Planning Travel on The Internet

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 You can save time and money and get a better idea of where you want to go by using these internet sites. We will give you the plusses and minuses of the most popular sites to use.

HOTELS

 One of the most popular sites is [www.hotels.com](http://www.hotels.com) in which you can list an area and see hotel “deals”. An “aggregator” for travel (web site that shows other websites) is [www.kayak.com](http://www.kayak.com) . If you go to Kayak you see that most of the listed sites have pretty much the same prices. One of the benefits of using some of the sites is the ability to “earn” a free night by booking multiple nights over time.

 There has, though, been a change over the past few years. Hotel chains have realized they are paying commissions to web sites to book rooms less than the hotel’s own prices. As a result, many, if not most hotel chains, pledge they will offer the lowest rates on their own sites. In addition, most have their own rewards programs which can earn free nights and other benefits. When you check in with a prepaid stay from a third-party site you may lose some benefits. For example, Marriott will promise the lowest rates and give points toward free nights plus free internet and some other goodies only available to their loyalty program members. I typically check the rates on third party sites before going to the hotel’s site.

 Another web site offering hotel deals is [www.priceline.com](http://www.priceline.com) . The premise of Priceline is that you enter bids on hotel rooms without knowing which hotel. You can designate an area where you want the room and star level of the hotel. The ostensible reason for this system is, when hotels have excess inventory, they are willing to drastically cut the rate but don’t want their regular guests to know certain rooms went for so little, thus the blind bidding.

 The major downside to Priceline is if your bid is not accepted you must change either the location or star level to re-bid. As a result, you may find yourself either overpaying or not getting a room. Also, you must list a credit card before bidding and are charged for the room whether you are happy with the choice of hotel or not.

 A solution to the problems in using Priceline is [www.biddingfortravel.com](http://www.biddingfortravel.com) . This site shows some representative deals people have found on Priceline with the hotel name and price shown. Keep in mind these results may be for a much slower period than that for which you are shopping. The real benefit of bidding-for-travel is they suggest a high and low bid and let you enter your high and low bid. They then bid for you using a bot. You may or may not win a bid but can re-bid. As with Priceline, if you win you have paid for the reservation.

 A big advantage of Priceline and Bidding-for-Travel is your bid is broken down by neighborhood with many cities broken down into many areas in which to bid. The map also show which hotels are typical for each star rating.

 Another tactic I use for hotels is to call the hotels directly. Sometimes the desk clerk will have better deals available than the web site. Also you can ask specific questions about room amenities and location.

 I often use hotel long-term parking when I fly or cruise. Sites such as [www.parksleepfly.com](http://www.parksleepfly.com) list hotels along with the rates and length of time you can leave the car. I’ve called hotels not listed as offering these deals at the time I wish to travel and ask something such as, “Is it OK to leave may car there a few weeks?” The answer is often that it would be fine with, possibly, the request that I park the car in an out-of-the-way area of their lot.

 A popular site for travelers is [www.tripadvisor.com](http://www.tripadvisor.com) where you can shop for hotel nights, flights, rental cars, and read user reviews of all these hotels along with restaurants and other attractions in an area. The reviews are useful and often include photos and videos. Just be aware that some reviews are questionable so check out how many reviews that a reviewer has posted. If this is one of their only reviews, there may be a motive. Trip Advisor also offers to make reservations for you. This company owns several travel web sites so has no real advantage.

 Another increasingly popular source of housing is [www.airbnb.com](http://www.airbnb.com) which pairs you with homeowners looking to rent out a room, apartment or entire house. The service is worldwide and prices can be substantially less than a hotel. You will post information on yourself and be accepted to register. Following a stay, the host and guest post reviews of each other so those shopping on the site can see how the rental worked out and hosts can determine whether to accept a guest request. The listings have descriptions and photos as well as a map indication of the location (but no address until you book). I use google earth and street view to check out the neighborhood even though I don’t have the address. I have used Airbnb for stays in England, Wales and Scotland. Except for Edinburgh during the festival, the stays were always in small towns where there was sometimes not even a hotel available. Rentals are available for as short as one night, however most hosts require a minimum of 2 or 3 nights.

 A similar site is [www.vrbo.com](http://www.vrbo.com) which is best for renting a week at a time. We used it once for a week in a condo but it is not as good for shorter terms.

 One more money-saving option is a dorm room, sometimes a single room with bath down the hall or, in other cases, a full apartment. There are web sites listing available dorm rentals, usually during summer when school is out. Google the web site for the country in which you plan to stay.

Flights

 For flights, the first place to look is the airlines’ sites. Get an idea of what airline is offering what prices to which airports. Consider a slightly out of the way airport if it can save enough money to be worth an extra drive. There is a belief that the airlines track your activity and will raise the price each time you search again for the same flight. I can’t vouch for that but use a private window to do my searches.

 Most travel sites offer to search for airfares. There are also some sites that specialize in looking for cheap fares. Keep in mind you should check several of them as some do better with international, others do well with last minute fares.

 Frommers tested sites and found [www.momondo.com](http://www.momondo.com) to be the overall best. They also gave good marks to [www.skyscanner.com](http://www.skyscanner.com) for including low-cost airlines. Other good marks went to [www.google.com/flights](http://www.google.com/flights) and [www.kayak.com](http://www.kayak.com).

 Some low-cost airlines such as [www.southwest.com](http://www.southwest.com) do not participate in these listings so need to be checked out individually. To also keep in mind is some of the lowest fares include multiple changes with long layovers resulting in a cheap fare that gets you a normally 6 hour flight that takes 24 hours, much of it in airport waiting areas.

 Another valuable site is [www.seatguru.com](http://www.seatguru.com) on which you can enter the date and number of your flight and get a seating plan for the plane you are expected to board. Seats are color coded for good, bad and mixed with explanations of why, such as near the lavatory, no window or cramped space. This is especially important as many airlines allow you to choose your seat.

Cruises

 Cruising has been an increasingly popular vacation and the mother of all cruise web sites is [www.cruisecritic.com](http://www.cruisecritic.com). Cruise Critic, owned by Trip Advisor, is where you can become an expert on cruising. There are ship reviews by both editors and members. The reviews can focus on destinations, shore excursions, food, cabins and every conceivable aspect of a cruise vacation. And, if course, the site has thousands of photos covering nearly every inch of every ship and port of call.

 What will make you an expert is participating in the cruise boards. They are broken down by cruise line, ports of call and even discussions of specialty topics such as first-time cruisers, family cruising, single cruising, gay cruises, etc. Ask a question and you will get answers. Also important are the “role calls” where you can link up on a discussion board with other members who are on your cruise. There are often sail-way parties on deck and receptions, often arranged by the ship and attended by officers.

 There are paid ads on Cruise Critic, but they are from travel agencies. I use a travel agent as there is no extra cost and sometimes extra rewards. You can also book through on-line stores such as Costco or Sam’s Club or directly through the cruise line.

 *It is important to remember that, if it be hotels, flights or cruises, providers have pricing based on demand and use systems that can change prices daily, hourly or by the minute. Keep this in mind when you are shopping as it is a matter of timing.*

TIMESHARES

 The indispensable site if you own a timeshare is Timeshare Users Group [www.tug2.net](http://www.tug2.net). There are discussion boards for various types of timeshares, timeshare companies, timeshare regions and subjects on buying, selling and renting. This is one of the sites where you must pay annual dues ($15) to get the full benefit. Paid members have access to members’ reviews of timeshares, photos and the ability to buy, sell, trade or rent timeshares on line.