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Practical Traveler | Getting There

How to Cut the High Cost of Flying to Africa

For American travelers, one of the biggest expenses of any trip to [Africa](#), whether a South African safari or a beach holiday in the [Seychelles](#), is simply getting there. During high season most flights cost \$2,000 or more round trip — in coach — and require stopping or changing planes. And while a few airlines, like Delta and South African Airways, have been adding more convenient routes, fares have continued to rise.

“They’ve typically been going up a little more every year,” said Jason Hedrick, branch manager at Azumano Travel, an American Express agency in [Portland, Ore.](#) “I have clients who have gone, three years ago, with me to East Africa on a \$1,200 or \$1,300 fare. Now the least expensive price from the West Coast that I’ve seen this year is \$1,700 or \$1,800, and as much as \$2,200 or \$2,300 during high season.”

The average fare in January from [Atlanta](#) to [Johannesburg](#) was up 32 percent to \$1,654 compared with the same month last year, according to Sabre Airline Solutions. From [Washington](#) to Johannesburg the average price was \$1,879, up 9 percent from January 2006. Overall, the average cost for flights to Africa from the [United States](#) in January was up 18 percent.

That means that if you’re planning an African vacation this year, you may have to be resourceful to find plane tickets that seem affordable. For starters, tally up your frequent flier miles and find out which airlines fly to the region you plan to visit. Then figure out which of them have partnerships with award programs where you have miles. Kenya Airways, for example, will join the SkyTeam alliance later this year — the airline network that includes Continental, Delta and Northwest.

“Just because American doesn’t fly to Africa, doesn’t mean you can’t get there using their miles,” said Linda Friedman, executive director of Custom Safaris in Bethesda, Md. (British Airways, a OneWorld alliance member that has code-share agreements with American Airlines, flies from New York to [London](#), for example, and from London to 11 cities in Africa.)

Ms. Friedman recently helped one of her clients design a trip using United miles for round-trip business-class tickets on Lufthansa from [Chicago](#) to Addis Ababa, [Ethiopia](#), and then separately purchase tickets for flights within Africa. The client flew to Kigali, [Rwanda](#), for a mountain gorilla tour and then, thanks in part to the savings on the business class tickets, which would have cost more than \$10,000, she said, spent three nights in Ethiopia seeing the historic cities of Gondar and Lalibela.

If you don’t have a stockpile of frequent flier miles to burn, consider traveling to Africa in the Northern Hemisphere winter, when flights from the United States to [Europe](#) tend to be cheaper than in the busy June-to-August vacation period. “Since most aircraft going to Africa tend to fly via Europe, our winter months are usually a good bargain,” said Nina Wennersten, co-owner of Hippo Creek Safaris in Woodcliff Lake, N.J.

While many travelers pay a premium to see millions of wildebeest migrate west and north toward the Masai Mara in July and August, tour operators like Ms. Wennersten recommend trips from January to March to catch the herds in the southern Serengeti plains, where they congregate at the Ndotu and Salei plains to give birth.

When searching for a deal to Africa, Astrid Breuer, a leisure specialist at Michaels Travel Centre in Agoura Hills, Calif., prices two separate tickets, between the United States and Europe and Europe and Africa. This, she said, lets her find the least expensive overall fare for both parts of the trip. Often the cheaper flight requires a less direct route and a stopover, but that doesn't have to mean longer total travel time.

For example, a September trip from Kennedy Airport in New York on Air France, leaving at around 6 p.m. and arriving in the Seychelles around 7:15 a.m. after a 12-hour layover in [Paris](#), was priced at \$2,822 earlier this month. By flying the same dates, but on different airlines, Ms. Breuer was able to cut the cost of the trip to \$1,502. The cheaper alternative was to take Air India from Newark at about 9 p.m., change in Paris to [Qatar](#) Airways and, after a brief layover in Doha, arrive in the Seychelles at 6:45 a.m., for a total trip three and a half hours shorter than the one on Air France.

By dealing with multiple airlines on separate tickets, you do run a greater risk of missing connecting flights if there are any delays — and don't expect the second airline to take responsibility if you do. But sometimes the savings outweigh the risk. "It's one extra stop," Ms. Breuer said of the cheaper flight, "but if you don't have a lot of money, it's worth doing."

It can also pay to check directly with African national airlines like Ethiopian Airlines, which flies between Dulles Airport near Washington and Addis Ababa, and has flights from there to many other cities in Africa. "I've found you are generally able to get better deals from the Africa airlines that have international flights to Europe and the U.S., then from the larger American and European Airlines," said Amanda Jamieson, an Africa destination specialist at Journeys International in [Ann Arbor](#), Mich. The African Airlines Association offers a list with Web links at www.afraa.org.

In April, the Star Alliance began offering an African Airpass that allows a traveler who buys a round-trip ticket to Africa on a member airline like Lufthansa or Swiss Air to take 4 to 10 flights in sub-Saharan Africa on South African Airways, at a savings of about 10 percent.

Also, in the last few years, three low-fare carriers — Kulula, 1time and Mango, the low-cost carrier of South African Airways — have emerged in [South Africa](#), offering one-way rates as low as 248 rand (\$33.50, at 7.6 rand to the dollar) from Johannesburg to [Cape Town](#). Flights from [Durban](#) to Johannesburg cost just 219 rand (\$29.60) on 1time and 175 rand (\$23.60) on Mango.

Keep an eye out for new flights to the continent, as airlines sometimes offer low fares on new routes. Introducing its new morning flight from New York to Paris starting May 1, Air France ran a promotion earlier this month touting easier connections from New York to Johannesburg and one-way fares from \$535. Last month, Delta announced it would fly nonstop between Atlanta and Lagos, Nigeria, starting Dec. 3. And Virgin Atlantic plans to start daily flights between Heathrow and [Nairobi](#), [Kenya](#), in June.