

## planning a trip

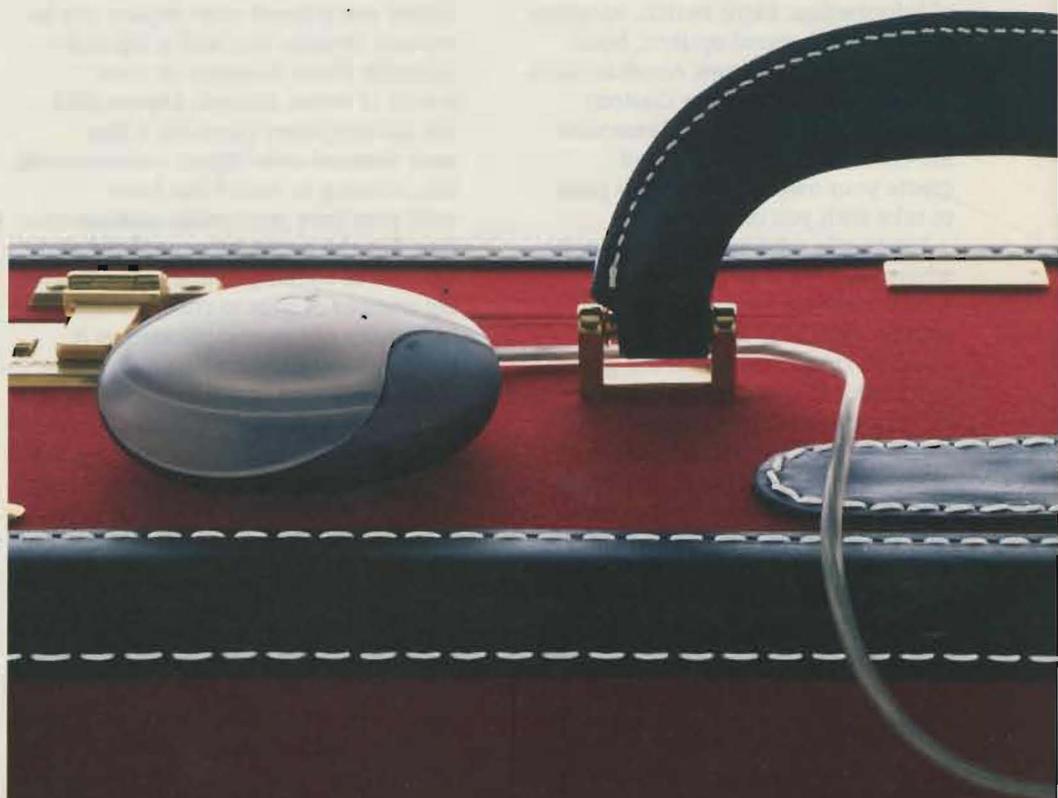
*taking a vacation has never been easier*

**S**urfing the Internet is great, but it's even better to use your computer to find a place to surf—say, Maui. Today, you can do everything online from planning a vacation to booking flights, cars, cruises, and lodging. In some cases, prices are cheaper and more available online than from travel agents. And because airlines want to encourage you to use their sites, they sometimes give incentives, like extra miles, for reserving through them. Whatever you're after, it's probably on the Internet.

But one word of caution: Services and sites on the Internet can change in a nanosecond, as companies merge and consolidate. While this story was being reported, four major players merged into two major players. Thankfully, most companies plan for smooth transitions—so when you click on an old URL, you're bounced to the new kid on the block. So don't be discouraged. Here's how to start.

### **PICKING A DESTINATION**

There are zillions of destination websites, including city and country sites hosted by tourist offices, bed-and-breakfast →



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information consortiums, individual hotels and resorts, tour operators, and the online versions of travel guides like Frommer's ([www.frommers.com](http://www.frommers.com)) and Fodor's ([www.fodors.com](http://www.fodors.com)). The one that's been the best for one-stop shopping is Preview Travel ([www.previewtravel.com](http://www.previewtravel.com)). However, it's merging with Travelocity this summer ([www.travelocity.com](http://www.travelocity.com) will be the URL that gets you there) and many of its services and features will be incorporated into Travelocity.

Right now, when you go to Preview Travel and type in a destination that interests you—let's say, the Grand Canyon—up pops a mammoth amount of information: flight search, vacation packages, car-rental options, hotel and restaurant reviews. Another really thoughtful feature is the Custom Miniguide, which lets you assemble information from the site and create your own printable info pack to take with you on your trip.

For people who aren't sure exactly where they want to go or people who prefer tour packages, Preview has another neat little module called Vacation Finder. You tell it the general geographical area that you're interested in, your price range, the type of activities you like, and a number of other criteria. If you want a snorkeling-oriented trip to Hawaii with a hotel that has children's facilities, a fitness center, and in-room kitchens, Preview will return dozens of choices. Bear in mind that many destination information sites are not exactly objective, which isn't necessarily a terrible thing; if you can go to a hotel's website and look at pictures of individual rooms, that's a valuable aid in deciding whether you want to stay there. But sometimes the best input is from other travelers. Before the online world was commercialized, there were plenty of forums and bulletin boards where regular people traded information—but they're harder and harder to find.

The absolute best resource in this field is CompuServe's Travel Forum, which has been around for years and is frequented by many knowledgeable travel writers, pilots, travel agents, and just plain seasoned travelers. Many

of its sections are only available to CompuServe subscribers, but the cruise, air/frequent flyer, and general help sections are open to all. Go to [www.csi.com](http://www.csi.com) and click on the travel channel.

#### BOOKING A FLIGHT

If you're a frequent flyer of only one airline, you can easily buy tickets at your airline's own website, although it still sometimes pays to go to a general travel site that promises to find you the lowest price. (I once got a ticket on Travelocity that was \$200 cheaper than the one I'd been quoted by the airline itself.) One annoyance is that many travel sites require you to register. Usually this isn't a big deal—although if you're asked for your e-mail or home address, always read the privacy policy carefully. A few sites demand even bigger commitments, like refusing to search out fares until they have your credit-card information. But the single most confusing part about booking online is the dizzying number of sites to choose from. In fact, it's not as complicated as it looks—many sites are just different-looking versions of a small number of online travel-service providers. There are only three reservation systems that serve all travel sites. All these systems have access to pretty much the same material, but if you have the time, it's always a good idea to comparison shop.

Here are three sites, each powered by a different reservation system. Spend an hour noodling around, getting a feel for the sites and planning imaginary trips (you can bail well before you have to sign on the digital line). Then let all three compete for your business the next time you need a ticket. Or if you consistently get similar prices on all three, just pick a favorite.

#### 1. American Express Travel

([www.travelamericanexpress.com](http://www.travelamericanexpress.com)) This site, a partner of the Internet Travel Network, comes equipped with many cool features, including a currency converter, a time-zone calculator, and a link for driving directions anywhere in the United States. Destination information from the Fodor's travel guides and CitySearch is also clickable from Am Ex's home page.

Small, thoughtful touches abound on the airfare search engine. American Express remembers where your home airport is. When you put in a date, it automatically tells you what day of the week it is. And as you construct a round-trip or multi-leg ticket, the computer also remembers where the last flight took you and types that airport's name for you. A free AmExcursions e-mail newsletter subscription tells you about last-minute getaway fares, special travel offers, and entertainment bargains. And the Rewards Manager keeps track of your frequent-flyer accounts, a great bonus for the mileage obsessed.

**2. Expedia** ([www.expedia.com](http://www.expedia.com)) This is a big site with something for everyone, especially families—tons of articles on traveling with kids, including useful stuff about kid-friendly facilities at all major airports where you might get stuck between connections. It's easy to set up traveler profiles for the whole family (passport information, address where tickets should be sent, aisle/window and meal preferences, frequent-flyer numbers, etc.), thus making it a snap to buy tickets for everyone at once. Expedia also takes the queasiness out of leaving your credit-card information online: The site guarantees that your credit card is protected from unauthorized charges after the first \$50. There's a fare-tracking option, and if you don't want changes in fares to your favorite destinations sent to your e-mail address, there's an option to have the information posted online in your personal folder.

#### 3. Travelocity

([www.travelocity.com](http://www.travelocity.com)) Travelocity's home page isn't as glitzy as some others, but it has good links, including bed-and-breakfast accommodations and specific information about carry-on rules for each major airline (and soon, it will incorporate features of Preview Travel). Travelocity has a fare-tracker feature and a credit-card transaction-safety guarantee, but no family profiles. Their fare finder is the most versatile around: You can choose to search for the lowest fares, the lowest fares on a particular date, or the lowest fares on particular →

**THAT'S URL, FOLKS!**

Follow this online map toward the most useful sites for planning your next trip:

**Choosing a destination****CompuServe's Travel Channel**

(go to [www.csi.com](http://www.csi.com) and click on the link for travel)

**Booking air travel****American Express Travel**

([www.travelamericanexpress.com](http://www.travelamericanexpress.com))

**Expedia ([www.expedia.com](http://www.expedia.com))**

**Travelocity ([www.travelocity.com](http://www.travelocity.com))**

**For business flyers**

**Biztravel ([www.biztravel.com](http://www.biztravel.com))**

**For discounted weekend airfares****Smarter Living**

([www.smarterliving.com](http://www.smarterliving.com))

(sign up for their Internet-Only Airfare Newsletter)

**Trip ([www.thetrip.com](http://www.thetrip.com))**

(click on IntelliTRIP)

**To bid on airline tickets**

**Priceline ([www.priceline.com](http://www.priceline.com))**

**Booking rail travel**

In America:

**Amtrak ([www.amtrak.com](http://www.amtrak.com))**

In Europe:

**Rail Europe ([www.raileurope.com](http://www.raileurope.com))**

**Booking car travel**

Nationally:

**Travelocity ([www.travelocity.com](http://www.travelocity.com))**

Internationally

(selected countries):

**Auto Europe ([www.autoeurope.com](http://www.autoeurope.com))**

**Booking ocean travel**

**Cruise.Com ([www.cruise.com](http://www.cruise.com))**

**CruiseNet ([www.cruisenet.com](http://www.cruisenet.com))**

dates and times. Once you buy a ticket, you can choose your own seat on a dozen major airlines from maps that show exactly what's available. There's also a link to rock-bottom consolidator fares. Another slick feature is a speedy Dream Map, where you type in your hometown and the amount of money you're willing to spend, and Travelocity tells you about all the deals available from your local airport.

**BUSINESS TRAVEL**

Business travelers might prefer **Biztravel ([www.biztravel.com](http://www.biztravel.com))**. Biztravel knows you care about your mileage and your upgrades, and their home page is full of information that assumes you at least occasionally fly in the front of the plane. You can also ask the search engine to take all your mileage-building programs into consideration when choosing reservations.

**GETTING SPECIAL DEALS****Discounted Weekend Airfares**

Most people know about the special discounted weekend airfares offered over the Internet by major airlines. You can visit the websites of all the airlines that fly out of your local airport and check out their weekend specials, or you can sign up for an e-mail notification from each and every carrier. A more streamlined alternative is to go to **Smarter Living ([www.smarterliving.com](http://www.smarterliving.com))** and sign up for their e-mail packet, called Internet-Only Airfare Newsletter. Just tell them what airport or airports you usually use, and every Wednesday you'll be sent roundups of all the domestic and international deals for the coming weekend. Two other places to see weekend fares online are **Travel Zoo ([www.travelzoo.com](http://www.travelzoo.com))**, click on Netfares, and **Trip ([www.thetrip.com](http://www.thetrip.com))**, click on IntelliTRIP.

**Bidding**

**Priceline ([www.priceline.com](http://www.priceline.com))** makes you agree in advance to a purchase if the search engine finds the flight (or hotel room) of your dreams. The hitch: You really have to buy—they take your credit-card info before they search. And if you specify, say, that you're willing to spend \$300 for a ticket

from New York to Los Angeles and Priceline finds one for \$275, you'll still pay \$300. (And no, don't think you can just keep lowballing it until you get what you want; usually you are limited to one bid per hour.) I would definitely try Priceline as a court of last resort—for instance, if I were desperate to get a last-minute hotel room in New Orleans during Mardi Gras.

**GOING BY TRAIN**

**Amtrak** has a site with fares, schedules, and special offers at [www.amtrak.com](http://www.amtrak.com). For official information about Eurail-passes and point-to-point European rail tickets, go to [www.raileurope.com](http://www.raileurope.com). You can even order passes online. Unfortunately, the site has limited resources for travelers who are planning to travel by train to smaller towns and cities.

**RESERVING A CAR**

All the major car-rental companies have their own websites. And at **Travelocity ([www.travelocity.com](http://www.travelocity.com))** you can ask to see the cheapest rental or choose according to the kind of vehicle. It's also possible to choose rental locations outside of airports, get your frequent-flyer number applied to the rental, and to request options like ski racks and child seats. For cars in eastern and western Europe, Australia, Egypt, Iceland, Israel, Jordan, Morocco, New Zealand, South Africa, and Tunisia, check out **Auto Europe ([www.autoeurope.com](http://www.autoeurope.com))**.

**BOOKING A CRUISE**

A truly full-featured cruise-specialist site can be found at [www.cruise.com](http://www.cruise.com). You can choose to get information on regular cruises according to specific destination, length of voyage, plus separate information on luxury cruises of varying lengths. The site gives all prices and has some discounted specials. There are also many excellent extras, including sample menus from major ship dining rooms, a chart giving explicit information about wheelchair and other special-needs accessibility, and advice on insurance and tipping. If you're just looking for links to cruise line websites, [www.cruisenet.com](http://www.cruisenet.com) has more than two dozen. ■