



## When to Reserve What

By Kelli B. Grant  
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**ANY SHOPPING ADDICT** will tell you that it's advance planners and last-minute lollygaggers who typically find the best deals.

The idea is that if you know exactly what you want — and won't settle for anything less — it's best to book well in advance. Not picky? With a little flexibility, you'll find last-minute booking deals for just about everything.

But the best bargain hunters know to look for that sweet spot of good selection and low prices. We talked to the experts and found the best time to reserve everything from moving companies to summer camps.

### Building/Remodeling Contractors

**When to book:** Summer, at least three months before you want the work to begin.

**Why:** Contractors are busy working year-round, but the real flood of calls for bids on new jobs occurs in spring, says Vince Butler, past chair of the National Association of Home Builders' Remodelers Council. "Someone calling in the middle of the summer is going to get a lot more of the contractor's time," he says. With emptier schedules during the fall, contractors face increased competition, and thus have more incentive to negotiate.

### Car Rentals

**When to book:** Eight or so days before your trip.

**Why:** Not every location offers last-minute rental deals, cautions Phil Reed, consumer advice editor for Edmunds.com<sup>1</sup>. In fact, most car-rental agencies increase their prices seven days out from a given rental date. Book before that for low prices and decent selection.

### Cruises

**When to book:** In spring, about a year before your trip.

**Why:** That's when the cruise lines release their schedules and begin booking for the following year, says cruise broker Stewart Chiron, a.k.a. The Cruise Guy<sup>2</sup>. You'll find the cheapest prices for those routes with the widest availability. "The trend for the past several years is that prices go up dramatically as the cruise date approaches," he says. "As cruise companies see demand go up and supply go down, they increase prices. Prices just go off the charts."

### Hotel Rooms

**When to book:** Early and often.

**Why:** Hotel rates fluctuate based on demand, says Robert Mandelbaum, director of research for PKF consulting, a hotel-industry research firm. Generally, prices get lower closer to your check-in date as the hotel looks to fill empty rooms, he says. To get the best rate at the hotel you want, book as far in advance as you can, and then check in every week or so. "Most hotels will let you cancel, penalty-free, until 24 hours in advance of your stay," says Mandelbaum. "If you spot a lower rate, cancel your old reservation and then immediately rebook it."

One caveat: Do check that the rate is refundable before you try this book-and-rebook trick. Thanks to online price competition, more hotels are adding low-cost restricted rates to their rosters, says Mandelbaum. Canceling these will cost you at least one night's stay, if the rate is refundable at all.

### Moving Companies

**When to book:** Six weeks before your move.

**Why:** Even the biggest moving companies have limited local resources, and dates fill up fast, says David Sparkman, spokesman for the American Moving and Storage Association. A six-week window gives you plenty of time to get accurate in-home estimates from several movers, compare and negotiate for the best rate.

### Reward Travel

**When to book:** 330 days before your flight leaves.

**Why:** "Give or take a couple of days, that's when airlines release their reward seats," says Anne Banas, executive editor for SmarterTravel.com<sup>3</sup>. "There are very limited reward seats; usually just one or two at the cheapest reward level." Wait even a few more days, and you may need to spend double or even triple the usual 25,000 miles to snag a seat — if there are any left at all.

## Summer Camps

**When to book:** July or August for the following summer.

**Why:** Camps save on marketing by filling their beds for next year while this year's camp is still in session, says Dr. Christopher Thurber, author of "The Secret Ingredients of Summer Camp Success," a DVD resource for new camper families. Parents, in turn, get the biggest discounts for booking early. Expect to save 10% off a summer-long camp stay, or at least \$100 off a two-week session, he says. If you can talk Junior's best friend or little brother into attending, too, you may be able to save another 5% to 10% with a multiple-camper discount.

## Wedding Vendors

**When to book:** Between Oct. 1 and Dec. 25, about six to 12 months out from your wedding date.

**Why:** "Wedding vendors do need to pay their mortgages year round, but they're kind of lonely business-wise during the last part of the year," says Alan Fields, co-author of "Bridal Bargains." As a result, they're more willing to negotiate if it results in you handing over a deposit check. Just be sure to lock in rates before Christmas, he cautions. By that time, vendors have increased their prices for the coming year, partly in anticipation of a post-holiday rush of calls from newly-engaged couples.

If you've set a date during the wedding high season (June through August), you'll need at least 12 months leeway — 15 is better — to snag the caterer, photographer and other vendors of choice. "They can only be in one place at a time," says Fields. Tying the knot in the off-season (November through February) buys you a little more time, he says. Look to book about six months out, at the latest.

Links in this article:

<sup>1</sup><http://www.edmunds.com>

<sup>2</sup><http://www.cruiseguy.com>

<sup>3</sup><http://www.smartertravel.com>

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