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**DOW JONES**

## Despite early demand, flights abound for Hong Kong turnover

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CHICAGO (AP) - Forget being a part of history when Hong Kong reverts to Chinese control on July 1. Do you know how much a trip like that will COST - and that the average tourist won't get much bang for the buck?

Despite early demand and reports that airlines were so full they were not even adding names to waiting lists, seats from the United States to the British colony are available. In fact, more are available now than a year ago, say travel agents such as Scott Montgomery, vice president of Geographic Expeditions in San Francisco.

The lack of enthusiasm could stem from the expense. Airline tickets range from \$1,600 to \$6,300 for a round trip. Hotel rooms go for \$1,000 or more per week, and that doesn't even include the standard fare of chicken feet, dim sum and baby eels.

"I could sell a dozen seats on almost every day prior to the handover. It's crazy," Montgomery said. "I'm actually surprised to see as many seats as I'm seeing now."

Travelers have lost interest because the average Joe will not be part of the hype, travel agents say. Sure there will be the inaugural banquet beside the harbor, but only 4,000 VIPs will dine on silver and crystal. The closest that the non-connected person will get is watching the closed-door ceremonies on the hotel TV.

"They tried to instill in people the fact that they were going to be part of history, but most of the signings and what have you will be done behind closed doors," said Paul Demers, a partner in Carlson Wagonlit Travel in San Francisco. "There will be no public display short of fireworks, and you can do that in Chinatown right here in the U.S."

Travelers also have been deterred by stories that hotels and airlines have been booked solid, Montgomery said.

"A lot of people thought they would not be able to get a hotel or plane ticket, so they didn't even bother to try," he said.

What a difference a couple of months makes.

United Airlines, which is based in suburban Chicago and has direct flights from Chicago to Hong Kong, has had a number of cancellations, said spokesman Joe Hopkins. Airline officials said flights may have a few more empty seats than last year but not many.

Cathay Pacific Airways, which is based in Hong Kong, has about the same number of vacancies as it did last year. Vice President Ian Callender said the primary difference is that passengers started booking flights in November - far earlier than usual - and are paying more "for the privilege of going to see Hong Kong at this

historical time."

"We are going into a historical period. Obviously, there are a lot of people who want to be part of that history, and June is traditionally a reasonably popular month for **travel**," he said.

Flights started to open up in the last few weeks, in part because travelers were not willing to pay up when some hotels jacked their prices from \$300 to \$600 a night, **travel** agents said.

"As we get closer, I think people are realizing ... do they really want to spend the time and money to go over there and not to witness anything in particular?" Demers said. "It's not like a royal wedding."

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