

Gulliver

No worms for the early birds

Germans get little in reward for booking their flights early

But Americans and Canadians pay through the nose for their last-minute booking habit



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HOW far in advance should you book a flight to get the best price? That is a question that many travellers agonise over. Yet people around the world do not respond in the same way to the incentives they are given.

New data from Concur, a travel-software firm, compares flight-booking trends from five countries. Their researchers found that the penalty for booking at the last minute is by far the greatest in America. For domestic flights in America, tickets booked fewer than eight days in advance of travel tended to cost 39% more last year than those purchased at least 15 days ahead of time. The equivalent figure for France was 27%, 19% for Canada and 16% for Germany. In Britain (where there are comparatively few domestic flights), waiting to buy a ticket until the final eight days actually saved travellers an average of 3%.

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Economists, then, would expect Americans to be the most careful about booking flights ahead of time, and German and British people to be the most lax. But this is not the case. In the average month last year, only 42% of American business travellers booked their flights more than 15 days ahead of travel. Germans were in fact among the earliest birds in this regard (tied with the French), booking ahead 44% of the

time, even though they faced a minimal penalty for late bookings. Meanwhile, Canadians, who faced a higher cost for last-minute travel than Germans, were by far the most lax among these countries, booking more than 15 days ahead just a third of the time. They were also the likeliest to book flights within three days of travel—they did so a fifth of the time. And Americans, despite the huge additional cost of last-minute bookings, came in second place here, booking within three days 17% of the time.

Around holiday times, the differences between the countries become even more accentuated. Canadians are woefully bad at buying flights ahead at peak travel times. In December, 23% of them purchased their tickets within three days of flying (the highest of any country in any month), and in June, just 29% of them purchased their tickets more than 15 days out (the lowest of any country in any month). Germans and the French, by contrast, become even more responsible about their ticket-purchasing around the holidays: only 11% of French business travellers bought flights with less than three-days notice before travelling in August, while 54% of Germans booked at least two weeks ahead in December.

Generational differences in ticket-buying habits do not provide much hope for greater planning in years to come. Millennials—travellers between the ages of 22 and 35—were the likeliest of all age groups to buy tickets within three days of travel and the least likely to buy them more than two weeks ahead. Of course, some of this can be explained by the fact that younger employees, who often do not have families, are likelier to be sent on last-minute trips than more senior workers.

But ticket buying habits could be as much to do with the industries frequent flyers work in as their nationality. Nearly 70% of people working in higher education book their tickets more than 15 days in advance—in part because academic

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often harder to anticipate client meetings in the fast-moving world of business than in the relatively sedate world of academia. Especially if you're Canadian, it seems.

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