



# PERSONAL JOURNAL.

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THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

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# The Best Way to Find a Fare Online

Airfares get more complicated with Expedia's mergers and Google's quiet entry into the fray; a state of upheaval.

By **SCOTT MCCARTNEY**

It may be time to try new ways to search for the best fare. The booking side of travel is in a state of upheaval. Like airlines, air-ticket sellers are consolidating. Expedia has already swallowed up Travelocity, and a deal to acquire Orbitz is likely to be completed later this year. Like other areas of online shopping, new entrants with new capabilities and new promises are popping up. And search giant Google is rocking the industry by acquiring a leading reservation technology firm and launching a powerful flight-search site. All this change means you can get more information about particular flights and add-

on fees, but probably not a cheaper fare. Airlines set the prices for their tickets. To assemble one fare, a booking system has to put together airline schedules with fares that are filed several times a day and then check availability. Some search engines find combinations of flights that produce a lower fare than others quote—pairing flights together from competing airlines, or even connections that airlines themselves didn't find in giant reservation-system schedules. "What you think is the lowest fare depends on who's doing the asking," says Steve Hafner, chief executive at meta-search site Kayak, which is owned by the Priceline Group. New trends, like fares that don't include

seat assignments or higher-priced tickets that bundle in a free checked bag, early boarding, extra legroom or other amenities, also cloud what's really the best deal. Fees charged by some booking sites can also confuse shoppers. CheapOair and OneTravel have booking fees as high as \$28 a person that they bake into the fare. And sometimes the fares quoted really are too good to be true. Sites may have price quotes out of date by a few minutes or even a couple of hours—they store up prices so they can answer customer queries very quickly, while others take slightly more time to check prices in real time with airlines. Click on a cached fare quote that's changed and you'll get a frustrating and seemingly

suspicious message saying, "Oops, the price has gone up." Kayak checks price quotes in real time when the query is made, when someone clicks on a particular flight and when you click to go to a site to book. And 5% of the price quotes turn out to be wrong, Mr. Hafner says. More than 30% of airline bookings are made through airline websites. Online travel agencies account for 15% to 20%, according to Atmosphere Research Group, a travel research and consulting company. The rest come through travel agencies—mostly business-travel bookings. Liz Browning of Seattle books 15 to 20. Please see **AIRFARES** page D3



## The Ticket That Flew Away

Finding an airfare deal online can sometimes turn out more difficult than it first appears. Here's how four sample searches\* went wrong:



**GOOGLE FLIGHTS** search for Seattle-Fort Lauderdale round trip.

**RESULTS:** Best and cheapest \$414 on US Airways through Charlotte with return on Delta through Detroit.

**CLICK:** 'Book with American.' Google sends you to AA.com.

**RESULTS:** 'Check below for errors: The flight you selected is no longer available. Please select another flight or modify your request.'

**REASON:** Can't book Delta on AA.com.



**MICROSOFT'S BING** search for Chicago-Buenos Aires round trip.

**RESULTS:** Best and cheapest \$1,131 on Aeromexico through Mexico City.

**CLICK:** Sends you to Priceline.com to book.

**RESULTS:** 'Due to constantly changing availability, the price for this itinerary has increased. The new price is shown below: \$1,584.'

**REASON:** Likely a cached fare that hadn't been updated with Aeromexico.



**CHEAPOAIR** search for Chicago-Miami round trip.

**RESULTS:** CheapOair says the lowest price, \$255 on Frontier Airlines. Other sites show Frontier non-stops no lower than \$292.

**CLICK:** CheapOair has changed my travel dates to June 2 with a return June 5, turning an eight-day trip into a four-day trip.

**REASON:** In small print it says 'This is a flexible date.'



**MOMONDO** search for New York-London non-stop round trip.

**RESULTS:** Momondo says the lowest price is \$1,384 for flights on American booked through partner Iberia. That's \$500 cheaper than the lowest on most other sites.

**CLICK:** Momondo sends you to Student Universe, a discount travel site that says some products and benefits are restricted to enrolled students and faculty with an .edu email address.

**REASON:** This fare is restricted to students and faculty.

\* All searches for trips departing May 31 and returning June 7.

The Wacky Water Event at the Spring Rally in March at Mount Peter Ski and Ride, Warwick, N.Y.



The biggest industry myth: Most wealth managers actually manage money.



Thinking Inside the Box

Jim Thompson and the glass cube that tops his four-story modern home in Chicago's Lincoln Park neighborhood.

ago as executive vice president and director of client services at Chicago advertising firm Leo Burnett USA, where his accounts included United Airlines, Hallmark and Oldsmobile. Now, he invests in and advises several startups and writes short stories. He turned one story into a screenplay for a 15-minute short currently being shopped to film festivals.

Mr. Thompson does a lot of his writing on a laptop in the sparsely decorated cube. The back wall is painted off-white, and the sparse furnishings include a small side table and two Wassily chairs in chocolate-colored leather. "I can bring anything I want up there, but I always take it back down," Mr. Thompson says.

however. He keeps Johnnie Walker and Grey Goose vodka in the room wet bar for visitors, as well as nice nights, they can step outside adjoining deck.

Even among the home's other like a bathroom with a mirror that design, shattered, the cube is a h when he shows visitors around, Thompson says.

"There's a dozen different kind we get around here," he says of changing clouds and multicolored and sunrises. "It's really beautiful of like living in an art museum."

—Erin Geig

## AIRFARES

Continued from page D1  
flights a year for multiple family members on different airlines. She prefers the one-stop, do-it-yourself convenience of

### THE MIDDLE SEAT

online travel agencies. She was a fan of Expedia for years but lately has grown frustrated with its services. Travelocity and Orbitz don't look like alternatives because of mergers. "I feel like I don't have anywhere to go," she says.

Expedia bombarded her with unwanted pop-ups and solicitations. She finally felt compelled to call the company to opt out. It took three calls and several hours. Expedia also isn't able to consistently get her Known Traveler number into her airline record, so she says she doesn't get Transportation Security Administration PreCheck privileges.

Expedia says customers can opt out of email solicitations by changing preferences in account information and shouldn't have to call. Senior Vice President Greg Schulze says that through testing, Expedia decided that pop-up ads "will only appear a limited number of times." The ability to add Known Traveler numbers to profiles is a recent addition and once in an Expedia customer's profile, Expedia sends the information to airlines with each booking.

Mr. Schulze says Expedia had been providing search technology to Travelocity since 2013, but the company has kept different features on the sites. He said it's too early to comment on plans for Orbitz.

While booking sites have been consolidating, search sites have been proliferating. Players range from giants, like Microsoft and its Bing search site, to garage-type startups like Momondo, launched by a small group of Danish developers and now backed by a Boston private-equity firm.

Google Flights doesn't sell tickets. It's a search site but not an online travel agency. It is making a splash in the industry by giving shoppers loads of information about flights in easy-to-use ways.

So far, Google hasn't promoted it. You can find it at google.com/flights or by running a Google search for a trip, such as "flight from Boston to Cleveland on April 15."

When you do find it, you'll see it doesn't look or run like other search sites. Put in your cities and dates and it automatically lists options. Google Flights shows what it calls cheapest, fastest and best itineraries. Using data from Routehappy, which provides data on airline amenities, Google Flights shows which flights have Wi-Fi, on-demand video and other amenities, what the average legroom is for the coach cabin on each plane and whether the flight has a bad track record of delays greater than 30 minutes.

With Google's mapping technology, a Google Flights search shows the lowest price at alternative airports on a map, so you can tell exactly how far Manchester, England, is from London, for example. The calendar for picking travel dates shows prices on each day, and clicking on the map shows a handy bar chart of prices so you can easily com-

pare dates.

Like Kayak, Google can pair flights from different airlines into a single round-trip itinerary—an advantage over just shopping airline websites.

Google lacks many direct links to booking tickets. In some cases Google Flights offers the very 1990s advice of calling the airline to book, and builds in the typical \$25 telephone booking fee.

Sometimes it gives just plain bad booking advice. It finds trips on multiple airlines that are competitors instead of partners, but those often have to be booked by online travel agencies, not airlines. For a trip departing on American and returning on Delta, Google Flights linked to American's website for booking. When you go there, you're greeted by red letters saying, "Check below for errors."

Another glitch: With some airlines—JetBlue, for example—Google Flights can send you to the generic home page after a search without inputting your itinerary. Then you have to re-enter your dates and times again for the flights you wanted. A spokeswoman declined to comment on questions about Google Flights. Google is "continuing to improve the product and underlying technology," she says.

Many consumers believe smart shoppers need to clear the cache and cookies in their own computers—elements merchants store so they recognize you when you return and tailor advertising and offers to your interests. The fear is that if airlines and travel sites know you go to Cleveland on Friday afternoons, they may only show you higher fares to Cleveland for those flights.

Experts say there's no evi-

dence of that. There have been some instances of hotel pricing being tailored to particular customers, but not with airlines. Airline websites guarantee they have the airline's lowest prices, and it's cheaper for airlines if consumers book directly with them rather than through third parties. If they discriminated against customers in pricing, smart shoppers would find cheaper fares on other airlines, says David Tossell, vice president of travel and hospitality at DataArt Inc., a technology consulting firm, and a former Travelocity manager.

"There is a point where people become price-sensitive," he says.

Henry Hartevelde, co-founder of Atmosphere, says his research has never turned up airline price discrimination. Mr. Hafner of Kayak agrees. Kayak's deals with carriers oblige them to give the site the lowest price, he says.

Best advice for consumers now: Shop several search sites, such as Kayak, Google, Hipmunk or Skyscanner. They are strong and reliable, but have different features. See which ones you like best. Hipmunk shows options in useful time bars so you can easily schedule. Skyscanner lets you easily shop inventory available in other countries where airlines may be running specials.

Once you find what you want, book directly at the airline. Booking on the airline website gives you the best shot at accurate information about what you get—or don't get—with that fare, plus add-on fees or buying potential upgrades. You also stand a better chance of getting your Known Traveler number to TSA Pre-Check if you're enrolled.

## Check the Board for Your Flight Search Status

There's been major turbulence in the world of online airline reservation searching and booking consolidation of major players, a plethora of new entrants and the emergence of heavyweight Flights. Here's a status update on some of your options for researching fares and flights.

### Sites where you can book tickets

<b>Expedia</b>	Like airlines, consolidating rivals.
<b>Travelocity</b>	Identical to Expedia.
<b>Orbitz</b>	Deal pending to fold into Expedia.
<b>Priceline</b>	Expedia's competitor in the booking sites. It and Expedia good for booking p
<b>CheapOair</b>	Not so cheapo \$28 fee.
<b>OneTravel</b>	Same company as CheapoAir. Same fee.

### Sites that search multiple sites and send you elsewhere to book

<b>Kayak</b>	Old reliable.
<b>Google Flights</b>	Great data, easy-to-use, extensive info, but still some glitches.
<b>Hipmunk</b>	Great display, but some glitches finding flights.
<b>Skyscanner</b>	Good data; can book fares offered in different countries.
<b>TripAdvisor</b>	Reviews can be helpful with hotels, not so much for airlines.
<b>Hopper</b>	Great data and advice on when to buy, which price is good.
<b>Momondo</b>	Great data, but who wants to sort through two pages of Student Universe l
<b>Vayama</b>	Specializes in international travel, but limited, such as no option for nearby a

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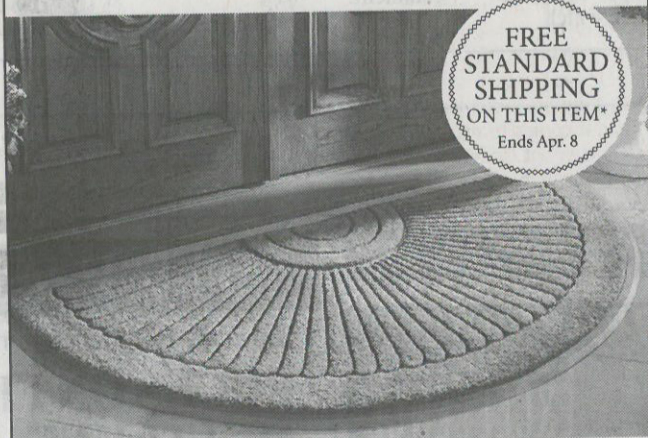
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