

July 5, 2005

THE MIDDLE SEAT
By SCOTT MCCARTNEY



Beyond Orbitz: How To Find the Best Tickets

New Web Sites Help Fliers Track Down Hidden Fares And First-Class Upgrades
July 5, 2005

A small but growing group of heavy fliers are turning to a few specialized Web sites that provide insider information on airline routes and fares -- giving them a leg up in tracking down first-class upgrades and frequent-flier award tickets.

As the summer travel season heats up, and ticket prices climb, sites like ExpertFlyer.com, itasoftware.com and the more well-known FlyerTalk.com are providing tools for finding offers, upgrades and special fares that you won't find on Travelocity, Expedia or Orbitz.

PERSONAL JOURNAL UPDATE

Get Personal Journal's print and online coverage together in one e-mail, including helpful news articles and your favorite columns, delivered each weekday. Sign up at the [E-Mail Center](#)¹.

MIDDLE SEAT MAILBOX

Have a question about air travel or the airline industry? Write to me at middleseat@wsj.com². Answers to selected questions will appear in [Middle Seat Mailbox](#)³ on Fridays. If you don't want your comments considered for Middle Seat Mailbox, please make that clear.

You have to be a true travel geek to venture into the world of "fare codes" and seat availability, but there can be a payoff. Basically, you're peeking into the airline's stockroom. By understanding what's there, you sometimes can get considerably more from an airline simply by paying a little more. Or, it can drastically boost the chances of an upgrade by picking a flight with plenty of open upgrade seats.

That's because, on any given flight, airlines offer dozens of different coach prices, and multiple paths to qualifying for an upgrade to first class, each sorted into a different fare "bucket." Chicago-Las Vegas over the Fourth of July: There were 153 different fares in that market.

Good travel agents routinely navigate through this arcane world of airline booking codes, but for most do-it-yourselfers, buying a coach ticket from an airline or online travel agent typically gets one or two choices: the lowest price, and maybe a full-fare unrestricted price.

Now a few tools are popping up that take travelers into the actual inventory of seats, fares and even open frequent-flier award seats and available upgrades. Airlines are starting to offer more on their own, too.

Ian Blumenstein, a lawyer who travels so much he's a top-tier frequent flier on AMR Corp.'s American Airlines,

DOW JONES REPRINTS

 This copy is for your personal, non-commercial use only. To order presentation-ready copies for distribution to your colleagues, clients or customers, use the Order Reprints tool at the bottom of any article or visit: www.djreprints.com.

- [See a sample reprint in PDF format.](#)
- [Order a reprint of this article now.](#)

ABOUT SCOTT MCCARTNEY

Scott McCartney writes The Middle Seat every Tuesday. The Wall Street Journal's Travel Editor, Scott has been on the airline beat since 1995 -- long enough to see it go from bust to boom and back to bust. He also answers readers' questions about air travel in [Middle Seat Mailbox](#)⁶ every Friday.

Scott won the Online News Association award for online commentary in 2003 for "The Middle Seat," the George Polk Award for transportation reporting in 2000, and has been honored by the Deadline Club and New York's chapter of the Society of Professional Journalists. Before joining the Journal in 1993, he spent 11 years at The Associated Press.

Scott, a native of Boston and graduate of Duke University, is the author of three books, including "ENIAC: The Triumphs and Tragedies of the World's First Computer," which was published in 1999. He's also an instrument-rated private pilot.

Send your comments about The Middle Seat to middleseat@wsj.com⁷

decided at the last minute to take his wife and daughter to Paris for Memorial Day weekend using frequent-flier miles. Impossible, many would say. But Mr. Blumenstein knew how to search American's inventory -- business-class frequent-flier awards are booked into the "U" fare bucket (coach into "T" and first-class into "Z.")

Using ExpertFlyer.com, a subscription search service that costs \$9.99 a month or \$99.99 a year for unlimited use that offers detailed access to airline inventory, he couldn't find open seats to Paris, but he did find three open U-class seats from Boston to London, and a return flight from London to New York with at least three seats open in the U-bucket. He had to get from London to Paris and back on his own, and from New York to his home in Boston. That's the kind of shrewd side-step road warriors cook up to get where they want to go, even when airline reservationists and Web sites can find no solution.

"I was happy to do that in order to be able to fly in business class for free across the pond," he said, although the trip was ultimately canceled at the last minute.

Mr. Blumenstein is a devotee of FlyerTalk.com, an online community of road warriors who share tips and tricks about airlines, including how to dig through fare buckets to find good deals with tools like ExpertFlyer and itasoftware.com, run by ITA Software, a Cambridge, Mass., company whose Web site lets the public use a powerful search engine of airline inventory (you have to click on "Looking for Airfares" to get to it).

Like ITA Software's public site, ExpertFlyer only gives you a look into airline inventories -- you can't book a flight through the service. The big difference is that ExpertFlyer lists different fare categories, and how many seats are available (up to a maximum nine). With the translation key for arcane airline codes, you can find lots of different options on the same airplane.

The complexity of airline pricing is legendary, and airlines parse the cabin into many different pricing buckets in order to maximize revenue. As some buckets sell out, buyers have to move up to higher-price buckets.

And not all fares come with all the harsh rules -- there's a hierarchy, unseen by most consumers.

ExpertFlyer was created to throw that fare matrix onto a screen for road warriors. It's led by a road warrior, John Lopinto, owner of a Long Island, N.Y., electronics manufacturing company, and two relatives. To help his own travels, Mr. Lopinto had been using some early-generation online booking tools designed for travel agents, and then grew frustrated when they were closed.

ExpertFlyer buys information from all three major airline-reservation systems that is available to travel agents on a per-search basis, and worked with a software developer to make it easier to use on a Web site. For most other airlines, the Web site has regular fare inventory data and seat maps.

"Everybody looks for an edge," says Mr. Lopinto. "We're pushing information that has always been available out to decision-makers."

One of Mr. Lopinto's favorite tricks is to search for "B" fares on American -- a coach fare typically a few hundred dollars higher than the lowest price for international trips. "B" fares upgrade for only 10,000 frequent-flier miles each way, while most coach fares on international trips upgrade at American for 25,000 miles plus \$250 each way. Buying the more-expensive coach fare can save miles and dollars, and the "B" fare is fully refundable.

A few weeks ago, I was checking New York-London on American for the Fourth of July weekend and was offered a lowest price of \$1,450, not including taxes and fees. Without restrictions, the lowest coach price was \$2,910 -- full-fare in coach. But ExpertFlyer found a B-class round-trip of \$1,644 without taxes, which was only \$194 more than the cheapest coach ticket. If you upgrade, you'd save more than \$300 and 30,000 miles over buying the cheapest fare. And if you simply wanted the flexibility of a fully refundable ticket, you saved more than \$1,200 by buying B-class instead of a full Y-class fare.

Another seam of gold for road warriors is information on upgrade availability. American, Delta Air Lines and others automatically gives upgrades to top-level frequent fliers within 100 hours of departure, for example, but travelers need to know if upgrades are available. You can't find it on airline Web sites, though.

By checking inventory on ExpertFlyer -- the "X" bucket on most American domestic flights and the "V" bucket for Delta domestic upgrades to first class -- frequent travelers buying tickets a few days before departure can pick flights based on which will get them automatically upgraded.

Few airlines, however, are willing to let customers see inventory information on upgrades and travel awards. ExpertFlyer does have frequent-flier award inventory data from American, Air France and Qantas, and upgrade availability information from American and Delta Air Lines. But that's it. Most carriers want to keep their frequent-flier awards and upgrades locked away in-house, where they undoubtedly have more control and customers have less ability to see.

It's a tricky thing for airlines, and too much information can lead to embarrassment. When ExpertFlyer initially launched, users realized that they could look up their own trip records and even find comments posted about the customer by airline agents. Some weren't so flattering, and American cut that access off.

Eventually, airlines have to do more to give travelers control. They have a community of power users -- the premium customers whose loyalty they desperately need because they buy lots of expensive tickets -- that wants sophisticated booking tools. It's not for everyone, and it is complex. But Web sites that just list the lowest price for a flight aren't for everyone either. "I want to know all of my options," Mr. Blumenstein said.

• **Write to** Scott McCartney at middleseat@wsj.com⁴

URL for this article:

<http://online.wsj.com/article/SB112051884696176873.html>

Hyperlinks in this Article:

(1) <http://online.wsj.com/email>

(2) <mailto:middleseat@wsj.com>

(3) http://online.wsj.com/article/0,,middle_seat_mailbox,00.html

(4) <http://www.middleseat@wsj.com>

(5) http://online.wsj.com/article/0,,middle_seat_mailbox,00.html

(6) <mailto:middleseat@wsj.com>

Copyright 2007 Dow Jones & Company, Inc. All Rights Reserved

This copy is for your personal, non-commercial use only. Distribution and use of this material are governed by our [Subscriber Agreement](#) and by copyright law. For non-personal use or to order multiple copies, please contact Dow Jones Reprints at 1-800-843-0008 or visit www.djreprints.com.