

ADDRESSING THE NEEDS OF
PERSONAL COMPUTER USERS
WHO FREQUENT THE INTERNET,
WITH SPECIAL EMPHASIS ON GIST
SUPPORT GROUP MEMBERS.

safe surfing

- ◆ ONLINE TRAVEL ARRANGEMENTS
- ◆ ANOTHER NEAT CELL PHONE FEATURE
- ◆ STUMPER CONTEST

Booking Travel Online

If you haven't ventured into the world of shopping online, an area I've tried to at least introduce in recent articles, then you're likely a stranger to online travel arrangements. This is a very mature industry online, and, as such, is both pretty secure and very competitive. So it's not only safe, it's fairly easy for you to find bargains. The most common online booking mode is air travel, so let's look at that primarily.



Typically someone seeking the best air rate and schedule will go to one of the major Online Travel Agencies (OTA) such as Orbitz, Expedia or Travelocity, the three big names. If you're more adventurous and have some travel flexibility, you might try Priceline, Cheaptickets or Hotwire. Those sites



are all good sources for competitive rates, but rather than going to each one independently and entering all the



same information again and again, why not go to a single site that will check them all? There may be more sites like this that I'm not aware of, but here are two I like and each has different advantages.


KAYAK™
save you the time of having to reenter all the data each time you go from one site to another to compare rates.

Kayak often seems to me to come up with a lower rate somehow, and SideStep makes it much easier to see the make-up of the compared flights (flight length, number of stops). Both sites arrange and display their information more clearly and logically than most of the OTAs. For example, you can sort by number of stops or flight length or virtually any other characteristic, but it also seems much easier to discriminate between those attributes using SideStep or Kayak than using the OTAs themselves.

Kayak and SideStep both check the major airlines AND the major air travel reservation sites. Additionally both of the sites'



When I mentioned I was doing this article, two seasoned travelers suggested I look at



TravelZoo and TripAdvisor. They are both similar to SideStep and Kayak, **except** that, rather than directing you to a specific flight either via an OTA or airline the way SideStep and Kayak do, they require you to click on links they provide for checking the other OTAs. And, for some odd reason, they exclude some of the OTAs. I tested the sites with several itineraries and cannot recommend them for making travel arrangements. They both offer to send you "occasional" emails with the hottest travel deals, but all other travel sites will do that for you too, including specific airlines. I have used TripAdvisor for hotel ratings and found them to be quite accurate and effective. Hotel arrangements are a "whole 'nother thing" though. I'll cover a few aspects of that realm later.



check them out independently. For example, Southwest Airlines and JetBlue very often have better rates between major cities they serve than any of the other airlines do. Yet you will not see Southwest's rates on any of the air travel comparison sites and you will only see JetBlue's on some OTAs. So visit their sites before you make other reservations.



A new site has come up with a nifty wrinkle: Yapta allows you to "tag" flights of interest and they will notify you when prices drop or

reach a specific level. They will do this whether you have already purchased a ticket or not. If you have a reservation, they will advise you on how to seek a rebate. They are brand new and don't cover all airlines yet, but they do cover a few that the OTAs do not, and they're adding airlines all the time.

Of course, while you're searching for the best air travel rates you may want to book a rental car and/or a hotel room. It doesn't hurt to look while you're booking a flight,



and, at least with hotels, there's the advantage that many of the sites offer recent customer reviews of

hotels. Also, there are often maps provided that can show you where the hotel is located. (If you don't find the map, just go directly to the hotel's web site or to Google or MapQuest to locate the hotel.)



But it doesn't seem likely that you'll get a particularly good hotel rates at an OTA. In fact, I've never found a better rate for cars or hotels at any travel site than I could get using any group plan such as AAA, AARP, USAA, COSTCO, Sam's Club or by using a credit card company's discount coupon. So, except for using the sites as a means of locating and comparing hotels, I don't use them to find good hotel or car rental rates.



When comparing hotel and car rental rates, if you have the time to be very thorough you will do best. Of course this is true when comparing any prices, but it's always particularly difficult when you're comparing "apples and oranges." Rental car companies offer very similar (and sometimes identical) vehicles and seem to have very similar plans (mileage included, a free day after so many paid, a free class upgrade, etc.). But not all companies have a facility at the airport so you might find yourself being shuttled to get to your car. Also they have different after-hour pick-up and drop-off procedures.

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Hotels are even more difficult to compare because none in any locale are identical. That's when customer and

professional reviews

(Frommer's, Fodor's, AAA, etc.) become

particularly valuable. All of the OTAs have hotel reviews, and some of them have pretty reliable ones. But reviews are very personal and, since you usually don't personally know anyone whose reviews you'll be reading, you'd best rely on raw numbers of reviews and percentages. Even though the OTAs may have more reviews right now, I suspect that SideStep and Kayak will soon be sufficiently popular to at least



compete with them. TripAdvisor has done good work for me too, but so has Fodor's and AAA. A comment on that type of "professional" review though: I have often found them to be less current than individual customer reviewers. Moreover, I have found their reviews to be overly swayed by some pet peeve of the professional reviewer (e.g. free parking, marble instead of granite in the bathrooms, or happy hour in the lobby, although the latter is certainly a big plus to me!).



For the best hotel rates and car rental deals, do not forget to check your group plans. For example, I have never (not once) found a better deal on car rentals than I could get using my USAA membership. Although

USAA is a restricted group, you probably have some similar membership that will offer you group rates, your auto insurance company for example.



Don't forget to check out your annual Entertainment Book (everyone buys or is

given one of those every November, right?! Although I've not been very impressed with their car rental deals, I have had an occasional good deal on a desirable hotel (although I was once charged more than the hotel's normal rate). And you just can't beat some of their meal deals!

And finally, after you've made your decision, but before actually shelling out the shekels, visit the actual web sites of the companies you've chosen to see what they offer online. I can't count the times I thought I had the very best deal only to find I could actually do better by making a reservation directly. Don't get me wrong, the online companies I've recommended here more than justify their existence. But I've also learned to be especially cautious, and I almost always recheck prices just before buying.



For example, the lowest fares very often require multiple-stop flights and/or changing aircraft and/or long layovers. I have sometimes found the cost of reducing or eliminating those significant inconveniences can be relatively low. But it's usually not as simple to make that kind of comparison at an OTA as it is at a particular airline's site.

With vehicle rentals, I have always found that I can beat the OTA prices and can often beat anyone else's



advertised discount in this way. I simply go to the specific car company's web site, find their lowest rate and then apply a standard discount available from virtually any group I have belonged to over the years (USAA, Entertainment Book, Costco, Sam's Club, AAA and credit card companies). As mentioned earlier, using a standard USAA discount code has always resulted in the best vehicle rate for me.

Comparing hotel rates (between hotels as well as between the hotel and the OTAs) often result in the highest percentage of savings in my experience. First, after you have decided which hotel has the best rates and facilities available at whatever site you've used for comparison, go to the hotel company's web site and price the dates and rooms you've selected. You will often find that a slight alteration of dates will save you a lot of money (especially in high tourism areas like Las Vegas, New York, etc.) or that the hotel offers package deals you may not see anywhere else. In any case, no matter where or how you decide to actually make your reservations, always do two more things:



1. Always ask what the best room rate is that is available immediately before you claim your room at check-in. I have been very surprised (and a bit miffed) to find a better rate than I have painstakingly arranged online!
2. Inquire at the time of reservation and again at the front desk upon check-in about any potential discounts available for your particular group (e.g., senior citizens, military members, government employees) and

Online Travel Summary

Hands down, my favorite single site is Kayak. Their presentation is the least cluttered and unsolicited pop-ups are rare (some are necessary as you make comparisons though). And their approach is no-nonsense, without excess fanciness and incessant ads to entice you to change your plans for another advertiser. They, like all other OTAs, do not cover Southwest Airlines, but they make it much simpler for you to do it by incorporating a link and a reminder. And they **do** compare JetBlue. Also, after



entering your dates (a simpler process here than on most sites) and check-marking the OTAs you also wish to compare, a single click compares all of the OTAs **and** all of the airlines' information that Kayak has available. Finally, Kayak always portrays the grand total cost, rather than a cost before taxes and fees, the way many other sites do, apparently trying to persuade you they have found you a better rate!



A New Cell Phone Feature

This is kind of obliquely related to travel. The latest nifty wrinkle in the way of cell phone features was introduced recently in Los Angeles, Sacramento, Dallas,

Denver and Washington D.C. It's a voice activated, free service called Dial Directions. Just punch in "DIR-ECTIONS" (347-328-4667), say where you are and where you want to go, and you receive turn-by-turn MapQuest directions immediately via text message. Receiving the text message may cost you something depending upon your cell plan, but it should be a lot less expensive than a portable GPS, especially in a pinch in a new and unfamiliar city. Now who wants to put money on the percentage of men vs. women who call this service?

Stumper Contest

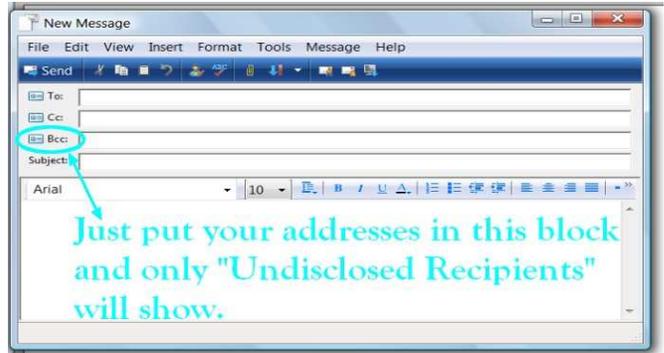
Everyone who tried (not many, I'm afraid) had generally the correct answer on last month's stumper.



How can and why should I send my emails without everyone else seeing the other email addresses?

Use the "BCC" (Blind Carbon Copy) feature available from within all email handlers instead of the "TO" or "CC" block.

Why do this? Beyond the simple issues of courtesy and privacy, you want to avoid distributing email addresses in the clear as much as possible for security reasons. It prevents spammers and phishers from having easy access to a whole bunch of new victims. Moreover, it keeps you from becoming the victim of a Trojan-style virus that exists or may occur on one of your recipient's computers. ALWAYS use BCC for multiple addresses!



For this month, another pretty easy but also important issue:

We all receive large, cumbersome files, often video clips, from well-intentioned friends who just want to share their amazing, one-of-a-kind finds with us. But those clips burn up hard drive space, take a lot of time to download and often turn out to be more aggravating than they are enlightening.

What's a good, free way to share video clips, notoriously large files, with everyone on your email list without significantly impacting their own webmail or hard drive storage space and everyone's bandwidth?

Just email me your answers to the address below. I expect that some of you will have slightly different, but every bit as effective, answers than I do. I'll publish any that seem to be helpful next month.

Barry Codron, a U.S. Air Force retiree, lives (with his wife and doggie and near his children and grandchildren and their doggies) in the Sacramento area. Although technically fully retired, he enjoys writing and consulting in areas including technology and music, among other fields that pique his interest from time to time. He welcomes your questions, comments, ideas or corrections at barry.mart@sbcglobal.net.

