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TRAVEL

Capturing a Fare Deal

Shopping for travel on the Web has become a long-drawn-out chore. Our step-by-step strategy will get you to the good deals fast.

BY WILLIAM J. MCGEE ILLUSTRATIONS BY YUKO SHIMIZU

DO YOU EVER FEEL AS THOUGH making airline reservations takes longer than the flight itself? There are so many websites, so many fares (200 million in the system at any one time, according to SITA, a global travel-services provider), so many new carriers and so many airports. By the time you get up from the computer, your bleary eyes need a vacation of their own.

Unfortunately, no website offers everything. So you

do have to noodle around a bit to get the best price. If you're a fare shopper with limited patience, we offer a few tricks to make a quick job of finding a ticket. But if you're, let's say, um, maybe a little compulsive about saving every possible penny, we'll tell you how to make sure that you have covered all the angles.

No matter your shopping style, however, choose the right moment. "Saturday morning is often a surprisingly



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good time,” says George Hobic, founder of Airfarewatchdog.com. Airlines frequently get a jump on competitors by rolling out fare sales on Friday evenings through the Airline Tariff Publishing Co. (ATPCO), he says. It maintains a comprehensive worldwide database of more than 80 million fares for 500-plus airlines.

It’s best to check travel sites two to four hours after ATPCO forwards fares to their reservations systems. At right are Hobic’s recommendations for the best times to look for new fares on travel-agency sites.

Quick-and-Dirty Search

Okay, you’re at your computer in prime travel-shopping time. Where to go first? Not to one of the big three travel-agency sites. You instead want to visit ITA Software (itasoftware.com), a Boston company that developed QPX, a travel search engine that powers other search engines. Primarily, it’s a business-to-business site with no frills, but you can logon (as a guest) and search fares, even including those of some discount carriers.

ONE-STOP SHOPPING Once you enter the usual information, QPX produces a list of flights with prices, departure and arrival times and warnings about inconveniences such as long layovers. You can also search for the lowest fares at any time during a month and for deals if you stay over a weekend. You can’t purchase a ticket through ITA, but you’ll receive “booking details” that instruct you how to secure the flight you want. ITA Software lets you send an e-mail to your travel agent (a living, breathing one, not a website) to request the specific ticket it found. Or you can print out the details and then hunt for the same flight on a travel website where you can make a reservation.

SEARCH THE ENGINES If you want to save a step and book online, however, then you should search any of three other websites—Kayak, Mobissimo and Sidestep—which in turn search travel-agency sites such as Expedia, Orbitz and

Travelocity. Again, you can’t buy, but once you select the flight you want, the website will send you to travel-agency sites or directly to an airline’s website. There you make your purchase online.

Why not go directly to one of the travel-agency sites? They don’t all offer as many choices as ITA and the other search engines. What’s more, many are “powered by” other search engines and online travel agencies. For example, AOL is undergirded by Travelocity, and AOL Pinpoint and USAToday.com by Kayak. By visiting a travel-agency website, you may be repeating your previous search—a big waste of time. Still, it makes sense to check your favorite site anyway because it may negotiate deals directly with airlines and hotels.

TWEAK, TWEAK AND TWEAK The more flexible your plans, the more easily you’ll save money. While you’re shopping on ITA and the other search engines, you should choose one or more of the following quick variations for possible savings.

➤ **A DIFFERENT DAY** Kayak and some travel-agency websites offer features that allow you to compare fares while changing your departure and/or return by up to three days before and after your preferred date. If your plans are flexible, you can reap some pretty significant savings. On a trip from Boston to Miami during Christmas week, for example, departing on Dec. 18 instead of Dec. 21 and return-

The Golden Hours

You’ll have the greatest selection of new fares at the following times (all eastern):

DOMESTIC	
Saturdays	7 a.m. to 9 a.m.
Weekdays	12 noon to 2 p.m. 2:30 to 4:30 p.m. 10 p.m. to 12 midnight
INTERNATIONAL	
Weekdays	7:30 a.m. to 9:30 a.m. and late afternoon

ing on Dec. 27 instead of Dec. 29 would cut \$104 off the lowest fare.

➤ **A NEW DEPARTURE TIME** On American Airlines’ site, a Super Saver fare from Miami to Los Angeles cost \$259 at 11 a.m. and \$284—\$25 more—at 2:55 p.m.; a one-stop first-class flexible fare between the same cities cost \$1,249 at 11:10 a.m. and \$1,639—\$390 more—at 8:30 a.m.

➤ **ANOTHER AIRFIELD** Consider flying out of a smaller airport a little farther from downtown where many low-cost carriers have set up shop. Not only will the discount airlines offer cheap flights, but their very presence forces more established competitors to lower their fares for the same routes, a phenomenon dubbed the “Southwest effect” by the U.S. Department of Transportation. A one-way ticket from Chicago to Atlanta, for example, costs only \$102 from nearby Milwaukee, instead of \$149, the lowest fare from O’Hare. Don’t assume that smaller or outlying airports always offer lower fares, however. On comparable itineraries from New York City to Oakland, a flight from La Guardia Airport cost \$378 while the flight from suburban White Plains was \$681.

Quest for the Perfect Fare

At this point you could simply book the best fare and be done, knowing you’ve found a pretty good value. But if you can’t rest without knowing whether you’ve

got the very best deal, you'll have to go further. Airlines themselves are trying to draw more business by offering lower fares to customers who book through their own websites. So you should check with the airline to see whether you can get a deeper discount on the same ticket. Even if the flight is the same exact price, you should consider buying from the carrier because unlike travel-agency websites, most airlines don't charge booking fees (which run as high as \$12.50 on Travelocity, for example).

LOOK FOR LOW-FARE CARRIERS If you're still not satisfied, you may want to check with new airlines such as Skybus and low-fare airlines, which may not have surfaced in your search of search engines. You can take a quick look by visiting Airfarewatchdog.com, which includes Southwest in its listings.

Otherwise, to snag one of those cheaper flights, you have to know whether a discount carrier serves your destination. If you don't already know, visit the website of OAG, a flight-information company based in London (oag.com), and click on the Who Flies Where link. You can enter the city of departure, your destination

and the date you're planning to travel and the program will give you a list of carriers that fly that route. Another tool helps you find out whether a particular carrier serves your city.

BUT WAIT, OR MAYBE NOT There's just one question: Should you buy now or wait? "Pricing changes over time," says Bob Harrell, president of Harrell Associates, a New York air-fare consulting firm. "You may find the lowest available fare at the time you happen to be shopping, but it may not be the lowest fare." Most travelers, he says, book within 90 days of traveling, but airlines begin posting fares about 11 months in advance.

Harrell recommends that you start shopping early, though you don't have to book. Some larger travel websites, if you request, will notify you by e-mail if the fare drops for the flight you want. For guidance, check with Farecast (farecast.com), which provides an instant prediction about whether the price is likely to fall on flights among 75 U.S. cities. If the site tells you that you're getting a good deal now, you can book immediately. If it projects that the price will fall in the next month, you can wait and try later. **\$**



FROM THE TRAVEL DESK

Get Me 6A!

Your luck. No matter where you fly, you're squished in the dreaded middle seat between two human hefties. With planes flying full this summer, a bad seat may be in your future. Enter CheckInSooner.com, a website launched last year. It offers "seat polling," a service that continually checks with your airline to find you a better spot. (Right now the service is available only on American, but additional carriers will be added this fall.) The site will check every four hours if your flight is three or more days away—or every 10 minutes if you're leaving within the next two days. "As people get upgraded or cancel their flight, opportunities come up to move to a better seat," says Neville Aga, the site's founder. It also checks in passengers within three minutes of the opening of the 24-hour check-in window on American, Continental, Delta, Southwest and United and then e-mails you a boarding pass (which you can print at any airport ticket kiosk if you're without a printer on the road). Getting checked in at "the earliest possible moment can help you grab an upgrade or a good place in line if you're flying an airline such as Southwest where seating is first come, first served. At \$79 a year, CheckInSooner is probably best for frequent travelers. But you can also try a 10-day membership for \$10. —BY DONNA ROSATO

Veer

Making the Most of Your Miles

►Frequent-flier miles Just ain't worth what they used to be—that is, about 2¢. Now, depending on the airline, their value ranges from 1.2¢ to 1.6¢. A domestic round-trip fare on most

programs costs 25,000 frequent-flier miles or about \$300 to \$400. So you shouldn't redeem mileage if the fare is less than that. Save your miles for expensive tickets, upgrades for long trips or special occasions—say, a honeymoon.

You can change that arithmetic by boosting yourself

to elite status, according to Randy Petersen, a loyalty-program guru and chairman of Frequent Flyer Services (webflyer.com). That gives you a better shot at upgrades and special mileage bonuses for flights. The bonus amount depends on the elite tier for which you qualify. Typically, you need to fly 25,000 miles in a year to be in the first elite level, 50,000 for the middle tier and 100,000 to make the top level. At that point you earn a 100% bonus on the miles you fly.



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