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COMMENTARY

Sites find deals for flying abroad

Sunday, October 14, 2007 4:15 AM

BY ED PERKINS

Internet entrepreneurs never stop refining their approaches to selling travel. Here's a look at two newer sites.



Vayama (www.vayama.com)

and cFares (www.cfares.com) offer similar procedures for finding airfares. For international travel, both claim to search published fares and consolidator discount fares. With either, you enter the usual trip parameters -- origins, destinations, dates and class of service. Both then search for and display the best available deals.

cFares presents the most comprehensive screen display, including a graphic matrix of fare vs. departure times. It also displays the lowest prices it finds on competitive sites, as well as good schedule data. cFares offers a \$50 membership option that sometimes provides even lower fares.

Vayama takes a lot less time than cFares to display its results, and its presentation of base fares and taxes is more straightforward. But its main display is a map of your route -- not very useful.

I recently tested both on a few sample round-trips in mid-October and found relatively few differences.

Both provided essentially the same result for New York to London: Delta at \$353 plus tax in economy class, SilverJet at \$1,776 in business class. For some reason, in business class, Vayama searched MaxJet, but cFares did not.

Each presented a different "lowest price" for Los Angeles to London in economy. cFares gave American at \$704 (or Air New Zealand at \$660 for paid members), both for nonstop flights. Vayama reported one-stop connections on US Airways, at \$631 plus tax.

Although neither features domestic travel, I tried Boston to San Francisco. Vayama displayed \$296 plus tax; cFares didn't price that trip at all. Neither presented the option to search for alternatives from Manchester or Providence on Southwest.

Neither allows for a search of premium economy fares on any route.

It's too early to declare a clear winner. If you're interested, give both a chance on your next

trip or two.

American Express announced two new features for its Membership Rewards program: New "flightfinder" search capability for air trips and "hotelfinder" for accommodations that can be booked with frequent-flier miles. Membership Rewards members log onto www.membershiprewards.com, click on "travel" and then go to the "finder" menu.

The idea is great: Although American Express points can be transferred into more than a dozen airline and hotel programs, until now you had to search each program individually to see whether a seat or room was available. So the ability to search all the options for seats or rooms before you transfer is attractive.

Unfortunately, the program is barely off the ground. So far, the only participating airline is AirTran, only for coach seats, and only for single travel dates -- you can't ask, for example, for a round-trip in February.

Two other sites provide some interesting browsing.

Kayak (www.kayak.com) has mounted a new weekend airfare feature with lots of flexibility in dates and times. It worked well in my test.

Tvtrip (www.tvtrip.com) provides TV views of hotels in 12 major cities in Europe. Hotel coverage is fair -- 24 in London, for example -- but far from comprehensive. Aside from an annoying soundtrack, the displays are useful for checking a hotel.

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