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## THE JOURNAL REPORT: ENCORE

### Travel Frugal Flying

*With senior discounts all but gone, here's our guide to finding the best airfares*

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After twice this summer enduring a grueling 14-hour car ride from a New York City suburb to Detroit, Michael Belsole couldn't believe his eyes when a Spirit Airlines online service he signed up for sent him an email advertising a round-trip flight for only \$16.

Date availability was limited, but the deal -- which came to \$35 after taxes and fees -- was too good to pass up. So Mr. Belsole and his wife, Angela, organized a visit with her brother and his grandchildren. "It was a nice family reunion," says Mr. Belsole, a 57-year-old computer-sales account manager from Mount Vernon, N.Y.

#### THE JOURNAL REPORT



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Augusta, Ga., is home to the Masters Tournament and [growing numbers of retirees](#)<sup>2</sup>. Plus, if you're feeling less useful at work, [read how to help yourself](#)<sup>3</sup> -- and your company. See the complete [Encore report](#)<sup>4</sup>.

In recent years, airlines have been cutting back on discount programs for people over 50. But some travelers are fighting back with strategies of their own. Getting the best fares takes some savvy, and sometimes a strong stomach to gamble a bit by waiting for last-minute sales. For those willing to invest the time and energy, the Internet now offers a plethora of tools formerly available only to industry insiders.

"Seniors are the perfect candidates for flying cheaply because they have time flexibility and destination flexibility, which are the two ingredients

for getting a good price," says Rick Seaney, chief executive of [FareCompare.com](#)<sup>5</sup>, an airfare information Web site based in Dallas that was launched in March.

Here are some favorite strategies from road warriors and travel agents:

**PICK THE CHEAPEST TRAVEL DAYS:** Typically Tuesdays and Wednesdays are the least booked -- and consequently the least expensive -- days to travel within the U.S. You can typically save \$20 to \$40 on domestic flights compared with prime weekend times, says Liberty Travel Inc. consultant Al Vega.

European fares vary depending on the route, but are often somewhat less expensive on Monday through Thursday. And you're more likely to find a seat in the airport waiting area.

**BUY TICKETS TO EUROPE IN DECEMBER FOR WINTER TRIPS:** Airlines typically launch fare wars in December for travel from January through March. The peak purchasing season for winter and spring travel kicks off on Jan. 2, Mr. Seaney says. But, by then, many of the best fares are gone.

Since the fare competition may be more intense for certain destinations, you can save even more by being flexible on where you land. For example, says Mr. Vega, you can often save by flying to London -- where fare competition is intense -- and hopping a low-cost European carrier such as Ryanair to your final destination.

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**WATCH LIKE A HAWK:** New domestic fares from hundreds of airlines are released by fare-collection firm Airline Tariff Publishing Co. three times every weekday: at 10 a.m., 12:30 p.m. and 8 p.m. On weekends, they come out once, at 5 p.m.

FareCompare says it makes new fares public within 10 minutes of their official release time. The truly obsessive can log on to FareCompare just after the posting times, check out what is available, and be among the first to snap up deals when they're posted on airline and travel sites, generally three to four hours later. You can't buy tickets on FareCompare itself.

If you use Firefox browser, a popular alternative to Microsoft's Internet Explorer, you can also sign up to get a beeping alert from FareCompare while you're online. The alert tells you when a fare to your selected destination dips below a level you've chosen.

**DON'T PLAN TOO FAR IN ADVANCE:** Older travelers often want to plan ahead -- getting to the airport three hours early and buying tickets six months ahead or more, Mr. Seaneay says. He says the early-bird strategy is smart only when you must travel at a peak time, such as Christmas and Thanksgiving. Otherwise, "if you're buying outside of six months, you're overpaying," Mr. Seaneay says.

Start looking at fares three or four months ahead, he says, but don't buy unless you see a deal. FareCompare gives historical seasonal fares for 77,000 city pairs in the U.S. and Canada and ranks them with stars up to four, which means "purchase it as quickly as possible."

At about a month to 90 days before travel, you should get serious about buying, but still hold out for a three-star or four-star fare. It's a game of chicken; if fares spike, you could miss a good deal. But more than likely, Mr. Seaneay says, you'll pay less if you wait, watch and buy on a dip.

If you are flying from a small airport, where there is less fare competition, you might want to err on the side of caution. And make sure to buy before the cutoff point needed to get cheaper advance fares -- generally 14 or 21 days before the flight.

**TRAVEL ON A LARK:** If you don't mind packing your bags with only one or two weeks' notice, a package with airline and hotel fare can be a steal.

Ed Perkins, the 76-year-old founding editor of the now-defunct Consumer Reports Travel Letter, says that packages can be a great money-saver, but that you should beware of the bottom-priced hotel used by travel agents to post eye-catching price headlines since it may be poor quality. He recommends paying a little more for the next-most-expensive hotel offered -- and even then checking its reputation with a guidebook or independent travel site.

**STRATEGIZE YOUR OFF-SEASON PLANS:** Pick your off-season bets carefully, says Mr. Perkins. Tickets are cheap to Scottsdale, Ariz., in July and August, he says, but "you open the door of your air-conditioned hotel room, and you think you've opened a furnace."

Mr. Perkins, now a semiretired online travel writer, says Europe is just as nice with a little rain and snow. "But if you're going to London, what you care about is the theater, not the weather," he says.

On FareCompare, the lowest available fare from Los Angeles to Rome recently was logged at \$573 for travel from November through March. But if you leave after April 1, you pay at least \$809.

**INVEST TIME IN LEARNING ARCANE CODE:** If you enjoy a puzzle with your bargain hunting, it's now possible to get the same information travel agents have been getting for years.

[ExpertFlyer.com](http://ExpertFlyer.com)<sup>6</sup>, for a basic monthly fee of \$4.99 or a premium fee of \$9.99 monthly, or \$99.99 annually, offers an inside peek at airlines' actual seat inventories. This information, which ExpertFlyer buys from three

major airline reservation systems, tells you how many seats are available in each "fare bucket," or class of fares on each flight. By learning the codes the airlines use, you can find which seats can be upgraded to a higher class with frequent-flier miles. You can also get a rough idea (not exact, alas) of how many seats are open in each booking class on each flight. So if you see there are only two coach-class seats left for a flight you're considering, you'd better book fast. If a lot are left, you might be able to wait a few days and see if the fare drops.

You can't buy directly from ExpertFlyer, but "we tell you what's available, so when you go to the airline's Web site you know what you are looking for," says John Lopinto, co-founder of the Patchogue, N.Y., site.

One highly coveted fare that the site helps you find is coded with the letters YUP, which means you pay coach fare but immediately upgrade to first class. Y-up fares, as they're referred to in the industry (though their codes can also begin with QUP or KUP), are offered by airlines because they bring in paying customers for seats which might ordinarily have been given away free or nearly free as upgrades.

ExpertFlyer tells you exactly which airlines are offering the Y-up fares on the dates you want to travel and how much they cost compared with cheaper coach fares. You can find the same fares on individual airline sites and some popular travel sites, but multiple searches are generally required to find what ExpertFlyer shows you on just one screen.

Still, securing a Y-up can be a little tricky. Mr. Lopinto recommends you first check the price of Y-up fares on ExpertFlyer -- and find out which flights have first-class seats available. Then you go directly to the airline's Web site and select "first class with restrictions" or a similar term and choose the flights where you already know Y-up fares are offered.

**SUBSCRIBE TO EMAIL ALERTS:** Many airlines and online travel agents will send you email alerts about cheap fares. Mr. Belsole, who got the cut-rate fare to Detroit, subscribes to about 10. The hitch: You might be limited to a very few travel dates. Spirit Airlines offered only five dates for the New York-Detroit deal, and all but two were gone by the time Mr. Belsole logged on. Spirit says it sends its "crazy eight" deals and other specials to anyone who asks, but frequent fliers get them at least slightly before they are made publicly available.

**SENIOR DISCOUNTS:** While airline discount programs for seniors have been disappearing, a few -- such as at Southwest and United Airlines -- are still going strong.

But you have to know how to use them to get the best discounts. For example, says Mr. Perkins, United Airlines' Silver Wings Plus program, available to people age 55-plus, often offers the biggest savings to small, underserved airports such as his local airport of Medford, Ore. Preferred membership in the program, which costs \$240 a year, offers fares sold on a "zone" system, in which you pay a flat fee based roughly on how far away you are traveling.

For example, fares for a fall trip from Medford to Boston recently ranged from \$575 to a whopping \$1,050, while the same trip leaving from Portland, Ore., would cost only \$429 to \$557. A Silver Wings "Preferred" member could fly from either Medford or Portland for \$389 plus a \$5 administrative fee.

Silver Wings Preferred members get \$300 in "travel credits" a year, which can be used only in increments of \$100 for each ticket purchase but don't expire as long as you remain a member. And for procrastinators, a big plus: You can book travel at the last minute under zone fares for the same flat fee, as long as fares are still available.

Other discounts for airfares, hotels and theme parks are available on an AARP members-only travel site ([www.travelocity.com/AARP/home](http://www.travelocity.com/AARP/home)<sup>7</sup>). On the site, powered by Travelocity, the text is made larger and colors are chosen to be easy on the eyes, Travelocity says. Airline discounts are few, but Travelocity says it is negotiating to add more. For now, the AARP site offers discounts of as much as 5% on some United fares and will soon be offering additional discounts on Mexicana Airlines.

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