Check out their web sites.

Alaska Air www.alaskaair.com (summer direct from Seattle, Portland, Los Angeles, Chicago) NOTE: Alaska Airlines has granted GraceWorks a 5% discount coupon code for Summer 2019. We expect to have this in 2020 also. Contact us for code info if you choose to book on Alaska.

Delta www.delta.com (summer direct from Atlanta, Minneapolis, Salt Lake, Seattle)

United www.ua.com (summer direct from Houston, Denver, Chicago, Newark)

American www.aa.com (summer direct from Dallas/Fort Worth, Phoenix, Los Angeles)

Sun Country www.suncountry.com Great prices from gateways such as Las Vegas, Orlando, Fort Myers, Dallas Fort Worth, Chicago, Minneapolis, Seattle and San Antonio

Frontier www.flyfrontier.com Not flying to Alaska as of May 2019

Jet Blue. www.jetblue.com Great deals often from Seattle and West Coast. Look at getting a deal to Seattle or LA or Longbeach, and then flying Jet Blue to Anchorage.