

COLUMNIST

Ready for spring break? So is everyone else. Here's what to expect.

Christopher Elliott Special to USA TODAY

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Ready for spring break? So is everyone else.

And that's the problem.

"My phone is ringing off the hook," said Shane Mahoney, CEO of Lugo's Travel. "There's such a pent-up demand for travel and people can finally travel wherever they want without restrictions."

Experts predict this spring break – typically from late February to the end of March – will be busier than last year's and maybe busier than 2019. But this won't be your typical travel season. Not even close.

Passport wait times are down: Here's what to know about getting a US passport

New theme park: Universal just announced a whole new theme park for families with young kids, in Texas

The holiday air travel meltdowns and this week's FAA computer outages have cast a long shadow across the spring break travel season. And there are other uncertainties: inflation, a soft economy and wars. Travelers are not sure what to do.

So what does that mean? Well, there are places everyone wants to go, which you might consider avoiding this spring break. And there are mistakes travelers will make, but you can avoid these, too.

Check out Elliott Confidential, the newsletter the travel industry doesn't want you to read. Each issue is filled with breaking news, deep insights, and exclusive strategies for becoming a better traveler. But don't tell anyone!

Where's everyone going this spring break?

When it comes to popular destinations, think warm. Many travelers want to head south to catch a few rays – and maybe waves. Here are Priceline's most popular domestic destinations for Spring Break 2022:

Las Vegas

Orlando, Florida

Miami

New York City

New Orleans

Nashville, Tennessee

Chicago

San Diego

Fort Lauderdale, Florida

Houston

But this year, for the first time since 2019, Americans are also considering traveling internationally for spring break.

"The strength of the dollar, coupled with lifted or lessened COVID restrictions, is leading to an uptick in searches for international travel destinations throughout Europe and even Asia," said Priceline spokeswoman Christina Bennett. "So while inflation is driving up costs overall, your dollars are going further with current conversion rates."

Travel insurance company World Nomads reports that for 2023, 52% of Americans' top destinations are European regions and 19% for South America and Asia respectively. The rest are domestic trips.

"Travelers are seeing 2023 as the year to take the big trips they had postponed due to COVID-19 and border restrictions," said Christina Tunnah, general manager of marketing and brands for World Nomads.

What are some spring break travel trends?

The new travel trends driving travel spring break 2023 focus on outdoor activities, fuel efficiency and predictability, according to experts.

► **Spring camping**

The Dyrts' 2022 Camping Report, which surveyed thousands of campers and members of the general public, found that spring is one of the fastest-growing camping seasons. "Spring camping is up 27% from pre-pandemic levels," said Sarah Smith, founder of the camping information app. "Spring break can be an excellent time to snag more competitive campsites before the summer season gets into full swing." But she said don't wait too long to book, or you might not find a site for your RV or tent.

► **Closecations**

Booking patterns for spring break suggest Americans prefer a "closecation" – traveling to a region within three to four hours of driving distance from home. A softer economy is driving this trend, according to Noël Russell, chief experience officer for Whimstay, a vacation rental platform. "These closecations will be an increasing trend for travelers who want to experience the joy of a vacation while staying within their budget and maintaining more control over their experiences," she said.

► **Return to "normal"**

Christopher Falvey, co-founder of Unique NOLA Tours, a ghost tour company in New Orleans, has been analyzing the bookings for spring break. His conclusion: It's looking a lot like 2019.

"Our seasonal ebb and flow has come back to normal," he said. "Finally, predictability!" But that means all the travel tricks you learned during the pandemic, like waiting until the last minute to find a deal, will no longer work.

Expert advice for your spring break trip

What's different about this spring break? Experts say this year, everyone is pushing the boundaries a little. They're waiting until the last minute, trying to squeeze more time into their vacation and taking more risks. Here's my free guide to holiday travel:

Don't wait until the last minute: "Book early," advised Melanie Fish, a travel expert at Expedia. "Last-minute deals are becoming exceedingly rare." When is the best time to book? At least a month before domestic flights and six months before international flights

will save you about 10%, according to Expedia's latest research. To find out if it's a good time to buy, Hudson recommends setting up a fare alert online. Expedia uses machine learning to identify patterns in historical data and forecast price changes.

Give yourself plenty of time to get there and back: "Spring break is a pretty tight window, usually one week with a weekend on each end to get to your destination and back," said Michael Rust, a professor at Western New England University. Rust helps plan educational trips during spring, and knows there isn't a lot of margin for error. "It doesn't leave much time for changing travel plans if something unexpected happens," he said.

Understand the risks: Spring break can be dangerous. After all, you're headed to the beach with thousands of other people. If you have travel insurance – and you probably should – take a few minutes to read the exclusions related to high-risk behaviors. "It's especially important to understand the alcohol-related exclusions of your insurance policy," said Narendra Khatri, principal of Insubuy, a travel insurance company. Put differently, if you overindulge during spring break and get into a moped accident on the way back to your hotel, you might not be covered.

I've never understood the spring break travel phenomenon. School districts give their students a week during spring; everybody drives to Florida or flies to Cancun. High prices and chaos follow. That's no way to spend your vacation. And this year, with all the air travel problems we've had, you might not even get to your destination.

So what will happen this spring break? It's too early to know for sure. And it may be impossible to predict, say experts.

"The unpredictability of travel, including flight cancellations, labor shortages, the impact of inflation, and potential illness, is unlikely to let up by springtime," said Angela Borden, a product strategist for travel insurance company Seven Corners.

So for spring break 2022, the only thing we know with absolute certainty is that we know nothing.

Christopher Elliott is an author, consumer advocate, and journalist. He founded Elliott Advocacy, a nonprofit organization that helps solve consumer problems. He publishes Elliott Confidential, a travel newsletter, and the Elliott Report, a news site about customer service.