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CHRISTMAS IS COMING

IT'S NOT TOO LATE

How to book a last-minute summer holiday

ESCAPE.COM.AU



COVER STORY

BETTER LATE THAN NEVER

There's still time to find a festive break with our expert tips and hot deals

DILVIN YASA

Feeling down about not having booked a trip for the post-Christmas period? It might be worth remembering that while the early bird might swoop on the worm, it's the second mouse that gets the cheese.

Of course this logic wouldn't ordinarily apply to peak periods, but Luxury Escapes general manager Blake Hutchison says there are plenty of benefits to being that second mouse – provided you stay open-minded about the kind of cheese you're willing to eat.

"With a little flexibility, you can save boatloads of money, and at the same time discover somewhere totally new," he says. "Simply identify

what it is you love about a particular destination that now seems out of reach (the beaches, the bustle etc), then create a shortlist of other similar destinations before selecting the best deal available to you."

TRICKS OF THE TRADE

Gone are the days of pleading with your travel agent to "Just do something!". By downloading apps such as Skyscanner, you can be across it all, including flash sales from airlines and online travel agents, to price drops on flights you've been watching, Skyscanner senior growth manager Robyn Lee says.

"The best way to keep up is by subscribing to Price Alerts on Skyscanner, or watch for deals in

communities like the Skyscanner Australia Deals Club," she says.

Searching "Everywhere" on the site, or tapping "Explore Everywhere" on their app will surface a list of destinations for the identified travel period (helpfully arranged by price), while their Cheap Summer Holiday Flight Deals engine aggregates the cheapest fares for travel during the summer months.

A current hot deal? Try Sydney to Singapore from \$371 return over the travel period January 25-31, 2018.

Over on Webjet's app, a Price Drop feature will notify you the second a price drops on a flight you've been watching, but it might also be worth considering flying out on Christmas or New Year's Day, according to David Galt, Webjet country manager.

"History shows that these two days



often have significantly cheaper flight options available.”

And above all, don't despair: although searching for the perfect last-minute Christmas break can be daunting, remember that Booking.com offers travellers more than 25 million bookable rooms worldwide in over 225 countries.

Your cheese is in there somewhere.

SKYSCANNER.COM.AU, WEBJET.COM.AU, BOOKING.COM

CRUISE CONTROL

Cruise companies normally recommend booking voyages at least six to nine months in advance to get the destination and stateroom category you desire, so does this mean the horse has already bolted?

Not necessarily, says Adam Armstrong, managing director of Royal Caribbean Cruises Australia and New Zealand. Royal Caribbean still has last-minute availability on selected sailings on the line which is over 76 voyages strong.

“A good place (for last-minute hopefuls) to start the search is by deciding on one thing you can't compromise on, such as destination, securing enough cabins for the whole family, or boarding that new ship friends have been raving about,” he says. “Work from there and keep yourself open to sailings you haven't considered before.”

One Royal Caribbean cruise which may pique your interest is a 10-night Island Adventure Voyage around Lifou, Mystery Island, Port Vila and Noumea from \$1129 a person twin share, while Celebrity Cruises has an eight-night South Pacific cruise taking in Noumea, Lifou and Isle of Pines from \$1399 a person twin share.

There are still spaces on key P&O voyages such as a six-night A Taste of Tasmania cruise on *Pacific Explorer* from \$749 a person, twin share, as well as an eight-night voyage around Mare, Noumea and Isle of Pines from Sydney from \$1139 a person.

Meanwhile, a 10-day cruise to New Zealand on *Carnival Spirit* is all yours from \$1349 a person twin share.

And if you prefer your love on the rocks, Chimu Adventures has availability on a 12-day cruise around Antarctica – including a luxury

Buenos Aires stopover – for \$10,660.

Not keen? Something more suitable could just be around the corner, says Phil Hoffmann, managing director of Phil Hoffmann Travel.

“Cruise lines may release last-minute cabins that are still available in the next couple of weeks so again, flexibility of dates, cruise line and destinations visited is key.”

ROYALCARIBBEAN.COM.AU, CELEBRITYCRUISES.COM.AU, POCRUISES.COM.AU, CARNIVAL.COM.AU, CHIMUADVENTURES.COM, PHT.COM.AU

ISLAND DREAMING

Our nation's love affair with tropical islands big and small continues, and that's fortunate because airfares to these destinations are lower than ever, and there are plenty of great deals to be enjoyed over summer.

Fiji – always popular with families for its short flight time and the locals' collective desire to play with your children, even when they're off the clock – leads the charge, with Qantas Holidays offering a five-night stay at InterContinental Fiji Golf Resort & Spa from \$1089 a person twin share, and a seven-night stay at Sheraton Fiji Resort from \$3345 a family – up to two kids (four to 11 years) stay, play and eat breakfast free.

Elsewhere in Fiji, Outrigger Fiji Beach Resort also has availability, offering guests a nightly rate from \$262 plus taxes a night, while Castaway Island Fiji has island bures calling your name from \$683 plus taxes a night.

If you'd like a side of action with your beach holiday, you might want to consider Vanuatu.

“It's only 2½ hours from Brisbane and it offers once-in-a-lifetime experiences, from visiting the mouth of an active volcano, to diving one of the world's best wrecks,” says Bart Druitt, from Vanuatu Tourism.

Helping you get in touch with your adventurous side is Eratap Beach Resort, which is offering a five-night stay in a one-bedroom villa for two adults from \$2720.

And Iririki Island Resort & Spa is currently offering 25 per cent off most room rates for stays of five

days and longer on select dates.

QANTASHOLIDAYS.COM.AU, OUTRIGGER.COM, CASTAWAYFIJI.COM, ERATAP.COM, IRIRIKI.COM

EUROPE CALLING

Selling the benefits of a cold Christmas to hot-blooded Australians isn't the easiest of jobs, but if anyone can do it, it's WOW Travel & Cruises managing director Lisa Myers.

“Just think that this is a time when you can enjoy mulled wine, visit Christmas markets, see Santa, and give in to picture-perfect winter holiday fun,” she says.

“And what's more, there are still fab airfares to Europe.”

Skyscanner backs up the theory, with data showing travellers in search of the Northern Lights and a white Christmas found fares to Helsinki 19 per cent cheaper than an average fare for the year (although Lee says the cheaper deals tend to be booked in advance).

Tempted to head north? Home swaps or private home rentals are popular choices, but if you'd prefer a bells-and-whistles tour,

TravelManagers Australia has availability on two-night French Christmas tours which run in Paris, Loire Valley and Champagne respectively, and are priced from \$707 a person.

A seven-night Christmas tour encompassing all three destinations is also available from \$1452 a person twin share.

WOWTRAVEL.COM.AU, SKYSCANNER.COM.AU, TRAVELMANAGERS.COM.AU

A TASTE OF ASIA

For Aussies who want a culturally different holiday without travelling too far from home, Southeast Asia is the answer. And there are some breathtaking last-minute deals, says Royal Caribbean's Armstrong, who adds that airlines are offering some great flight-and-cruise deals from ports such as Singapore and Hong Kong.

“Cruising in particular is a unique way to travel through Asia,” he says. “Not only will you avoid the hustle and bustle of connecting flights and traffic jams, but you'll get the best of both worlds – palm-fringed beaches



in places like Koh Samui, and the electric buzz of cities like Bangkok.”

Brett Mitchell, Intrepid Travel

regional director for Australia and New Zealand, agrees that Asia is a solid bet for last-minute travellers – particularly when travelling with a tour operator, which means you won’t have the stress of organising logistics at the last minute.

“For those who aren’t willing to stray too far from home, we have great trips available over the Christmas and New Year break in Thailand, Cambodia, Vietnam and Japan, including up to 30 per cent off our classic tours as well as cycling, family, food and sailing itineraries,” he says.

Such deals include a Classic Vietnam 15-day tour priced from \$2348 a person, twin share, and an 11-day Highlights of Thailand trip priced from \$1710 a person twin share.

Elsewhere, Travel Associates is offering a stay four, pay three package at the five-star Dorsett Wanchai, Hong Kong, in a Deluxe Course View Room from \$569 a person, while Phil Hoffmann Travel has a host of land only packages including a four-night

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stay at Rendezvous Hotel, Singapore, from \$525 a person twin share, as well as a five-night stay at Eastern & Oriental Hotel Penang from \$619 a person.

**ROYALCARIBBEAN.COM.AU,
INTREPIDTRAVEL.COM/AU, TRAVEL-
ASSOCIATES.COM.AU, PHT.COM.AU**

DOMESTIC BLISS

We live in the most beautiful country on earth so why not spend summer exploring your own back yard? Bag a last-minute bargain in Cairns, Mudgee or Perth (identified by Booking.com as the most cost-effective destinations over summer)

by using either a hotel comparison site to book accommodation, or by going old-school and driving to a new destination where there are traditional holiday parks and campgrounds aplenty.

Another strong option is to head south where the weather is cooler (and thus, the tourists fewer) or across the Tasman where locals have left to join the Aussies in Queensland, and if you like, take an organised tour which will take all the hassle out of planning last-minute logistics.

AAT Kings managing director Hans Belle is a fan of Tasmania in particular. “It has breathtaking sites and some of the best produce in Australia, and it really is the perfect destination for those who want to treat all of the senses over the festive period,” he says.

AAT Kings has availability on a few of their guided holidays during the December period, including their 10-day Tasmanian Wonders guided holiday which is priced from \$2875 a person twin share, as well as an 18-day Best of New Zealand tour covering every corner of the country from the sandy white beaches of the North Island to the snow-capped mountains of the South Island, from \$6870 a person.

The lesson learned?

Whether you’re an early bird, a tardy mouse or simply an exhausted parent, that life-affirming next holiday is only ever a few clicks away.

**BOOKING.COM, AATKINGS.COM,
TRAVELMANAGERS.COM.AU**

**DEALS CURRENT AT TIME OF WRITING AND ARE
SUBJECT TO AVAILABILITY.**

ENJOY MULLED WINE,
VISIT CHRISTMAS
MARKETS, SEE SANTA,
AND GIVE IN TO
PICTURE-PERFECT
WINTER FUN

CHRISTMAS DAY
AND NEW YEAR'S DAY
OFTEN HAVE
SIGNIFICANTLY
CHEAPER FLIGHT
OPTIONS





Want to beat the summer heat?
Chimu Adventures has an
Antarctica cruise deal.

ANTARCTICA

PICTURE: SUPPLIED





PENANG

With a little flexibility and a sense of adventure, the festive season could find you at exotic places such as the InterContinental Fiji Golf Resort (main), the Eastern & Oriental Hotel Penang or the Dorsett Wanchai, Hong Kong.

PICTURES: SUPPLIED



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Secrets to
score a bargain
holiday, only
online at...

ESCAPE.COM.AU

