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Airline Tickets Likely To Fall

By Peter Pae Los Angeles Times

Air travelers suffering from summer sticker shock might find some relief this autumn.

With demand for air travel falling faster than Olympic swimming records, some carriers are slashing autumn fares to levels not seen since oil prices began skyrocketing last year.

"It's a good time to fly if you want to put up with the grief," said Joe Brancatelli, editor of the business travel Web site JoeSentMe.com.

In the past two weeks, for example, Southwest Airlines and Jet-Blue Airways began offering \$49 one-way fares to the San Francisco Bay Area from Southern California airports while AirTran Airways and Virgin America were selling \$139 one-way tickets for flights from Los Angeles International Airport to Atlanta or New York.

"That's good news," said Jason Womack, an Ojai, Calif., resident and management consultant who flies frequently for his job. "My clients are bracing for fares to rise."

Womack said he found a roundtrip fare this past weekend from Los Angeles to Portland, Ore., for \$400, about the same as last year. "That was a bit surprising because everything has been going up."

International fares are hovering at an average of 50 percent more than last year — mostly because of fuel surcharges of as much as \$400 — but there are signs of weakening, said Tom Parsons, chief executive of travel Web site BestFares.com.

Some foreign carriers began dropping prices by as much as 50 percent, with round-trip fares from Los Angeles to London dropping to about \$900 from \$1,600.

The latest dip in oil prices is giving airlines some room to lower fares. But analysts and travel experts said the bargains were driven for the most part by one of the industry's worst fears: flying planes with empty seats. Even with the latest drop in the price of oil, fuel costs are 53 percent more than a year ago.

"A drop of \$30 a barrel helps but traffic is collapsing, so airlines are having to discount like crazy to fill their planes," Brancatelli said.

Demand for air travel is falling faster than airlines can eliminate flights to take empty seats off line, he said.





THE ASSOCIATED PRESS As airlines see consumer demand drop, they are lowering prices for tickets.