Chapter One

“INTO THE WILD BLUE YONDER . . .”

ALL ABOUT AIRFARES, AIRLINES & AIRPORTS
For years, we have all exulted over the low cost of airfares. While every other expense of travel went up, up, and up, airfares remained stable or even declined.

No longer. Not simply the high cost of fuel but the poor financial condition of the airlines has caused carriers to cut flights, eliminate destinations, end the discounts (or made them harder to get), and hike the average cost of transportation to really serious levels, making it a big and growing part of our total vacation expenses.

So it has become utterly necessary to learn how to find the occasional bargains. And that’s what I’ve attempted to do in this chapter. In alphabetical order, from “A” to “F,” I’ve grouped all the sources of those lower fares and all the methods for finding and obtaining them. And then, under “P,” I’ve discussed the question of passenger rights, which relates to the quality of the flight experience.

AGGREGATORS

Next time you’re determined to find the lowest possible airfare, use an aggregator

Aggregators are like Google—they search everything in sight. But unlike Google, which “orders” (that is, tampers with) its results, aggregators list the fares they find in an untouched and strictly logical order. They also claim to be totally comprehensive. When you use an aggregator (I’ll name several prominent ones below) to find an airfare for your next trip, they search not only the big airlines but the little ones; not just the established airlines but the upstarts, too; not just the airlines but the consolidators (discounters) of travel. They peer not only at the American booking engines (Orbitz, Travelocity, Expedia) but at the British (www.ebookers.com, for example), French (such as www.anyway.com), and Asian (such as Ctrip.com) varieties, too.

It may come as a surprise that none of the famous U.S. booking engines—Orbitz, Travelocity, Expedia—are nearly as comprehensive in the searching they do for you. None of them list fares of all the cost-cutting, upstart airlines, and some list only a few. None of them reach out overseas to pick up the special deals enjoyed, on occasion, by the foreign booking engines. None, as far as I know, go to the companies that operate only as consolidators (taking risk positions on blocs of seats and thus enjoying lower fares).

The reason aggregators can go to so many additional sources of fares is rooted in their cost structure. Instead of taking a hefty commission on the fares they offer, they ask only a modest “per click” referral fee. They do not book the

Previous page: Upstart airlines, such as Britain’s easyJet, offer savings in exchange for sometimes-casual service and harsh conditions.
airfares they show, but simply direct their customers to “click through” to the airlines (or other sources of airfares) for the actual issuance of tickets. Fewer airlines or other airfare companies are thus reluctant to deal with the aggregators.


What other advantages do they offer? Many of the aggregators present their results in a form that can be customized to your needs, allowing you, say, to choose to see only those flights that don’t require a transfer, or leave only from certain airports in your area. You can also usually limit the results to certain airlines, or search for fares leaving or returning within a several-day window (often, if you leave a day earlier or later you can save big). It’s like having a virtual assistant perform 50-or-so individual Web searches on your behalf—a powerful tool indeed in the hunt for the cheapest airfare.

Most important, the aggregators search the low-cost and no-frills airlines (the Southwests and Ryanairs of the world) that most other booking sites ignore. They frequently find the same route being offered for drastically different prices, saving you up to 40%. They won’t book the ticket for you; they merely ferret out all the going rates. It is then up to you to click over to the appropriate site and commence the booking process.

Even for flights within the United States, a Danish-based search engine (yes, a Danish search engine!) seems to come up with the best fares

I’ve tried every search engine there is in the eternal search for the best airfares. And after testing the wares of the top American firms (Kayak, SideStep, FareChase, and others), I recently concluded that the European website known as Mobissimo (see below) was more likely to do the best job.

But that was before I ran tests on a Danish service called Momondo (www.momondo.com). It claims to search more than 500 airfare sources (upstart airlines, budget airlines, big and little airlines, other airfare websites, consolidators, and aggregators), which is two to three times the number scanned by most of its competitors.
Since claims are one thing, results another, I ran several of the best-known search engines through a series of tests of popular routes: a domestic flight (New York to Los Angeles), a transatlantic flight (New York to London), and an inter-European flight (London to Rome).

And would you believe—Momondo saved the most! I won't bore you with every pricing detail, but suffice to say, the little Danish-based Momondo was the clear winner every single time, finding fares that were from 20% to 40% less.

To use a firm headquartered in Copenhagen may seem an odd tactic for finding air bargains between New York and California, or between Atlanta and Chicago. But there it is—those canny Danes are something else!

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**MOBISSIMO IS ALSO COMING ON STRONG (FOR INTERNATIONAL AIRFARES), A MAJOR PLAYER AMONG THE AIRFARE SEARCH ENGINES**

It isn't just my imagination. On several recent instances—too many to be ignored—Mobissimo (www.mobissimo.com) has occasionally produced the best airfare for international itineraries.

Mobissimo, as I’ve pointed out, is an aggregator. It reveals all the many options for reaching a particular destination, but then leaves it to you to access the winning fare, by going directly to the website of the airline or consolidator with the lowest price. A search engine with strong European roots (though it maintains a major office in the United States), Mobissimo is obviously best used for international itineraries, not domestic ones, such as New York to Zagreb, Croatia.

The lesson: Include Mobissimo when you search for advantageous international airfares.

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**AIRFARES (& FLIGHTS)**

**STAY ALERT TO AIRFARE “DEALS” LEAVING FROM YOUR OWN HOME CITY**

Most airfare websites do a terrible job of alerting you to information that’s relevant to your own particular needs. Even when they send you periodic e-mails containing the latest “deals,” the offers are often so varied and geographically scattered that it’s difficult to find anything of real value from your own home airport.

Half the time, when you open up a “deals e-mail” from the likes of American Airlines, there won’t be a single airfare you can use. You’ll have wasted your time.
But that confusing situation is improving, and some websites are doing better than others. The current champ is Kayak.

Of all the travel websites, Kayak is, in my experience, the best at tailoring its flight information to your home airport. While Kayak’s deals may not be exactly last minute (many of them are for travel a month or two in the future), most of them are certainly late breaking, making it necessary for travelers to book sooner than later if they want to lock in the savings. Once users set their home city, Kayak produces its list of the “top 25” (the criteria are uncertain) deals. And once the Kayak website knows your home city, it comes up with helpful links to deals specific to your location, such as late-breaking fares. Kayak also gives you the option of receiving e-mail fare alerts to the destination of your choice.

Kayak’s RSS feed (called Recent Kayak Deals) is less helpful; it’s an unsorted mix of deals to and from everywhere, and thumbing through it will waste your time.

**Yapta—which tracks the price after you’ve bought the ticket—is something else!**

You can now take advantage of a subsequent airfare sale on a ticket you’ve already purchased by going to www.yapta.com. Yapta is a fab new website whose initials stand for “Your Amazing Personal Travel Assistant.” It tracks prices on specific flights of major U.S. carriers. If the price goes down after you have bought your ticket, Yapta alerts you and you can then contact the airline and demand either cash back or a voucher for the difference in price, good for future transportation. Although all airlines other than Southwest now charge change fees of from $75 to $100, the savings from an airfare sale will frequently exceed that amount, justifying the use of Yapta. Note that the service is valid only for tickets purchased directly from the airline and not from such intermediaries as Expedia or Orbitz. I think Yapta has a future, and you might want to look at it.

**In terms of its practical benefits, a website called FlightStats has become rather valuable**

Because of the hub-and-spoke system used by most airlines, the great majority of flights require a connection to reach the ultimate destination. You change planes in Minneapolis, let’s say, to reach Billings, Montana. You have an hour in which to walk from the gate of one plane to another, often in a different and far-away terminal.

Now let’s assume that the flight you’ve chosen to Minneapolis has a record of arriving 40 minutes late at least 50% of the time. Or that the
“median delay” is 40 minutes, leaving you (and your luggage) unable to reach the other terminal in time. How wise is it to take the flight to Minneapolis in order to make a 1-hour connection to Billings? Wouldn’t it be smart to book a flight whose arrival is more reliable, even if that flight is not at the most convenient time?

Before scheduling a flight that involves a connection, it has now become prudent to check the on-time record of that flight. FlightStats (www.flightstats.com) does just that. And though none of us enjoys complicating our lives, the conditions of air traffic in America require this extra bit of caution. In a country whose airlines all want to leave at the same popular times of day, requiring far more takeoffs than the airport or the air controllers can handle, delays are rampant.

We shouldn’t book these habitually late flights if by doing so we lessen our chance of making a connection. FlightStats tells you what’s likely to happen.

As air travel within the United States grows costlier & costlier, eight basic tactics remain for reducing your overall travel costs

Recent months have been among the gloomiest in the history of U.S. travel. Everything has gone wrong. The dollar plummeted in value, the cost of oil skyrocketed to over $140 per barrel, and major airlines—including American, United, and Continental—all announced they will be reducing
flights by 10% to 15%, thus causing airfares to climb, by amounts that I predict will be shocking.

So what can you do about it? Several solutions come to mind:

◆ **You can use alternative forms of transportation.** On trips to nearby cities, you can seek to substitute less expensive buses or trains for air travel, especially the new “cheap” buses ($10–$25 each way) that travel the eastern seaboard and crisscross the Midwestern states to and from Chicago: BoltBus (owned by Greyhound), Megabus.com (in the Midwest and on the East Coast), Fung Wah Bus (the pioneering Chinese-American company operating between Chinatowns in Boston; New York; Philadelphia; Washington, D.C.; and Richmond), and DC2NY (operated as a side business by an executive of Marriott Hotels).

To cities that aren’t serviced by these remarkable cost-cutting god-sends, you can take good old Greyhound. People who once turned up their noses at Greyhound should think again (that premiere bus line is engaged in upgrading the quality of its terminals and vehicles). And in those instances where Amtrak is cheaper than air, you ought now to consider taking Amtrak (as so many Americans are now doing).

◆ **You can purchase your plane tickets well in advance.** Though airfares will obviously climb, they may be a little cheaper if purchased long in advance. They will not be cheaper at the last moment, since more and more flights are taking off totally full—and with big waiting lists, too.

◆ **You can use cost-cutting, cheaper airlines.** Because of its brilliant policy of hedging its fuel costs, Southwest Airlines will undoubtedly remain cheaper than the others in 2009 and early 2010. And though some of Southwest’s hub cities (Islip, Long Island; Providence, Rhode Island; Oakland, California) may be less than convenient, you should grin and bear their awkward locations. You should also look long and hard at feisty Spirit Airlines and AirTran.

◆ **You can offset the higher cost of air transportation by lowering the price of lodgings at the destination.** You will want to consider staying at a Comfort Inn. You may even (gulp!) consider booking a Motel 6. (It’s a good idea to scan the Motel 6 website for properties identified as having interior corridors—meaning that they are relatively “new builds.” I recently stayed at a brand-new, fresh, and modern $59-a-night Motel 6 near Dallas/Fort Worth Airport, and it was just as good as many higher-category motels charging twice the price.)

◆ **You can cut your air costs by taking public transportation to the airport** (there always is a public bus used by airport personnel), and by bringing sandwiches along to escape the need to buy one of those
overpriced, tasteless snacks at an airport eatery or—heaven forbid!—on the flight itself.

✦ You can cut your total travel costs by renting an apartment or vacation home at the destination instead of booking a room in a standard hotel. You can turn to Vacation Rentals by Owner (www.vrbo.com), HomeAway (www.homeaway.com), or various local rental agencies listed in guidebooks; or you can go (cautiously) to Craigslist (www.craigslist.com) or Kijiji (www.kijiji.com) to find a low-cost rental apartment or vacation home.

✦ You can join a hospitality club, such as Servas (www.usservas.org) or Evergreen (www.evergreenclub.com), or a hospitality service, such as Couch Surfing (www.couchsurfing.com) or GlobalFreeloaders.com. Contrary to the common perception, those organizations are not limited to foreign destinations but have copious listings within the United States. You might also consider using a vacation exchange club, such as HomeExchange.com or Intervac (www.intervac.com), swapping your own house or apartment for someone else’s in the United States or Canada.

✦ You can become politically active and work for the defeat of those several U.S. senators who have thwarted the development of an adequate and inexpensive U.S. system of rail transportation. You can retire those servants of the oil industry so that we Americans can once again travel our beautiful country at affordable costs.

Some reflections on the rise in airfares & our own responses to those increasingly heavy costs

Most of us have now experienced, firsthand, the practice of a la carte pricing for air transportation in the United States—the imposition of all sorts of extra fees and charges for services that used to be included in the cost of the ticket. Nearly every airline now charges at least $15 to check aboard the first suitcase per person and $25 to check a second suitcase. Some of the carriers now charge $2 for a small plastic bottle of water or a soft drink. I haven’t yet learned how costly the peanuts will be.

These fees are part of a frantic effort to raise money. One analyst has predicted that if oil rises again to more than $130 a barrel, one or more major carriers will be forced into bankruptcy. So they are panic stricken and we probably haven’t seen an end to additional charges.

You can gain a glimpse of America’s airline future by noting the tactics of the low-cost airlines that fly within Europe. The biggest of them, Ryanair, goes well beyond charging for each suitcase checked aboard. They now also
Ryanair, Europe’s largest cut-rate carrier, often charges as much for your luggage as it asks for the fare.

charge 5€ ($7.50) for simply checking in at the airport rather than online. Because you have to check in at the airport if you want to check aboard luggage, people with luggage to check always have to pay that extra fee.

Ryanair also charges $6 for using a credit card to pay for your ticket. And it imposes unusually harsh charges for overly heavy luggage, which it defines as more than 33 pounds. It charges $22—think about that—for each 2 pounds above the weight limit. And that’s each way. In some instances, passengers have paid more than 98€ ($150) in total extra charges, which in some cases is higher than the cost of the Ryanair ticket itself. (Another European airline, the Hungarian/Polish carrier called Wizzair, is charging 1€/$1.50 per minute simply to phone them.)

Within the United States, we haven’t yet experienced the congestion, delays, and fistfights that these luggage fees will inevitably bring about. But because so many people will attempt to limit their baggage to carry-ons stowed in the racks above their seats, it’s obvious that rack space will soon be at a premium, that passengers will battle for that space, and that carry-ons will be strictly limited to small sizes. It’s been reported that airlines are preparing to hire personnel to hang around the luggage belts, and at the gates leading into planes, spying on the carry-ons taken aboard, to ensure that persons do not attempt to smuggle on overly large suitcases.

And because many persons will limit themselves to carry-ons, they will also have to ensure that their liquid, gel, or aerosol containers are no greater in size than 3 ounces apiece, all enclosed in a medium-size, transparent Ziploc bag. What a mess!
To worsen matters, scarcely a week goes by that the airlines don’t increase their ticket prices. Those increases will gain momentum as many airlines exhaust their “hedge” contracts limiting the cost of aviation fuel—and indeed, most such contracts will soon expire. Already, the cost of fuel surcharges across the Atlantic is approaching $250 round-trip, on top of increased security charges, government taxes, and baggage fees. The days when you could cross the Atlantic, or the United States, for $299 each way are over. I’m expecting many one-way fares (and additional charges) to total (including fuel surcharge, taxes, fees, baggage, and other added charges) $700 to $800 each way, at least $1,200 round-trip. A couple going to Europe, or from New York to California, will often need to budget $2,400 (and possibly more) for round-trip transportation.

Unless you are among a small group of high earners, the only way you will be able to travel in the future is to become increasingly cost-conscious about lodgings and other land expenditures. I used to be looked on as an eccentric for constantly stressing the need to consider alternative low-cost accommodations: hostels and hostales, pensiones and B&Bs, apartments and vacation homes, convents and monasteries, private homes and houseboats. May I suggest that for many travelers these will now become necessities? May I advise that for most of us the glossy pages and upscale recommendations of Condé Nast Traveler and Travel & Leisure will now become crushingly irrelevant? Most American travelers, if they are to continue to travel extensively, will have to seek out economical approaches that offset the high cost of getting there.

**AIRFARE CONSOLIDATORS**

**DON’T FORGET THE SAVINGS YOU CAN ACHIEVE BY SIMPLY PHONING AN AIRFARE CONSOLIDATOR**

Wholly apart from using aggregators or airfare search engines for your tickets, booking the flight via an airfare consolidator can also occasionally save you anywhere from 20% to 40% off the published fares (though it is usually much closer to the 20% end of that spectrum). How is this possible?

Consolidators—not to be confused with their similar but shadier cousins known as “bucket shops” (thinly financed fly-by-nights)—use their buying power to negotiate directly with various airlines to purchase seats in bulk at a wholesale price. Some of them then sell these seats exclusively to travel agents, but increasingly most consolidators are turning around and reselling their discounted plane tickets directly to consumers—naturally, at a
slightly smaller discount than they were purchased for, pocketing the difference as their fee.

Chief among reputable consolidators specializing in Europe is 1-800-FlyEurope (its name is, conveniently, also its phone number and website: ☏ 800/359-3876; www.1800flyeurope.com). Others that go to destinations other than Europe include AirfarePlanet.com (☎ 503/429-1811), based in Salem, Oregon; the Chicago-based CheapTickets (www.cheaptickets.com); Dallas-based D-FW Tours (☎ 800/780-5733; www.dfwtours.com); Los Angeles–based Picasso Travel (☎ 800/742-2776; www.picassotravel.net); and Atlanta-based Economy Travel (☎ 888/222-2110; www.economytravel.com).

All these providers have good track records based on years of reputable service, but there are many others, as well as smaller, regional consolidators and so-called “ethnic consolidators.” The latter are travel agencies located in ethnic neighborhoods, specializing in airfares between the city in which they’re located and the country of origin of most of their customers (in other words, your local Chinatown is a good resource for cheap tickets to China).

Just make sure you check out any company first with the Better Business Bureau (www.bbb.org). Added layers of protection are afforded if the company is a member of any or all of the following trade guilds: the American Society of Travel Agents (www.travelsense.org, a site maintained by the travel agents’ organization), the International Air Transport Association (www.iata.org), or the Airlines Reporting Corporation (www.arccorp.com).

Some tips: Consolidator fares are usually locked in by about 6 to 8 weeks before departure; waiting until the last minute only makes it more likely the consolidator will have sold out its bloc of seats.

Most people think air tickets consist of three categories: first class, business class, and steerage (otherwise known as coach or economy class), but in reality there are dozens of gradations. The arcana of how these degrees of tickets work varies from airline to airline, but one thing holds true across the board in the airfare game: The less you pay for the fare, the more rules and conditions are imposed on the ticket.

Consolidator tickets tend to hang around the bottom rungs of this regulations hierarchy, boasting the most restrictions and stiffest penalties for any changes—if, indeed, changes are allowed at all.

Still, when you consider an airfare to Europe can easily be $1,100 or more round-trip, the prospects of slicing 20% or more off that expense can easily be worth the mild extra layer of restrictions.
WE SHOULD BE ENTHUSIASTIC ABOUT THE AIRFARE CONSOLIDATORS, BUT WARY OF THE CONDITIONS THEY OFTEN IMPOSE

Most smart travelers know that any dirt-cheap plane ticket is going to come with some standard restrictions: no refunds or exchanges without incurring a penalty of $200 or more, requirements that you purchase the ticket 2 weeks in advance, that your trip straddle a Saturday, and that you stay a minimum of 7 and maximum of 30 days. But some discounted fares come with restrictions you might not even notice until they come into play.

A friend recently reported that, after years of purchasing discounted plane tickets to Europe from the noted and excellent consolidator 1-800-Fly-Europe (www.1800flyeurope.com), he ran into an unexpected snag on a recent trip to Italy. The tickets—on which he saved nearly $100 over other advertised fares by using 1-800-Fly-Europe—routed him through Amsterdam on Northwest/KLM. Weather delays caused his outgoing flight from New York to Amsterdam to be canceled. A helpful Northwest agent at the airport obligingly rebooked him on a new flight with a partner airline that had an added benefit: It would fly direct to Rome and get him in even earlier than planned!

His relief was short-lived. As he walked away from the desk, the agent called him back with an apology and some bad news. His discounted fare had come with restrictions on flying any airline other than Northwest/KLM and on flying any route other than the one scheduled. In short, he had to wait to be rebooked on a KLM plane, and he had to fly via Amsterdam.

He ended up flying a ridiculous new routing via Detroit, where he had to dash through the airport, barely making a connection to Amsterdam, where again he had to run to catch the plane to Rome. He also arrived in Rome about 8 hours after he was originally scheduled to do so, in effect losing an entire day of his trip. In a stroke of sheer luck, his luggage actually managed to make all the connections.

The moral: The consolidators of discount fares, and the budget airlines themselves, continue to be a reliable source for discounted airfares, but be prepared to ride out any potentially bigger bumps in the road that come with the fare rules. Also, make sure you read the fine print on any discounted ticket, as the savings may come with more restrictions than you realize.
Airfare Search Engines

When you go to an airfare search engine seeking a bargain, always keep in mind that scarcely any of them list the really cheap airlines

I’m indebted to my colleague, George Hobica of Airfarewatchdog, for recently reminding us that scarcely any of the airfare search engines (such as Travelocity, Expedia, and that ilk) ever list the fares or flights of the really cheap airlines, such as Southwest and Skybus. Most of them fail to list Virgin America or Allegiant, and only a handful list cost-cutting Spirit Airlines.

Some of them list low-fare airlines but never show the sales fares offered by those carriers. It’s all a reminder that there’s really no shortcut for obtaining airfare bargains. After you consult the search engines and the results of the aggregators (Sidestep, Kayak, and the like), it’s wise then to go directly to the airline websites (especially those of Southwest, JetBlue, Spirit, and AirTran), and compare fares. And don’t forget to consider some of the foreign airfare aggregators, such as Denmark’s Momondo or the increasingly popular Mobissimo.

After years of withholding its fares from the major airfare search engines, JetBlue has finally agreed to appear. Hooray!

The first benefit of the new arrangement is a practical one. Consumers can now find out what JetBlue (www.jetblue.com) is charging at the same time as they’re checking with dozens of other airlines. That makes shopping for airfare much easier, with fewer steps.

Second, it steps up the competition between airlines. Now, with all the big players’ fares appearing in the same Web window (JetBlue is now the eighth-largest airline in America), head-to-head price competition becomes a very real thing, with the marketplace deciding the victor.

JetBlue’s agreement to appear in the major search matrixes does not mean, however, that the airline has completely joined the ranks. It still lacks baggage-handling agreements with the major carriers, meaning that if you intend to transfer from JetBlue to another airline, you still have to pick up your bags after the JetBlue leg and recheck them in for the leg on the other airline (or vice versa). That’s an important scheduling consideration if you’re planning on using JetBlue to connect with an expensive, infrequent flight—say, to Europe via JFK in New York.
Given a choice, I’d still book my JetBlue flights on JetBlue’s corporate-owned website, because the airline’s own site often grants booking bonuses (such as frequent-flier points) and slight discounts that aren’t available elsewhere.

The JetBlue agreement leaves Southwest as the only major airline that declines to participate on the major Internet search engines. With Southwest as profitable as it is, the airline has little incentive to transfer control over its bookings to other websites, so on routes where Southwest is a player, you still have to troop over to its website to complete your price-comparison research.

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**IN LOOKING FOR A CHEAP AIRFARE, HOTEL, OR CAR RENTAL, IT ALWAYS PAYS TO SEEK OUT THE FOREIGN VERSIONS OF SEVERAL AIRFARE SEARCH ENGINES**

When you use an Internet search engine, it pays to look not simply at the U.S./international version—the one that ends in “.com,” such as www.expedia.com or www.hertz.com—but also at the foreign versions of those websites set up for residents of the country to which you’re traveling, such as www.expedia.fr in France, www.hertz.es in Spain, or www.travelocity.com.au in Australia.

Because travel is priced differently in different markets, the savings can be substantial over what you would need to pay on the “.com” version of the site. The technique is fraught with difficulties, however, as some sites have a built-in blocker that keeps anyone who is not a resident of a particular country from buying through that country’s version of the site (they usually verify this by the mailing address for your credit card).

Still, shopping around never hurts, and it always pays to know the lowest price out there. In some cases, you may discover that it would behoove you to wait until you arrive in a country, visit a travel agent (often clustered in and around major train stations), and have them book for you at the lower price available only in that country. The marginal fee they might charge may be more than worth it.

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**TELLING YOUR AIRFARE SEARCH ENGINE THAT YOU WANT TO LOOK AT FLEXIBLE DATES IS A POWERFUL WAY OF SECURING THE LOWEST AIRFARE**

Such airlines as American, Delta, Continental, and more all permit you to look at airfares over a range of dates—you simply click on a feature called “flexible dates” or perhaps a link that says “more options.” Trouble is, they will then search only their own flights—and not those of other airlines.
So go to an aggregator offering flexible searches. Although such services as Kayak (www.kayak.com) require customers to register before doing flexible data searches, the 30 seconds it takes to register is well worth the trouble. Once you’re signed in, the website gives you the option of searching fares up to 3 days before or after the dates selected. I recently plugged in a Chicago-London round-trip in September with a Friday departure, returning the following Sunday. Within seconds, Kayak retrieved prices from more than a dozen airlines and revealed that by shifting the trip around and leaving a day earlier and returning 2 days later, I could save nearly $175.

Travelocity and Orbitz also offer flexible date searches. But each site has its own glitches. On Travelocity, the website sometimes retrieves prices only for the exact dates plugged in, never producing the better fares resulting from slight shifts in dates. Orbitz is better at finding a range of fares, but its grid only shows prices—information regarding airlines, flight times, and stopovers doesn’t appear unless you click on a price and the website does a separate search. And, of course, always remember that Travelocity and Orbitz add fees of $5 to $10 onto the flights they sell.

Whatever you decide, flexible technology permits you to see more—and see it faster—than ever before.

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**Airlines**

**Spirit Airlines has become a mighty force in low-cost travel—always go directly to its website for the best of its bargains**

Spirit Airlines began as an oddity, pure and simple, a cut-rate airline flying mainly to Myrtle Beach, South Carolina, of all places. And then it caught on. Today, it has countless flights each day all up and down the East Coast (from Boston, New York, Atlantic City, Washington, and even Atlanta) to and from Florida (mainly Fort Lauderdale, where it is now the largest airline using that airport), with onward flights to the Caribbean, Mexico, and Central America, and still other flights from Detroit to Las Vegas and Los Angeles. (It has still more flights from Chicago to Cancun and Florida.)

On each of those routes, it is a big-time price leader. Its fares Though it’s not as well-known as some of its competitors, Spirit Airlines is often the source of unmatched travel bargains.
sometimes boggle the mind ($9 is one offering) and almost always undercut the rates of other airlines flying the same routes (Delta, American, even JetBlue). How do you spot those bargains? By going direct to the Spirit Airways website (www.spiritair.com). Too many of the airfare search engines do not list Spirit’s flights, and often you must simply ferret them out yourself.

In early 2008, Spirit announced plans for a major expansion of its fleet and labor force (a 40% jump). It’s hoped that those additional personnel will eliminate the lines that often snake from Spirit check-in counters in Florida.

**There’s trouble brewing among the cut-rate carriers of Britain & Europe, which calls for great caution (always using a credit card) on your part**

Ryanair (www.ryanair.com) is the Southwest Airlines (the budget champion) of Great Britain, and so is easyJet (www.easyjet.com). Both fly at absurdly low prices from British cities to locations throughout western and eastern Europe. They siphon off so much business from domestic British transportation (that is, they cause the English population to vacation on the Continent rather than in England, Scotland, or Wales) that they have recently come in for violent criticism from Travelodge (www.travelodge.co.uk), which is the Motel 6 chain of Great Britain (offering ultracheap lodgings). Travelodge claims that Ryanair and easyJet are destroying the British hotel industry by causing more and more Brits to fly outside of Britain for their holidays and vacations. Got it?

Now why is this of interest to us Yanks? Well, there’s trouble in the British/European industry of ultra-low-cost carriers. Because of an incipient recession in Britain, and the skyrocketing cost of fuel costs raising the price of air tickets, bookings are down on the budget airlines, and Ryanair and easyJet are enjoying load factors not of 95% (on which they rely for their rock-bottom pricing) but of 80%, which doesn’t produce a profit at the rates they’re charging. When the president of Ryanair announced that he expects a sharp drop in results for 2009, his competitors grew alarmed.

The various British newsletters dealing with the “LCCs” (low-cost carriers) are growing alarmist, too. One such publication openly predicts that two or three of the European low-cost carriers must either merge or go under. It all means that you should exercise extreme caution in booking one of these services in the months to come. If you can, make your purchase via credit card and try to pay as late as possible.
AIRPORTS

THE NEW PROTOCOL FOR GOING TO AIRPORTS

They may seem obvious, but special precautions need to be taken nowadays when you head to an airport for a flight. First, bring reading matter for those long periods when you’ll be cooling your heels because you followed the advice to check in 2 hours in advance and then unexpectedly whizzed through security in record time. Bring the tastiest sandwich of which your kitchen is capable—for those flights on which nothing edible is provided. Bring those sandwiches even if your flight is supposed to include food. A meal supplied by an airline in bankruptcy—and two of the big ones recently were—is unlike any you’ve enjoyed in your earlier life. Bring nothing really valuable to the airport, such as your best watch or heavy expensive jewelry that you’ll need to place in a plastic tray at the security gates; there’s been an uptick in airport thefts. And finally, don’t argue with the one bit of advice that should be heeded by every traveler: Do arrive at the airport much earlier than usual. The security procedures can cause long lines, and some overconfident flyers have missed their planes because of security delays.

THE GROWING PROBLEM OF THE PREMATURE PLANE

We sat chatting over coffee in a cafe no more than 40 yards from the gate at which our plane would depart. At 15 minutes before the flight’s scheduled departure time, we casually strolled to the gate, only to find that the plane had already closed its doors, pulled away from the gate, and was now

Make peace with the fact that you’ll be spending a lot of time at the airport—and prepare accordingly.
taxiing to the runway. Having fully checked in, and holding valid boarding cards, my wife and I had missed our flight despite having appeared where the plane was to leave, a full 15 minutes ahead! Hell-bent to achieve a record of on-time performance by departing in advance of schedule, some airlines are apparently forcing even prudent passengers to appear in the boarding area—not the check-in counters—as many as 20 minutes ahead of time.

I have now placed four phone calls to the public relations departments of major airlines in a fruitless attempt to determine whether these jump-the-gun departures are sanctioned by airline policies. Each time I encountered a runaround (“We’ll call you back,” “The person who knows is on vacation,” “Give us a few minutes to ask around”) worthy of a CIA press conference. And meantime, it behooves all of us to pass up the temptations of airport cafes or newsstands in favor of rushing to the gate.

1 HOUR OF CONNECTION TIME JUST WON’T WORK ANY LONGER AT TODAY’S AIRPORTS

It’s become painfully obvious, based on more dreadful experiences than I choose to recall, that the “legal connection time” of 1 hour between flights is no longer sufficient in today’s world. The number of flights arriving half an hour late, and the distances that one must often cover from one terminal to another to board a connecting flight, ensure that you will often be left behind. And when that happens, you can say goodbye to all your other scheduled activities.

Sad to say, split-second timing and efficient scheduling are no longer realistically available to the airline passenger. If only we had a decent railroad system for our transportation needs!

FOR THOSE WITH AN INCONVENIENTLY LONG LAYOVER, THERE IS A WEBSITE DEVOTED TO THE FINE ART OF SLEEPING IN AIRPORTS

On a recent edition of my weekly radio call-in show, I received a call from a man who would be spending a 13-hour layover in Beijing en route from Vietnam back to the United States. Normally I would have said it would be worth the hassle and fee to obtain a visa to visit China’s capital, even for just the 1 day. Unfortunately, most of his layover would be taking place during the overnight hours, and he was desperate for information on where he could get some sleep between his flights.

Although airline schedules for the transatlantic market have largely evolved to the point where long layovers, let alone overnight ones, are...
uncommon, for other long-haul flights (and for many people attempting to link up a transatlantic flight with a connection to a no-frills or low-cost carrier in Europe), layovers of 8 to 12 hours or longer are a surprisingly common occurrence. If a quick trip into town isn’t a real possibility, as with this gentleman’s Beijing flight, and you just want to catch some shut-eye, there now exists a website just for you.

The Budget Traveller’s Guide to Sleeping in Airports (www.sleepinginairports.com) is essentially a bulletin-board database detailing the best places to sleep in airports around the world. It is a clearinghouse where travelers share all the best tips for catching some Zs between flights. These can range from some quiet gate that is tucked out of the way, to a list of terminals with seats without armrests (allowing you to lie across them), to various nooks and crannies where you can cozy up to your carry-on luggage (here used as a pillow) and airport security will not bother you. Contributors are invited to rate their sleeping arrangements into one of three categories: “Hell,” “Tolerable,” and “Excellent, considering it’s an airport.”

If you access this site, you’ll discover that, in Beijing, the best places to nap are in the main terminal (comfy benches, with armrests only every three seats) and in the dimly lit Irish Bar one flight above the check-in counters. On the downside, you will apparently have to contend with security personnel waking you up every 15 minutes to check your ticket.
Especially in holiday periods (but other times, too), print your boarding pass at home
before going to the airport to avoid being overbooked & bumped

I can’t absolutely guarantee you’ll avoid those consequences by printing out
your boarding pass before you leave for the airport, as many airlines permit
you to do so. The various carriers have a strange tendency to bump those
passengers who have paid the lowest price for their tickets, regardless of
whether they already have a boarding pass and assigned seat. But expert
after expert has told me that in a period when airports will be jammed, and
overbooking widespread, it’s smart to do as I’ve suggested above (within 24
hr. of your flight). And how can it hurt?

Other tips for the airport around holidays times, when the airports are
packed: Key the toll-free number of your airline into your mobile phone so
that you can quickly phone reservations and get another seat if your flight
is canceled. Reserve a parking space at the airport through Airportparking.
com—those places will also be jammed. Ascertain the average waiting time
to clear security at your airport, and then add another half-hour in plan-
ning your arrival at the airport—go to www.waittime.tsa.dhs.gov/index.
html for that information. And for your Thanksgiving or Christmas travels,
give some thought to flying on Thanksgiving and Christmas day them-
selves, early in the morning, when the airports and the planes are empty.

Nutrition for travelers—making wise choices at
the airport itself

How can you eat better when flying by air? A group of doctors recently
reported that the meat-stuffed, cheese-stuffed sandwiches on a big roll that
most airlines are now serving, are, healthwise, the worst possible repast.
One so-called airline snack, of ham, salami, and provolone cheese on a
huge and doughy slab, brings you a big 800 calories and 40 grams of fat.
They suggest, instead, that you order in advance a vegetarian sandwich.
Since many airlines are no longer responding to such requests, the doctors
recommend that you eat in the airport before you take off: Veggie burgers
are widely sold, the popular Sbarro’s has pasta primavera, and amazingly
enough some of the Starbucks at airports sell vegetable panini sandwiches
to accompany your coffee. Plus, some airports offer healthy salads and
sandwiches to take on the plane.
Six websites help to reduce the discomfort of airport check-ins & waits

Often unusual, sometimes quirky, but always useful, these online resources can greatly improve the preflight portion of the trip:

- **Finding the airport:** Perhaps the best—but often overlooked—resources available to air travelers are the websites of the actual airports they will be using. Airport sites, which are listed at www.atlasnavigator.com/directory/airports.html, are treasure troves of information covering everything from maps of the terminals, with shopping and dining options, to real-time arrival and departure information. You can find direct phone numbers for various airport services and, perhaps most useful of all, details (and links) on every means of getting to and from the airport, from private limo services to taxis to shuttle bus services, regional rail lines that link to the airport, and the frequently missed (but potentially cost-saving) local city bus lines.

- **Picking the perfect seat on the plane:** To help you select the best seat available on any flight on any carrier, visit www.seatguru.com.

- **Tracking your flight:** The www.flighttracker.com service from Orbitz offers current weather and delay conditions at airports across the country, wait times for security lines, and links to track the flight status of any flight.

- **Finding a parking space:** There’s an effective solution to the high fees and often full airport parking lots at airports: parking at discount, off-site lots near the airports. They may add from 5 to 15 minutes of extra time on a shuttle bus to the terminal, but off-site lots have the benefits of a) costing several dollars less per day and b) allowing you to reserve a spot ahead of time—often a crucial service during holidays and other busy travel periods. The two biggest networks and booking services are www.airportparkingreservations.com and www.parknflynetwork.com.

- **Killing time at the airport:** Booking engine Expedia has thoughtfully posted selections from Harriet Baskas’s book *Stuck at the Airport*, detailing survival tips, hints, and insider secrets to getting the most out of your waiting time at each of 65 major airports around the world. You can find it at www.expedia.com/daily/airports.

- **Catching some Zs:** For truly long layovers and unexpected flight delays, the funky www.sleepinginairports.com rates various airport terminals on how easy it is to catch 40 winks and lists the prime spots for snoozing without being bothered.
It’s those short-haul flights that are jamming up our airports & airways

My wife and I flew to Sanibel, Florida (reached via the Fort Myers airport), on JetBlue, boarding at what is probably the busiest and most crowded terminal building in all of America. JetBlue at JFK Airport is a scene from an all-year-round New Year’s Eve, crammed with hordes of people standing patiently in line to pass through security, looking for empty seats in which to rest, surging to the gates when a flight is announced. And why is JetBlue so busy? A glance at the departures board tells the story.

Flights from New York City to Rochester, New York, less than 350 miles away. Flights to Buffalo, New York. To Syracuse, New York. To Portland, Maine. To Burlington, Vermont. To Richmond, Virginia. All of them short, under-1-hour flights, each scheduled for several departures a day, and using up a large percentage of JetBlue’s total takeoffs and landings.

Not one of these nearby places should be reached by airplane from New York. They should be serviced by train—by trains on high-speed tracks. If we had such trains, we could radically reduce congestion in the skies. We could return to an efficient, comfortable aviation system, and conserve giant amounts of fuel at the same time.

We urgently need to increase the appropriations for Amtrak and permit that system to grow and get faster.

Cut-Rate Carriers (Europe & Transatlantic)

Cut-rate carriers—and three foreign websites identifying them—will whisk you around Europe, for sums you can afford

It’s important that first-time visitors to Europe be aware of some 20 low-cost airlines that have created a fast and remarkably cheap way to travel between famous European capitals and resorts.

To see all the possibilities, go to a website called WhichBudget (www.whichbudget.com), which lists all the relevant budget airlines. Or go to a website called Dohop.com, on which you plug in a pair of airports and within seconds discover the cut-rate airlines that connect them. Or you can go to a site called Attitude Travel (www.attitudetravel.com), which lets travelers search for low-cost airlines in other parts of the world. The cut-rate airlines have revolutionized travel.
It’s Important to Know How to Approach the New Low-Cost Airlines of Europe

A score of low-cost airlines now crisscross the continent of Europe, enabling you to visit all sorts of remote locations for peanuts—but they present you with a number of novel challenges. Bear in mind the following:

1. The baggage allowance on such tightwad firms as Ryanair, Air Berlin, easyJet, and others may be considerably less than on airlines that fly transatlantic. So reduce the weight of your load and leave part of your wardrobe at home.

2. Low-cost airlines keep their prices down by using out-of-the-way airports, such as Charleroi for Brussels.

3. All secondary airports have cheap and direct bus service into town, whatever airport taxi drivers tell you to the contrary.

4. The cheapest airfares on the cut-rate carriers are sold on the Internet.

5. Book well in advance; prices increase as the departure date approaches.

6. The cheap airlines will “close the gate” at the advertised time, and no amount of pleading will get you on if you’re late. And finally:

7. Once aloft, don’t expect more service than you’d get on a bus. Some will sell you coffee and a snack.

But used wisely, these low-cost carriers have opened up a new world of travel opportunities in Europe.

Upstarts Are Flying the Atlantic—Go Directly to Their Websites

Other European upstart airlines fly across the Atlantic. A long-experienced Italian company called Eurofly (www.euroflyusa.com) has low-cost flights between New York City and several cities in Italy (Naples, Palermo, Bologna, Rome, and others). A carrier called Air Plus Comet (www.airpluscomet.com) flies to Spain. Condor Airlines (www8.condor.com) goes to Germany from Orlando and Las Vegas. Martinair (www.martinair.com) flies from Florida to Holland. Britain’s Flyglobespan (www.flyglobespan.com) flies from Orlando to Edinburgh. Because these flights aren’t always listed by the big airfare search engines, you’d do well to access the airlines’ own websites when you next consider a transatlantic trip.
Attention, frequent fliers: You have big problems

If you’re a collector of frequent-flier privileges and enjoy the periodic pleasure of using your “miles” to fly for free to some attractive place, then steel yourself, have a drink, beware of darkening clouds. United Airlines and US Airways have cut in half the amount of time for miles in “inactive” accounts to expire, from 3 years to just 18 months. In doing so, they have adopted a similar policy announced by Delta Airlines (miles are canceled in accounts remaining “inactive”—that is, without additions or redemptions—for 2 years).

Obviously, the airlines are out to reduce the “free” travel privileges you thought you safely possessed. And persons who are infrequent fliers and need more than 18 months to accumulate the necessary numbers are out of luck. What you can do about it?

First, you can transfer your allegiance to the more generous airlines. On Continental Airlines, miles never expire (at least for now)—and you might keep that in mind when you book your next flight. On American Airlines, miles expire only after 3 years. What’s more, American is known as the airline that gives away the most frequent-flier seats each year, and gets the highest marks in consumer surveys for its frequent-flier program.

Second, make use of a mileage credit card issued by your favorite airline for virtually all purposes, including flights. Downside of that tactic: These are usually expensive cards with high interest and fierce late-payment penalties.

Third, periodically “spend” your miles for purchases other than a flight, such as a hotel room or rental car—this, too, extends the life of your
mileage. Downside of that tactic: You’re depleting your miles and making it more difficult to amass the number needed for a flight.

All in all, the average U.S. flier has taken a big hit. It will now be necessary to pay careful attention to the status of your frequent-flier account, and to redeem your miles earlier than you may have wanted.

At least one airline is compounding its actions with greed. A friend, who a few months ago saw more than 50,000 miles evaporate from her long-established US Airways account simply because she hadn’t used them or earned more in the past 18 months, recently received an email from US Airways offering to reinstate those miles . . . for a price. It was entitled “Get your Dividend Miles back” and gave her three options:

- Sign up for a US Airways credit or debit card, all but one of which carry an annual fee (and with the caveat that she would have to make a purchase with the card to get her miles back).
- Pay a service charge of $300.
- Purchase a ticket to fly first class or envoy class on US Airways.

The kicker? The fine print on these offers to “reinstate” her miles carried yet another 18-month deadline.

Is this how airlines now reward loyalty? By taking away the rights and privileges their frequent fliers have earned and then holding them hostage with the promise to return them only in exchange for a cash payment or for further shows of “loyalty”? That’s not customer appreciation. That’s an abusive relationship. The airlines can do better.

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**When Your Favorite Airline Turns You Down on the Use of Frequent-Flier Mileage, Turn to Its Alliance Partners**

A potent travel secret: When one of the four major U.S. air carriers—Delta, United, American, or Northwest—turns down your request to use the frequent-flier mileage you’ve earned on that carrier (because of “blackout periods,” “exhaustion of space,” a half-dozen other phony reasons)—you can often use the same mileage on flights of one of its alliance partners. All four belong to groups whose other members honor one another’s mileage. American Airlines’ One World Alliance is with Aer Lingus, British Airways, Cathay Pacific, Finnair, Iberia, Lan Chile, and Qantas; every one of these airlines pledges to honor AA’s frequent-flier mileage. Delta’s Sky Team consists of Aeromexico, Air France, Alitalia, Czech Airlines, and Korean. Northwest’s partners are Continental, KLM, Alaska Airlines, Horizon, and US Airways. United’s Star Alliance includes Air Canada, British Midlands, Lufthansa, Mexicana, ANA, Air New Zealand, Austrian Airlines, Varig,
SAS, Singapore, Thai, and Asiana. Although miles from one carrier can’t be combined with miles from another, they can be used on carriers other than the one on which they were earned. And thus, a turndown by the airlines operating your program shouldn’t end the quest; simply call the others.

**Passenger Rights**

An organization formed to promote airline passengers’ rights has gained new clout

Whatever happened to the Airline Passengers’ Bill of Rights? Various versions of it have been introduced into Congress and are awaiting committee approvals. In the meantime, various states have either passed or are considering legislation of their own to compel the airlines to respond to passenger health issues when planes are left stranded on the tarmac for several hours. Pushing back against such efforts, the airlines have filed lawsuits to prevent state legislation from going into effect, claiming that only the federal government has the right to regulate airline behavior.

The situation is untenable. Almost a decade after the first widely publicized, 8-hour stranding of passengers by Northwest Airlines, no law exists compelling the airlines either to return to the gate after an extended delay in takeoff, or to ensure that passengers receive food, water, ventilation, and clean toilet facilities during such delays.

When these delays reoccurred last winter, a frustrated airline passenger named Kate Hanni of California decided to form the Coalition for an Airline Passengers’ Bill of Rights and began soliciting members and funds. Today, more than 22,000 Americans have signed up with her, and her efforts are beginning to attract national attention. Among other things, she has now set up and staffed a telephone hot line—877/FLYERS6 (359-3776)—to receive reports of passenger hardships, so that her group may then use such reports to publicize the problem and pressure the Congress into action.

Though the airlines continue to proclaim, “Trust us,” it’s increasingly apparent that none of them has yet agreed to return planes to the gate after a delay on the tarmac of, say, 4 hours. Not one has issued instructions to its staff requiring them to return the plane and permit passengers to get off because of an overly extended delay. And though various state legislators are currently making noises about requirements that the airlines provide stranded planes with food, water, and clean toilets, it is increasingly obvious that the only adequate remedy will be a single, clear, unambiguous legal mandate to limit the number of hours passengers can be involuntarily confined on the tarmac.
Other remedies are also badly needed, and those include requirements of “Truth in Scheduling,” as the coalition puts it. Flights are “deceptively scheduled,” they say, if they “are late more than 70% of the time or . . . are cancelled more than 8% of the time.”

Go to www.strandedpassengers.blogspot.com for further information or to join the coalition. You can also listen to a Frommers.com podcast with Kate Hanni.