



Friday, April 21, 2006 - 12:00 AM

Travel Wise

\$3 gas? Money-grubbing airlines? Good planning is how you fight back

As the peak season for traveling approaches, vacation-survival skills are more important than ever, that is unless you plan to pitch a tent in the backyard and call it this year's excellent adventure.

I don't, and I'm sure if you're reading this, you don't either. So, what do we do about \$3-a-gallon gas, higher fares and extra charges for everything from aisle seats to using our credit cards?

School's out soon, but it's never too late for a quick refresher. Welcome to Travel 101 for spring and summer.

BYO Everything

Airlines are charging extra for everything but using the bathroom. Are pay toilets next? Probably not, but soft drinks and checked bags might be.

European discounter Ryan Air already charges for soft drinks and checked bags. Terry Trippler, an airline consultant for Cheapseats.com, predicts that some U.S. carriers will be doing the same by the end of this year.

Among the services for which airlines now impose fees, according to an Associated Press report:

- **Paper tickets** (\$20-\$30; international, \$50). Solution: Order an electronic ticket whenever possible.
- **Telephone reservations** (\$5-\$10). Ask all the questions you want on the phone, but book online.
- **Exit row and aisle seats** (\$15). Northwest is charging for some of its aisle seats, though there are still plenty of them that can be reserved for free. Before choosing a seat on any airline, consult [www](http://www.seatguru.com).

[seatguru.com](http://www.seatguru.com), a Web site that shows the best and worst seats on various flights.

- **Children traveling alone** (\$30-\$60 each way). Check your airline's policy. Alaska Airlines, for instance, makes unaccompanied minor service optional for children 13 and older.
- **Overweight bags** (\$25-\$50 for checked bags over 50 pounds). Find out your airline's weight policies before packing. Distribute your things so that no one bag is over the limit. Keep weight in mind when buying luggage. Many suitcases come loaded with unnecessary pouches and accessories.
- **Food on board** (\$5-\$10). Eat before you leave, or bring your own. Most airport restaurants offer carry-out options. Many restaurants at Seattle-Tacoma Airport now open at 5 a.m. for breakfast.
- **Curbside check-in** (\$2-\$3 a bag). Might be worth it to avoid long lines inside the terminal. Otherwise, take your bags inside, or better yet, travel with just a carry-on.

Shopping for airfares

Shopping around for summer fares is unlikely to uncover any super-cheap deals, but it can save you money. It's all in the timing.

"The question of buying now or buying later is always tricky," says **Bob Harrell of Harrell Associates, a New York-based airfare-analysis firm.** "I compare it to buying a summer suit. Buy it now, and you get your choice of size and colors, or wait until July when they go on sale. You won't have the selection, but you may get a lower price."

The mistake most people make is buying too far in advance. Airlines tend to lower fares six to eight weeks out, depending on how fast seats are selling. Until then, what you mostly see are published fares set months in advance.

Summer fares to Europe right now are higher than they were last year (up 6 percent on average from Seattle to Paris, London and Frankfurt, according to **Harrell**), but airlines have boosted availability on international flights, and unless the planes fill up fast, prices should drop.

"If you're very flexible, these fares will go on sale — probably in May or June," **Harrell** says. "If you're particularly price sensitive and flexible, I'd wait."

Trippler agrees on international fares, but says it's a different story when it comes to domestic tickets.

"If you see it, take it," he says. Airlines have reduced the number of available seats on U.S. flights and seats are filling up faster than usual.

Domestic leisure fares are up an average \$40-\$45 compared to last year, according to Trippler, and could go higher if airlines increase fuel surcharges.

- **Start shopping by comparing** prices on the airline Web sites with those offered by the online travel sites. If the fare is the same, as it often is, book directly with the airline and save the \$5-\$9 booking fees that the online sites build into their prices.
- **Check with discount travel agents** for consolidator fares, especially for travel to Asia, Africa and Latin America, and remember that some online sites don't include discount airlines such as JetBlue and Southwest.

Comparison shopping takes time and patience. It's important to know what's a real discount vs. just the regular price for a red eye or an inconvenient routing with multiple connections.

- **Sites that scan multiple sites** are handy. Try kayak.com, mobissimo.com or sidestep.com to get a quick idea of prices.
- **If you're not comfortable** shopping online, call a travel agent, but expect to pay for the service.
- **Keep in mind that online** fares can appear and disappear quickly, and sometimes aren't available at all.

Consider a search I did the other day on nine online sites plus Northwest Airlines' Web site for a round-trip ticket from Seattle to Paris in July.

Fares touted as the lowest available ranged from \$1,311 on Northwest's site for a flight through Detroit, to \$1,479 at OneTravel.com for a US Airways flight through Philadelphia.

Orbitz promoted a fare of \$1,217 on multiple carriers, but it wasn't available when I clicked through to book. The next-best offer was the Northwest flight for \$1,322.

Cheapseats.com also advertised the Northwest flight for \$1,320. Expedia had it for \$1,316.

Cheaptickets.com didn't list Northwest among its available options. It directed me instead to the US Air flight for \$1,374. Travelocity also advertised the US Air flight as its cheapest at \$1,391.

Kayak took me to Northwest's site for the \$1,311 fare. Mobissimo and Sidestep steered me to Orbitz for the \$1,217 fare that wasn't.

All of this for the privilege of paying more than \$1,000 to fly to Paris ... If you really want a deal, avoid summer travel. A friend of mine is flying to Paris this week on a round-trip ticket he bought in late February for \$450.

All aboard

How does \$60 round-trip for two between Seattle and Vancouver, B.C., sound as you sit back and take in the view while someone else does the driving?

"It looks like we'll probably sustain \$3 a gallon gas throughout the summer," says Cathy Keefe of the Travel Industry Association, a trade group representing airlines, tour companies and hotels specializing in U.S. travel.

Beat high gas prices through May 25 with two-for-one companion fares on Amtrak Cascades routes between Seattle and Portland and Seattle and Vancouver, B.C.

Prices increase closer to departure dates, but a recent check for dates in mid-May turned up the \$60 fare to Vancouver and \$52 to Portland for two. Both of these cities are walkable and have excellent public transportation accessible from the stations.

Don't feel like going for the weekend? Consider a day trip to historic Fairhaven near Bellingham. The Amtrak station is within walking distance. The train from Seattle arrives at 10 a.m. and leaves Fairhaven a 5:30 p.m. so you have a full day. Bring your bike for an extra \$5 each way.

Call 1-800-872-7245 or see www.AmtrakCascades.com, and refer to discount code H567.

The train doesn't go to Victoria, B.C., but daily round-trip service aboard the Victoria Clipper ferry is on sale Mondays-Thursdays through June for \$59 as Clipper Navigation rolls back prices to what it charged when it started in business 20 years ago in 1986.

April 30 is the last day to book discount tickets on the clipper. One child under 12 goes free when traveling with an adult. See www.victoriaclipper.com/20th_anniversary_sale or call 800-888-2535.

Pick up the phone

Increases in business and leisure travel are pushing up hotel rates.

Shopping the Web is a convenient way to see a range of what's available, but booking directly through the hotel usually yields the same or better rates, and offers more flexibility when it comes to making changes or canceling.

Policies vary, but online sites often impose stricter cancellation penalties than the hotels themselves, require prepayment in advance and charge a fee for making changes.

Orbitz, for example, recently quoted a \$179.34 rate (\$204.72 with taxes and fees) for a deluxe king

room at the Westin Portland, with three days cancellation notice required to avoid a one-night penalty.

Westin offered the room on its Web site for \$179 (\$201 with taxes), with one day's cancellation notice required. Calling the hotel directly and asking for an American Automobile Association (AAA) discount yielded a rate of \$129 (\$145 with taxes).

Some hotels have begun to charge \$10-\$20 a night "resort fees" for extras including Internet access, newspapers, use of the fitness center, etc. Ask about a fee when you book and if you don't plan to use the services, request that it be waived.

Before booking a hotel, check www.tripadvisor.com for what other travelers have to say. Expedia and Travelocity also publish user reviews.

Say "no" to bank fees

The weak value of the dollar against most foreign currencies makes international travel expensive enough. Why pay extra by racking up fees using your credit and ATM cards?

If you use your Visa or MasterCard debit or credit card in another country (including Canada and Mexico), you'll be charged a foreign currency conversion fee of 1 to 3 percent of the amount of the transaction, and possibly an ATM withdrawal fee of \$3-\$5 per depending on your bank's policies.

Visa and MasterCard International impose an across-the-board 1 percent processing fee on all foreign transactions. Avoid paying any more than that by:

- **Using a credit card** and/or an ATM card issued by a bank or credit union that adds no fee of its own on top of the 1 percent. Locally, these include Washington Mutual, Boeing and Watermark Credit Unions, and some smaller community banks.

Wells Fargo, Bank of America and other big banks add a 2 percent surcharge for a total of 3 percent, or \$3 a \$100 charge. REI's Visa card, issued by US Bank, also has a 3 percent fee.

- **Saving even more** by using a credit card issued by Capital One Financial Corp. (www.capitalone.com). Capital One absorbs the 1 percent Visa and MasterCard fee and adds no surcharge of its own.

Unwrap the packages

There are thousands of package deals that combine airfare, hotels and sometimes rental cars. They're convenient for one-stop shopping, but if you have the time, price them out separately before booking to see if the savings is worth whatever trade-offs there might be.

Consider whether the hotels offered are the ones you really want, what flexibility you have to make changes and whether the package is refundable once booked.

Some companies specialize in last-minute packages. [Site59.com](#) is one that offers special rates on air and hotel packages within a two-week window. Others, such as Bothell-based [Go-today.com](#), are better for longer-range planning. It has a range of Asian, Latin American and European packages that can be booked months out and sorted by destinations, departure cities and date ranges.

Keep in mind:

- **Package prices are usually** quoted on a per-person basis for two persons traveling together. Single supplements may be available, but the per-person cost will be higher.
- **The initial quote may not** include taxes and fees.
- **The key word is "from"** as in "Santa Fe from \$369," meaning anything better than the least expensive budget hotel will cost more.

Be sure about insurance

The travel-insurance business is booming as tour operators, cruise lines, resorts and hotels tighten cancellation penalties.

Expect to pay between 4-8 percent of your trip cost for a basic policy that includes trip cancellation or interruption coverage; some basic medical expenses and reimbursement for lost or damaged baggage.

Before buying:

- **Find out if the policy** covers the reasons that you might need to cancel or come home early.

Most policies won't cover you if you decide you want to avoid an area where there's an outbreak of bird flu, says Jim Grace, CEO of [InsureMyTrip.com](#), an online seller of travel insurance for 16 companies. You would more likely be covered if you were seriously injured or needed to get back due to the death or illness of a family member.

- **Compare prices** and coverage on [www.insuremytrip.com](#), keeping in mind your personal concerns, such as terrorism coverage, pre-existing condition waivers or medical-evacuation coverage.
- **If you're worried** that your cruise line, tour operator or airline might go out of business and leave you stranded, buy a policy that covers financial default, but make sure the company is covered. Insurers exclude companies in Chapter 11 bankruptcy reorganization. That includes Delta and

Northwest airlines.

Talk to other travelers

It's never been easier to connect with other travelers and learn from people who have been there.

The newest wrinkle is Web 2.0 or "wiki" technology that lets people edit Web page content.

TripAdvisor is using Web 2.0 for a new feature called TripAdvisor Inside that lets travelers assemble the equivalent of collectively written online guidebooks on various destinations, starting with London and Los Angeles.

Care to write your own travel blog and or read journals written by others? See realtravel.com for blogs and photos on dozens of destinations.

Thousands of travel tips appear on dozens of travelers' message boards.

A few worth checking out:

- **Slow Travel** (slowtrav.com) has trip reports, hotel tips, vacation rental info and photos from independent travelers who like to spend a week or more in one place. Strong on Italy, France, UK, Ireland and Spain.
- **Cruise Critic** (cruisecritic.com) for cruise reviews and a travelers' message board.
- **Any of the guidebook-sponsored sites:** thorntree.lonelyplanet.com, the reader forums at fodors.com and frommers.com; researcher blogs at letsgo.com and the graffiti wall at www.ricksteves.com
- **VirtualToursit** (virtualtourist.com) Travelers' postings and photos on worldwide destinations.
- **Passplanet** (passplanet.com). Practical info for independent travel in Asia and Central America.
- **TheTravelzine group** (www.thetravelzine.com/zine.htm), online discussion group for Europe and North America with info on hotels, restaurants and planning tips.

Carol Pucci's Travel Wise column runs Sundays in Travel. Contact her at 206-464-3701 or cpucci@seattletimes.com.