

Fly Me To The Moon...Or Just Around Planet Earth – A ‘how to’ guide for on-line travel booking

By Nadine Meeker

The world has come a long way since the days of horse and buggy and the steam engine. Trips that would take weeks or even months in the twentieth century now take a matter of hours. Vacationers can have breakfast near the Statue of Liberty and still have time to catch the lights of the Eiffel Tower that night. Yet how to get from point A to point B is a question that travelers still face today. Add to this the advent of the Internet and the possibilities seem endless and perhaps even frustrating.

In the Beginning...

Conventionally, people went to travel agents to book trips, either home or abroad. Travel agents offered better deals or packages that airlines or hotels didn't offer to the general public. Often a traveler could call an agent and give a location with instructions of his needs. The agent simply shopped around for the best prices and researched the area if he wasn't already familiar with it. In some instances, an agent could book a whole itinerary of the area, arranging what visitors could do and sightseeing possibilities.

Here and Now...

With the Internet, the rules of travel have changed. Travelers can essentially become their own agents by contacting hotels, airlines and even tourist information bureaus for the area. The U.S. Department of Labor claims, "...many consumers still will prefer to use a professional travel agent to ensure reliability, to save time, and, in some cases, money." Although this is true to a point there are pros and cons when it comes to finding an agent or booking your trip via the Internet.

If time is a factor then a travel agent most certainly will help. Researching locales, looking for the best lodging, comparing pricing and searching for places of interest in an area is time consuming, especially if a traveler is unfamiliar with the area he plans to visit. A good agent will stay aware of trends and savings. He knows the best places to fit a buyers needs and he can do it quickly and effectively. Some agents will also confirm reservations so the client doesn't have to do it.

When a traveler builds his own vacation he must make the call to be certain that a room is waiting for him when he arrives and he must confirm with the airline to be certain there are no problems. In other words, he needs to do a larger amount of the work. For those that lack the time but not the money, a travel agent can be a valuable tool.

The second factor to consider when choosing to book with an agent or online is money. If funds aren't plentiful sometimes vacationers can find rates on the Internet better than what a hotel or an agent can get them directly. Highly advertised sites like Priceline.com or Hotwire.com are two sources that can greatly reduce the price paid for a hotel stay or airline travel. Although tourists can pick a particular area (like mid-town Manhattan) the drawback is that buyers have no say in what hotel they will stay aside for the 'star rating' (one star being economy and four stars being upscale with many amenities). Buyers on these sites are charged for the trip in advance. Only after the terms have been accepted (which is usually no refund) do they find out at which hotel they will be staying. Going in 'blind' however has its

advantages – the savings on a four star hotel can be substantial to any price an agent or travel site might propose.

The same conditions at these sites are similar for air travel. Often, the flight times cover a broad number of hours (anywhere from 6 A.M to 10 P.M) and a connection flight is almost a guarantee. Also, passengers cannot pick an airline – one is given. But again, the savings might be worth a couple hours in layover time in another city.

Comparing Apples and Apples...

For those people simply looking a place to crash a weary head there are other sites that offer hotel discounts such as Orbitz.com, Hotels.com, Travelocity.com and Expedia.com. All of these sites offer other features such as car rental and airline flights too but their main focus is hotels and vacation packages. One of the benefits of booking through them is knowing in advance the price and the location. Another bonus is being able to sort by price from least expensive and compare figures. Other smaller sites that web users might not be aware of that offer similar services are Onetravel.com and its family companies Discounthotels.com and Cheapseats.com.

What makes Discounthotels.com easy to use is the simple ‘point and click’ of a state that takes visitors to all the cities with special rates. As for Cheapseats.com their site claims that in a study conducted by Topaz International, Ltd., a Portland, OR-based airfare auditing firm, ‘CheapSeats returned fares with average savings of \$45 per ticket versus Orbitz, \$82 per ticket versus Expedia, and \$341 per ticket versus Travelocity.’ In addition all three of these sites are partnered with Lycos.com.

If these sites aren’t enough, more can be found at Travelzoo.com. This site doesn’t do direct sales to customers but they do offer a host of links that goes to various other web locations that are offering hot deals on travel.

For the carefree traveler who likes to just hop in the car and go there are discounts available to last minute travelers online too. The sites mentioned above do have such offers but another site some readers might not be aware of is Roomsavers.com. Clipping the coupons of a state or area before leaving can lead to significant discounts at the check-in window. The hitch is that discounts aren’t given for reservations made in advance but the savings can be worth it for last minute travelers who present a coupon.

A New Spin on an Old Promotion...

Although the Internet has grown in the last ten years and changed the face of travel an older business practice as found a new life on the web – Travel Memberships. Playersvacationclub.com, for example, could best be called a ‘layaway’ vacation site. Entry into the program is under five dollars (for credit check purposes) but fees are expected after the trial period. The benefit of this program is the vacation doesn’t have to be paid in one lump sum. Payments can be spread out over time. Travelersadvantage.com is another membership club where a fee is paid in order to get the discounts they have. In addition to hotels they also have information on cabin rentals or bed and breakfast inns that other larger sites don’t offer.

But as with any travel site it's best that buyers read the fine print. Some sites have cancelable trips, other do not. Some offer the information and booking at no charges while others do have fees. With coupon sites like roomsavers.com there might be restrictions on when the discount can be taken, such as exclusion on certain dates. As with any major purchase, knowing the rules of each site will help to ensure that a traveler's needs are met.

So whether travelers are staying on the other side of town or the other side of the world, the World Wide Web can be a wonderful tool to getting great deals for a relaxing getaway or family fun.

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Gateways (Links)

<http://www.priceline.com/> - Priceline.com

<http://www.hotwire.com/index.jsp> - Hotwire.com

<http://www.orbitz.com/> - Orbitz.com

<http://www.hotels.com/index.jsp> -- Hotels.com

<http://travelocity.com/> - Travelocity.com

<http://www.expedia.com/Default.asp?CCheck=1> - Expedia.com

<http://onetravel.com/> - Onetravel.com

<http://www.discounthotels.com/> - Discounthotels.com

<http://www.cheapseats.com/> - Cheapseats.com

<http://www.roomsavers.com> - Roomsavers.com

<http://www.playersvacationclub.com/> - Playersvacationclub.com

<http://www.travelersadvantage.com/Default.asp> - Travelersadvantage.com

Bio

Nadine is a full-time, freelance writer residing in Michigan with her husband and daughter. With 15 years of experience in journalism she also writes fiction novels and screenplays under her pen name CN Winters. Her homepage can be found at <http://www.wintersproductions.com>