

Movie ticket prices jump to all-time high

Scott Bowles, USA TODAY 3:43 p.m. EDT July 23, 2013

Movie tickets jump to their highest average ever, sparking a debate over whether the cineplex is getting too expensive for a night on the town.



(Photo: Zade Rosenthal)

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LOS ANGELES — Let's start with the bad news: The average cost of a movie ticket in the USA is the highest on record.

The flip side: Adjusted for inflation, that ticket still costs less than it did 40 years ago, when it cost an average of \$1.76.

The latest data from the National Association of Theater Owners finds that the average ticket last quarter rose to \$8.38 from \$7.96 a year ago, sparking debate over whether moviegoing is losing its appeal as an affordable night on the town.

The surge is largely because of the surcharge on 3-D and IMAX tickets, which often adds \$3-\$5 to a ticket. And it helps explain why revenues are down less than 1% this year this year even though attendance is down 3%. The second quarter of the year saw more than \$1.3 billion in 3-D ticket sale thanks to hits such as *Iron Man 3* and *The Great Gatsby*. Over the same quarter last year, 3-D generated \$745 million, NATO says.

"There were more options for moviegoers, which is what we strive for," says Patrick Corcoran, NATO vice president. The price increase still leaves moviegoing as one of the USA's cheapest social options, he says. Adjusted for inflation, that \$1.76 movie ticket in 1973 would cost \$9.26 today.

Movies "still stand out as a less expensive out-of-home experience," Corcoran says.

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But for how long? April Masini, columnist for askapril.com and author of four dating-advice books, warns that the industry is flirting with losing its favorite demographic.

"Movie tickets are the prime resource for a Saturday night date," she says. "And when you start up-pricing movie tickets, you're edging out high school kids, college kids and millennials."

And she doesn't accept the national average, which NATO says includes children's and senior tickets.

"While \$8 is the average price, in most urban areas \$8 is the matinee bargain price," she says. "With Saturday night movie tickets hitting the \$15 and \$20 mark, add \$20 for pricey popcorn and giant drinks, and dinner before or after the movie, and a date night is easily at the \$100-\$150 mark. And then don't forget to pay the babysitter."

Hollywood.com's Paul Dergarabedian says the price increase "isn't something to worry about — prices rise and drop every year — but it's something to watch out for, particularly if the product is seen as substandard."

Indeed, in this economy, ticket prices are a state of mind, says Gary Lemon, professor of economics at Indiana's DePauw University.

"Where else can you spend less than \$9 for two hours and have a good time?" Lemon asks. "Of course, if the movie is bad, you just got ripped off."

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