

Chapter Eight

Flights

Finding a good deal on flights means you can spend more money on the fun stuff when you reach your destination. But with low-cost carriers popping up everywhere, airlines are forced to compete via hidden fees and upsells while dramatically decreasing traveler experience. My goal for chapter eight is to get you to your destination economically *and* have a good in-flight experience.

Before I tell you where to look for flights, let me first give you a heads-up that the prices you see advertised on websites are often not what they seem.

Agony vs. Convenience

Sure, you might be able to fly to Southeast Asia for \$500 round trip... but if you had three layovers and it took you 50+ hours, was it worth it? That answer is up to you.

In my twenties, I didn't care—I'd snag a \$99 flight to Cancun on Spirit Airlines, and I wouldn't mind if it was delayed or if I had to wake up at 2 a.m. to catch my flight. In my thirties, with a little more money to spend and a little less tolerance for pain, I'd rather wake up at a reasonable hour and arrive at my destination feeling well-rested.

The idea of a gony versus convenience isn't my own. The flight search engine [Hipmunk](#) allows you to sort flights by “agony” level, which is a combination of price, flight duration, and the number of stops. It's something I always stress people to consider when booking their flights. The only thing I'd add to their agony algorithm is the time of the flight. If it's an early morning wake-up or an overnight flight, you can count me out whenever possible.

Hidden Fees

These days, airline seats are getting smaller, while passengers are getting larger. If you don't mind being crammed in a middle seat, in the back row, that doesn't recline, go for it. Otherwise, you'll want to see if your fare includes the ability to choose your own seat.

Next up on the list of ways airlines are squeezing the consumer to maximize profits is via baggage fees. I suggest going carry-on only if possible, but for longer trips, sometimes you just want the convenience of checking a bag, especially as the list of things you can't bring through security is growing longer.

Be aware that budget airlines like Spirit charge a fee for carry-on bags, and now legacy carriers like United are joining the party, offering what appears as a low-cost fare, only to tell you later you need to pay for your carry-on bag. Some of the lowest fares on legacy carriers put you in the very last boarding group, where it's likely that all the overhead compartment space will be taken and you'll be forced to check your bag at the gate. If you jump on one of these fares, be prepared to grab your toiletries, medicine, and valuables in case you need to hand over your carry-on.

Be sure to check your ticket to see what's included before purchasing. If you decide to check a bag, make sure they don't charge extra for paying at the airport. Frontier Airlines, who I fly on occasion, will charge you \$5 extra if you don't pay for your checked bag online. Worse yet, Spirit will charge you \$10 if you don't check-in online as a fee to print your boarding pass. And finally, the award for biggest rip-off goes to Ryanair, whose website states, "Customers that do not check-in before arriving at the airport are required to pay the Airport Check-in Fee of €/£55." As you can see, "no frills" might as well mean, "bring your own seat!"

To be honest, low-cost carriers are usually okay, as long as you know what you are getting yourself into and aren't blindsided by the fees and small inconveniences.

Where to Find Deals on Flights

Instead of "cheap flights," notice I said, "deals on flights." You can make your own judgment on what is important to you. If your father-in-law is cashing in miles for you to fly first-class on your honeymoon, it'd be nice to find him a good deal, wouldn't it? Cheap isn't always what we are after.

Third-Party Aggregators

In the old days, I imagine you had to do a lot of legwork or get a travel agent to find a good deal on a flight, but today's travel search engines have you covered. Between Google Flights, Kayak, Expedia, and Skyscanner, you don't have to do much hunting. I use Google Flights almost exclusively unless I'm really having trouble finding a reasonable flight. If you are maniacal about price comparison, you can also try Travelocity, CheapOair, TripAdvisor Flights, Bookit.com, OneTravel, and Momondo. Most of these companies are pulling from the same database, so you probably aren't going to do much better if you continue to look for a cheaper fare.

Direct Bookings

To find some of the best deals, you'll need to go directly to the airline's website. Airlines don't particularly want to be sold through Online Travel Agencies or OTAs because they have to pay them a commission, adding to the cost of the flight. To keep prices down,

Southwest refuses to work with OTAs, JetBlue has banned many apps like Hopper, and even Delta has started to withdraw routes from these comparison sites. Many airlines and hotels will offer you more points if you book directly with them to avoid having to pay the OTA commission.

If I see a flight I like on Google Flights, I usually just click through to the airline's website and book it. I asked Mark Peacock of the Travel Commons Podcast if he was ever able to find a better deal by not clicking the OTA's link and going directly to the website yourself, and he's never found a price difference either.

The best thing about booking directly with the airline is that if you have a problem with your itinerary, there is never a third party involved. Remember, if you buy on Expedia, for example, you'll have to call Expedia to resolve any issues, which usually involves waiting on hold while they call the airline for you. If you use Google Flights, you'll just click the fare you want and be brought directly to the airline's website. Any customer service will be handled directly by the airline.

Apps, Alerts, and Price Predictors

I understand that some people think booking flights is an Olympic sport, but I'm of the opinion that after you cover the basics above, any additional "hacking" you do will fall victim to the law of diminishing returns. I know people who obsessively watch flights for a hobby, but I'd rather be outdoors. Alas, if you can't live without the dopamine hit of push alerts and daily email newsletters, here are a few places you can derive further value:

- [Hopper](#)—an app that uses data science to predict future prices of flights.
- [Scott's Cheap flights](#)—a newsletter of handpicked flight deals departing from your local city.
- [Kayak](#)—uses search data and trends to generate price forecasts.
- Airline distribution lists—set up a junk email address or a folder where all the airline newsletters go. You'll be the first to hear about deals.

Pro Tip: Use an incognito or private browsing window in your browser. Every time you visit a website that sells airfare, they place cookies on your device and track your clicks. It is rumored that if you hesitate to book, airlines will increase the price on you. But, by the way, BBC reported that those scarcity tickers that say "38 people are looking at this flight." are often not true.

When to Book

According to the 2018 CheapAir.com Airfare Study of over 917,000,000 flights, your “prime booking window” for international flights is two to three months away from your departure date. For domestic flights, your “prime booking window” is three weeks to three months in advance. In general, you don’t want to book too early!

In an [interview with Scott Keyes](#) from Scott’s Cheap flights, he explained to me that last-minute deals were once popular with airlines, but now, airlines increase prices exorbitantly at the last minute to take advantage of business travelers whose companies are paying for the flight and are much less price-sensitive.

What day of the week should you book, you ask? The answer, according to FareCompare.com, is Tuesday, because this is when most airlines release their sales for the week.

While this chapter isn’t about credit card travel hacks, it’s good to know what day the billing cycle of your credit card turns over. If your credit card statement period ends on the 28th of the month, then it’d be advantageous for you to book just after that, on the 29th, 30th, or 1st of the month. This way, you’ll have a month or more to pay your credit card bill. Please use credit responsibly, and do not purchase flights you can’t afford!

When to Fly

Let’s start with when *not* to fly. The average traveler might not notice, but there is actually a very serious rush hour in airports. Monday mornings and Thursday evenings are when business travelers are trying to either get to work or get home. This is when Mark Peacock advises his family to stay home as to not get steamrolled by businesspeople trying to get from point A to point B as quickly as possible. As I mentioned before, flights at this time will probably be more expensive since corporations are paying for a fare.

Kayak.com’s data scientists recommend:

Travelers planning a week-long domestic trip should depart on a Saturday and return on Monday to score the cheapest airfare (roughly 16% lower than average).

For international week-long trips, we recommend departing on a Tuesday and returning on Wednesday to save some money. These flights were 21% lower than the average.

Common sense also says a fare will be higher around the holidays because of increased demand. Thanksgiving, Christmas, New Years, and Easter week are all heavy air travel periods. Fridays during June, July, and August are what Roger Dow of the US Travel Association calls the busiest travel days of the year. If you are like most Millennials, you

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probably highly value freedom and flexibility, so if you can take time off or work remotely, flying several days before or after peak holidays will give you a nice break in airfare.

For years, I took my winter holiday in Key West, Florida. I'd arrive on the 18th of December before the crowds and fly out on Christmas Day. Flying when nobody else wants to is a great idea. Flying overnight on New Year's Eve or first thing New Year's Day when the rest of the world is hungover is one of the best ways to reduce your already expensive peak season trip. This year I caught a great deal flying during the Superbowl. I simply arrived at the San Diego airport early and watched the game once I got through security.

Finally, as you probably know by now, those five or six a.m. flights are always cheap because of the pain the traveler has to go through to catch them. The good news is, there is no traffic on the way to the airport at that hour, and airports aren't too congested. Chances of your flight being delayed are low. The only thing I'd watch out for is if you are flying from a cold climate, like Chicago or Boston, there is a chance your flight could be delayed if the plane needs to be de-iced in the dead of winter.

Super Travel Hacks

I know I said endlessly searching the internet to find a cheaper fare wouldn't do you much good, but allow me to explain the exception to that rule—creativity. While I don't think booking travel should be a competition, there is an art to designing a trip. Are you headed to Asia or Europe from North America? If you have more time than money, think about taking the scenic route.

Travel Hack 1: Take the scenic route.

Last summer, I was headed with my fiancé to a wedding in the French Countryside. The only problem—we live in Costa Rica. We could have flown directly to Madrid and then flown to the south of France, but these flights were several thousand dollars. Instead, we decided to take our time and spend our money more slowly....

Travel Hack 2: Find friends and family conveniently located along your journey.

Our first thought when booking this trip was, where do we have friends and family that we can see along the way? Stopping in and staying with them is a great way to save costs. Plus, you get to see people you try to spend time with each year without spending extra money on a separate trip. For example, if I ever fly to Asia or Europe, I always try to stop in New York for a few days, see my family, and then take advantage of the major international airports. It almost always works out cheaper to fly from New York. This is my "kill two birds with one stone" approach to meet family obligations and still have money left over to see the world.

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Travel Hack 3: Search smaller airports outside your destination.

On this trip, however, I had work to do, so we decided to stop into Under30Experiences' Austin office. People on our team raved about Norwegian Air's direct flights from Austin to Gatwick, so I jumped on the opportunity. Heathrow is London's biggest international airport and is really expensive for airlines to land in, driving up the costs of flights. These days, you'll see low-cost carriers across the world taking advantage of smaller airports who charge the airlines less to land there. These airports might be farther from the city center, but they are usually a lot less hassle. Check-in can be a breeze, and customs lines are generally shorter. If I can land in an airport like Fort Lauderdale, instead of Miami, or Austin, instead of Houston or Dallas, I do. Orly in Paris is another one of my favorites—I'll do anything to avoid Charles de Gaulle.

Travel Hack 4: Take advantage of layovers.

We flew Austin to London, but we were still nowhere near the French countryside... now what?? We could have waited at the airport and caught a connection to France, but after taking an overnight flight to Europe, the last thing we want to do is wait around for a connection when we are exhausted. Instead, we hopped on the Gatwick Express train and were exploring the center of London in 30 minutes. To be honest, I'd been to London before, and it isn't a destination I'd spend extra money to revisit, but to break up a long trip it worked great.

Travel Hack 5: Combine other modes of transportation.

From London, we could have easily flown to Paris, but there was something about going back to the airport that just didn't flow. Remember, arranging an itinerary is an art! And besides, traveling by train is much more eco-friendly than flying. Taking the Eurostar train gave us that classic European feel we were looking for before our romantic night in Paris.

From Paris, we could have flown to the south of France or taken the high-speed train, but our destination was in the countryside, so we decided to rent a car and drive to the south of France. We would have needed to rent a car in Aix-en-Provence anyway. As an American, a long road trip was no big deal to me, but our European friends thought we were crazy. To us, it was a great way to see rural regions of the country instead of just flying over it.

After the wedding, we drove to Lyon, dropped the car off, and stayed for a week. Lyon is a great walking city, and it didn't make sense for us to keep the car and pay for parking. From Lyon, we were free to do whatever we pleased. We ended up spontaneously flying to Barcelona because our travel plans were open. Spontaneity is truly liberating.

A final word on layovers and stopovers...

I can't stress enough how great of an opportunity layovers and free stopovers are. I've gotten a taste of Singapore, Beijing, Dubai, and Taipei twice like this. These are cities that aren't at the top of my list to spend a lot of time and money in, but checking them out was a fantastic adventure. China's visa-free transit options allowed me to stay up to 72 hours in Beijing and take advantage of a \$400 ticket direct to Dallas. I spent the extra money getting to experience a five-star hotel in Beijing at 3-star prices. Next time I go to Asia, I'm going to stop through Shanghai or Hong Kong, no doubt. Don't forget you can fly the other way around the world and stop in Abu Dhabi, Doha, or Dubai, as I already mentioned. The service on long-haul flights via Emirates and Qatar airlines is usually impressive.

Icelandair has a fantastic stopover program, where you can stay in Iceland for up to seven days with no additional charge for airfare. Many cities like Seoul, Istanbul, and even Salt Lake City have tours that run from the airport if you have a shorter layover but still have some time on your hands. While you are only seeing a very small part of the city, I'll never forget what it was like going to the indoor ski resort in Dubai or seeing the communist army doing marching drills in China.

Get [The Millennial Travel Guidebook](#) in its entirety on Amazon!

