



A Comparison of Internet Booking Sites

The question of which internet booking site can provide the lowest airfare has been constant since the emergence of internet booking tools in the late 1990's. It still remains an ongoing concern to the consumer. How do I find the lowest airfare? In an effort to establish an answer, Topaz International has completed an internet airfare shopping study between three major distribution sites over a two month period.

A wide variety of travel dates were applied including weekend travel and Saturday night stays, making the results valid for both business and leisure based travel. However, the flight times were specifically requested to depart at 10:00 AM and return at 5:00 PM during peak business travel times.

When searching for the lowest airfare on an internet booking site, one important consideration is the time involved in the search. Topaz allowed two and a half minutes per search and due to the potential fees the booking process could not be followed through completely. Also, specific parameters were used (see methodology) and the lowest price was accepted with little regard to the carrier or routing. It is safe to say that the average traveler would spend considerably more time maneuvering within the various websites and selecting an itinerary appropriate to their needs.

Topaz did not consider sites that search and consolidate other travel sites and that may have an appeal to some as an easy alternative. In the summer of 2009, Kiplinger magazine identified Kayak and Bing.com/travel as the two best internet sites that search online sources in an effort to find the lowest airfare (Rapacon, 2009). It may be a time saver to utilize an internet searching tool, however, as the article points out, flexibility is a determining factor which may not be available for the business traveler.

This review will cover the methodology of the Topaz International study, the results, and some additional items to consider when searching the internet for the lowest airfare.

The Methodology

Over 1500 most traveled city pairs from the Topaz International data base were searched on the major public booking sites: Expedia, Travelocity, and Orbitz. If the city pair was known to be a Southwest Airlines market, a search was conducted on that website.



A variety of advance purchase requirements were used: 3 days, 7 days and 14 days with a one or two night stay. Travel was requested into and out of the same airport and only results with a maximum of one connection were considered. Itineraries with a 10AM departure and 5PM return were requested in an effort to make this realistic for the average business traveler.

The itinerary with the lowest returned fare was duplicated on the applicable airline website for comparison. For example: If Expedia returned the lowest airfare with American Airlines, those flights were re-priced on the American Airlines website.

The Results

Expedia, Travelocity, and Orbitz

All of the three major booking websites offered similar results. Orbitz returned the lowest fare 56% of the time, Expedia 54% of the time, and Travelocity 47% of the time.

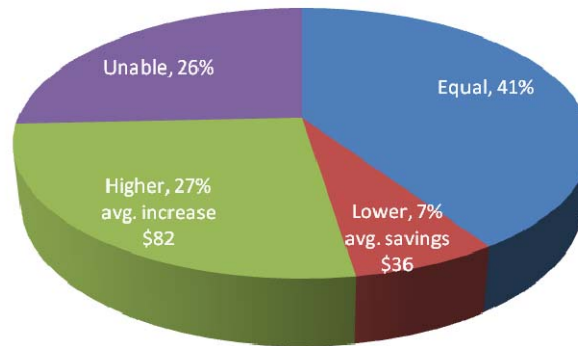
Each of the three websites had itineraries that could not be priced, however it is almost not worth mentioning as it is less than 5%. Of the 1515 city pairs requested only 4 markets were unable to be priced on all of the three.

On the average, Orbitz produced the lowest airfare with an average of \$399. Travelocity came in at \$411 and Expedia followed at \$419.

Website	% of low fares returned	Average airfare
Expedia	54%	\$419
Travelocity	47%	\$411
Orbitz	56%	\$399

The Airline Websites

When the itinerary with the lowest fare was duplicated on the airline website, the same price was returned over 41% of the time. Only rarely, 7% of the time, did the airline actually return a lower fare with an average savings of \$36. In fact, 27% of the time, the airline websites fare was more expensive than one of the three major websites with an average increase of \$82 and 26% of the time, the airline website could not come up with the same flights found on Orbitz, Expedia, or Travelocity.



Southwest Airlines

It is almost unfair to compare Southwest Airlines with the other booking tools since the airline does not participate in them. Moreover, 66% of the markets in the study that were requested in Orbitz, Expedia and Travelocity are not flown by Southwest Airlines. However, here is one interesting statistic: When an itinerary in one of the three sites included a Southwest market, the Southwest website returned the lowest airfare 35% of the time with an average ticket price of \$367.



Some Final Considerations

Airfares and the internet booking sites are tied to the airline distribution systems. Equality amongst them is contentious. The fact is that the airlines load new fares and inventory changes continuously throughout the day using yield management techniques and complicated computer calculations that very few people understand. Since each internet booking tool uses an airline distribution channel to search for the lowest fare, the question will always remain “How do I find the lowest airfare?” In many ways, it is the luck of the draw.

Among the three websites, the best return of lowest fares was only 56% of the searches. Perhaps that low of a percentage may be the best one could expect from this ever changing industry. The more appropriate questions for booking the lowest airfare may be based on consumer economics: “How much time am I willing to spend to find the lowest airfare? How badly do I need to travel? How much money am I willing to spend?”

One final consideration is the issue of cache memory utilized by the major internet booking sites. The fares are submitted for a final update only when the booking is completed. Therefore fares/inventory can change from the time of the initial search to the point of sale. The Topaz study did not account for these last minute fluctuations.

Your Travel Program may yield very different results which is why you might consider a customized Topaz Analysis.

We provide strategic support to the corporate travel management professional with a suite of audit products designed to evaluate travel programs and save corporations millions of dollars on their travel spend worldwide.

References

Rapacon, Stacey (August 2009) 28 Best Travel Sites, Retrieved on March 1 from <http://www.kiplinger.com/features/archives/2004/06/travelsites.html>