

Where can I
find the best
last-minute
deals?

I wonder which
airline has the
most legroom....

T+L'S TOP TRAVEL WEBSITES NOW

THE INTERNET is filled with websites promising to change the way you travel, but only a select few actually get you where you want to go faster and more affordably. Our editors scoured the online universe and uncovered 33 sites that deliver, whether you're booking a last-minute flight or trying to score impossible restaurant reservations. Plus, four online travel trends and why they matter.

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PHOTOGRAPHED BY GEOFF KERN



THE NEW BOOKING **MODEL**



WITH SO MANY booking agents to choose from, travelers are turning to a new group of sites that is moving into travel-agent territory. “People are frustrated,” says Henry Harteveltdt, lead travel analyst at Forrester Research Inc., an independent research company in Cambridge, Mass. “Online booking tools haven’t inspired customers, helped them plan, or made them feel smarter.” In response, the new hybrid models are trying to lure customers by offering insider advice on destinations and organizing custom itineraries. Nileguide.com, for example, allows you to create individualized itineraries in more than 20 countries by clicking and dragging listings of restaurants, hotels, and attractions into an online trip calendar. (For more, see Zicasso and TripIt, pages 132 and 136.)

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BEST TRAVEL **WEB-SITES**

Airports And Airlines

PREDICT THE IDEAL MOMENT TO BUY A TICKET

FARECAST.COM

Farecast uses historic pricing data to anticipate whether or not a fare is likely to fluctuate in the next week, even providing you with a rating.

GET YOUR MONEY BACK IF A FARE DROPS

YAPTA.COM

If you’ve booked a flight directly through an airline website, Yapta will monitor the fare, alert you if the price drops, and instruct you how to get a refund from the airline for the difference (yes, it’s often possible).

FIND ON-TIME FLIGHTS AT 60 U.S. AIRPORTS

DELAYCAST.COM

Learn the odds of an on-time departure, the expected length of delays, and the likelihood of a cancellation for any given flight. Caveat: predictions reflect past delay patterns, not real-time data.

SNAG A SEAT WITH THE MOST LEGROOM

SEATGURU.COM

With 436 detailed seating maps for 62 airlines and 74 plane models, the site makes it possible to pinpoint the ideal spot for the most space, access to power outlets, and distance from the lavatory.

INCREASE YOUR ODDS FOR A HASSLE-FREE FLIGHT

INSIDETRIPO.COM

Meticulous online bookers will love the TripQuality function on this site, which lets you search flights based on factors such as the carrier’s record for losing bags and the aircraft’s age. »



WORD OF **MOUSE**

Trend
No. **2**

AS THE POPULARITY of social networking sites such as Facebook and MySpace grows—a record 70 percent of all Internet users in the U.S. logged on to a community-based site in August of this year—travelers are benefiting from their virtual friends' experiences. By adding applications such as *Rummble* to your Facebook profile, for example, you can share and receive tips on hotels around the world. The website Socialight provides maps that are annotated with food, drink, and entertainment recommendations from friends in your network. You can also join “channels,” such as “Free WiFi” (members note where you can find it worldwide) or “Farmers’ Markets” (locate the closest ones, wherever you happen to be).

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BEST
TRAVEL
WEB-
SITES

SECURE PRIME PARKING AT THE AIRPORT

ABOUTAIRPORTPARKING.COM

This directory of more than 500 airport parking lots around the world gives you prices and distances from the terminals, plus maps and user reviews. Caveat: contact info is included, but reservations can only be made online for lots at 15 airports (with more added each month).

GET THE BEST DEALS ON FLIGHTS AND HOTELS

KAYAK.COM & SIDESTEP.COM

These two aggregators (now both owned by Kayak) are still the ultimate source for deals on airfare, hotels, and car rentals. Their new Flight Quality tool highlights itineraries with long layovers or short connection times. And the Every Hotel on Earth (EHOE) program allows users to search a database of 130,000 properties by amenities and location.

BOOK LOW-FARE CARRIERS WITHIN EUROPE

WEGOLO.COM

You can search 75 low-fare carriers that service 700 destinations. Two numbers pop up—the fare and the price—so pay close attention. The fare is the base cost, while the price includes taxes and hidden fees, which can add as much as \$65 to the cost of a ticket.

Car Travel

AVOID ROADBLOCKS

TRAFFIC.COM

Identify the fastest, most direct routes—taking into account speed limits and delay times—in more than 100 U.S. cities. Real-time data is used for info on roadwork, car accidents, and even traffic-camera locations.

TUNE IN TO STATIONS AROUND THE WORLD

RADIO-LOCATOR.COM

From your PDA or iPhone, punch in your zip code and download a list of stations—from talk radio to jazz and country—in your area; the site has 14,500 AM and FM stations in the United States and 6,000 abroad. »



USER-GENERATED **FEEDBACK**

Trend
No.

3

FOR YEARS, BOOKING SITES such as Orbitz and Travelocity relied on standard hotel-star ratings to help travelers distinguish between properties. Then came TripAdvisor and TravelPost, which offer user-generated ratings and rank properties by their highest combined scores. Newer sites are taking comparison shopping to a more nuanced level. On UpTake, you can search for U.S. hotels by theme: “romantic,” “cheap,” or “pet-friendly,” to name a few. The site then scours more than 1,000 websites, blogs, and online magazines to find which hotels are most often tagged in surveys with that keyword. For airline travel, InsideTrip (see page 126 for more information) organizes flights by price and creates a score based on 12 “pain points,” including the likelihood of a delay and the minimum amount of legroom to expect.

Food

MAKE RESTAURANT RESERVATIONS ABROAD

OPENTABLE.COM

For the food-obsessed, no more staying up until 4 a.m. to call a soba spot in Tokyo. OpenTable, which links into the reservation systems of more than 8,500 restaurants around the world, makes it easy to secure a table at any time of day or night.

STAY CURRENT ON THE LOCAL FOOD SCENE

SERIOUSEATS.COM

An obsessive community of nearly one million foodies dishes about restaurants, recipes from top regional chefs, and local markets around the world.

Hotels

REVIEWS BY USERS

TRIPADVISOR.COM

With eight years' experience, this site is a leader because of the sheer volume of entries—nearly 20 million reviews of hotels, restaurants, and attractions, and more than 1.3 million photos. Be forewarned: opinions range from candid to nitpicky and suspiciously enthusiastic.

COMPARE HOTELS IN A DESTINATION

TVTRIP.COM

Preview all aspects of a hotel and compare it with its competitors. Short videos take you inside more than 8,000 properties, from the lobby to the bathroom of a master suite.

PINPOINT THE BEST ROOM

TRIPKICK.COM

Get the floors to avoid and the suites not to miss in 450 hotels across the United States. You can compare rooms based on noise level, view, location, and bathroom size. In the coming year, the site will expand to include hotels in Europe, South America, Mexico, and the Caribbean. »



PDA APPLICATIONS TAKE OFF

Trend
No. **4**

THE SUCCESS OF THE IPHONE and its “application store” has spawned a new era for those on the go—and copycat cell-phone companies are clamoring to add similar capabilities. Among the more than 3,000 iPhone applications available, there’s *Urbanspoon*, which provides restaurant recommendations in your neighborhood; *iWant*, which lets you search for everything from cocktail lounges to antiques shops and then plot the places on a map; and *iLingo*, which allows you to download hundreds of useful phrases in several European and Asian languages. Airline companies are also hopping on the mobile bandwagon. With Southwest, Delta, and American, you can check in from your PDA. Other airlines will soon follow suit.

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BEST
TRAVEL
WEB-
SITES

BOUTIQUE PROPERTIES

I-ESCAPE.COM

More than 1,000 reviews detail the high and low points of each listed property, from a bungalow in Bali to a château in Bordeaux. You’ll know what to expect, whether it’s a stellar menu or pesky highway noise.

QUIRKY HOTELS

UNUSUALHOTELSOFTHEWORLD.COM

An igloo in Switzerland, a castle in Australia, a prison in Turkey: these are just some of the oddball finds on the site. A colorful interactive map makes it possible to search by region and then ranks each property by its “wow” factor.

Itineraries

CUSTOMIZE TRIP PLANS

ZICASSO.COM

Fill out a Trip Request form (identifying your budget, where and when you want to travel, and more), and you’ll receive personalized itinerary options from a travel agent who specializes in your destination of choice.

COORDINATE GROUP TRAVEL

TRIPORAMA.COM

Get all your friends or family members on the same page—literally. Everyone can have an equal share in the planning, thanks to a personalized website that lets you create to-do lists, chat on private message boards, and build day-by-day itineraries.

PACKAGE DEALS, ONE WEEK OUT

LASTMINUTE.COM

The site’s Last-Second Deals tab allows you to search, by destination and date, a list of packages that include reduced rates for flights, hotels, and car rentals. At press time, we found a round-trip flight from New York to Seattle, plus a three-night stay at the downtown Hotel Vintage Park, for \$622 per person. »



▶
**New Features
 We Love on
 These Always-
 Useful Booking
 Engines**

Expedia The Fare Alert tool, downloaded to your desktop, tracks flights for your desired destination and price range.

Orbitz Under the site's new Price Assurance policy, Orbitz will monitor any flight you've booked up until the day of departure. If, within that time, another customer books the same itinerary at a lower price, Orbitz will send you a cash refund for the difference.

Travelocity The Insider's Guide shows you how to find the best deals on airfare, hotels, cruises, and car rentals, such as flexible-date shopping and dateless hotel searches.

CREATE NO-FUSS ONLINE ITINERARIES

TRIPIT.COM

Forward your many confirmation e-mails (car, hotel, flight, restaurants) to this site, which synthesizes them all by time and date and creates a streamlined itinerary, including maps, weather conditions, and driving directions.

Luxury

BID ON OVER-THE-TOP HOTEL STAYS AND CRUISES

LUXURYLINK.COM

This user-friendly site turns up hundreds of five-star hotel and cruise deals (with savings of up to 50 percent). Thanks to extensive slide shows, you'll know exactly what to expect.

FULFILL SINGULAR REQUESTS

QUINTESSENTIALLY.COM

Annual membership to the Quintessentially Group is steep—from \$1,800 a year—but it gets you a team of multilingual, multitasking staffers who can take care of any travel need—in person, over the phone, or online—whether it's planning a one-of-a-kind trip to Thailand or snagging front-row seats for a fashion show in Milan.

Logistics

OVERALL DIRECTIONS

MAPS.GOOGLE.COM

Google Maps still soars above the competition with easy-to-read maps, street views of most U.S. cities, live feeds of traffic conditions, and detailed car, subway, and walking routes.

DRIVING DIRECTIONS

VIAMICHELIN.COM

Get suggested routes for 61 countries around the world (24 in Europe) along with estimates about what you'll spend on gas and tolls. New technology sends the route directly to your GPS, and distances are available in both kilometers and miles.

NAVIGATE MAJOR U.S. TRANSIT SYSTEMS

HOPSTOP.COM

A simple search yields point-to-point bus, subway, and taxi directions in six major U.S. cities. Helpful extras include trip cost, expected travel time, and amount of walking en route.

VACATION RENTALS

FLIPKEY.COM

All 50,000-plus listings feature photos, Google-powered maps, and ratings and reviews from previous renters.

DESTINATION IDEAS

TRIPBASE.COM

Plug in when you want to go and how much you want to spend on your next vacation, and Tripbase will identify a handful of destinations that match your needs. Each will include an overview of the city, average flight and hotel costs, and expected weather.

SHIP LUGGAGE IN ADVANCE

LUGGAGECONCIERGE.COM

With fees for checking bags on the rise, this site's service is comparatively reasonable: between New York and California, it's \$96 for a small duffel (40 pounds) to \$140 for a large upright (70 pounds). T+L Tip: it takes two to six business days for the bags to arrive domestically, and seven to 10 days internationally. +

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