

So you're thinking about going to Europe and you wonder how much to budget? And how to get the best price? Here are some tips and guidelines that I have learned from 30 years of working in the travel industry.

For many years as both a teacher and travel agent, I taught students and clients that the single most important way to get the best airfare was to book it and purchase it as far in advance as possible. *That's an old rule that has changed.* In recent years, especially since the events of September 11th, the airlines have been offering reduced rates closer to departure date, and as improved computer programs allow them to analyze which flights, cities and even regions have more empty seats, it's now not uncommon to find an airline sale 3 weeks to 2 months before your planned trip. *The point is not that you should wait until 3 weeks before purchasing your ticket, rather that you no longer have to buy it 9 months in advance.*

Here is a specific sale to look out for (I buy my own personal travel tickets during this sale almost every year); it's the British Airways "Winter Seat Sale", which can be announced anytime between late January and early March for travel through the summer months. Prices that may be posted high in the time around the December holidays are often 35 – 50% lower during this sale. In this case, purchasing your summer travel tickets 4 – 6 months in advance *is* advisable. Many times when one airline offers this sale others will follow, so it's a good time of year to keep your ears open for sales.

Destinations and routes that have lots of competition (numerous airlines and flights) almost always offer better airfares, in some cases there are very significant price differences. One good example is London's Heathrow Airport. There are dozens of flights every day on excellent airlines to Heathrow from many North American cities, such as Seattle, San Francisco, Los Angeles, Minneapolis, New York, Philadelphia, Washington, Toronto, Vancouver, and etc. Here's how you can use those low costs to your advantage:

Always check the airfare with more than one airline, and let's say you call them and they say your ticket from Podunk to Heathrow is \$1,500 round trip in economy. You gulp, and then ask them how much it is from (fill in the blank with your closest large city) to London and they say \$500. You then call that local commuter or discount airline that offers seats to the large hub for \$300 round trip, and you have saved yourself \$700. (But when I say check with more than one airline, that means checking with them for a round trip ticket; one way tickets are almost always a lot more money). Think broadly when exploring: ask the international airline where their best deals are from in North America. If that's an East Coast city see if there is a commuter carrier that can get you there inexpensively.

The major airlines will not offer to do that trip for you in two tickets because they want to make more money. Your best ally in this case is still a good Travel Agent. There numbers have been decimated by the airlines deliberate campaign to eliminate them, but if there is still one near you, try them. They now have to charge for issuing airline tickets because the airlines no longer compensate them, but the cost is usually worth while – it will save you time and aggravation in trying to reach the airlines.

There's another trap that you want to avoid: leaving too little connecting time between your flight from Podunk to Chicago and the connecting flight to London. *Never ever allow less than 3 hours for the connection if you put together two tickets to get you there.* If you book your ticket all the way through with one airline and aren't using two tickets, they will book you on a legal connecting time. Even then I often ask them to start me off on an earlier flight as a precaution. *Think about it this way: if you are going on a holiday that is already paid for and perhaps is only 12 days long, do you really want to miss a day or two because you didn't take an earlier flight the morning of departure?*

So you live near a major airport, but you need to get to a smaller airport within Britain or Europe: you can use the two ticket method to save yourself money at that end. For example you live near New York and you want to get to Inverness, Scotland. You call the airlines who say "that will be \$1200 please". So using the premise the above, ask them how much to get to London? They say \$500. And you ask how much is a ticket from London

to Inverness round trip? \$150. Hmm, sounds like you may have just saved yourself \$550! Some airlines will not sell tickets to you that way, so again you may want to visit a travel agent.

Here's an example from one of my tours in 2003 and 2004: the Northern Lights trip begins in Inverness and finishes in Aberdeen. Do you have to race back to Inverness to catch your flight to London, and thence homewards? *No!* You can ask the travel agent to issue the ticket within Britain to read: London to Inverness, then a blank section of no value, and then resume your return ticket in Aberdeen back to London. It's perfectly legal, and is called an "*Open Jaw*" ticket. I have used it to save folks money for many years.

The premise behind an open jaw ticket can work for most other places within Europe, as long as the distance between the two points is not a very great one. For example, it's not uncommon to have a ticket read in to Amsterdam but return from Paris, or into Paris and out of Rome, etc. The general rule is that the distance between the two points must be less than either of the two flights, so for example leaving an open jaw between Moscow and Madrid would not work because it's longer from Moscow to Madrid than it is from say New York to Madrid. In cases like these it's best to check with a travel agent.

These are some of the formulas I use in booking travel. And you know what? Sometimes the option of a non stop flight for a major part of my trip carries so much appeal that I splurge. Ultimately, every decision about travel comes down to a choice between time & convenience vs. money...

I hope this helps you!

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