



CONSUMER TRAVEL : Online international travel sites take flight

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Hopeful Internet entrepreneurs never stop innovating their approaches to selling travel — and the established sites keep evolving to compete. Here's a quick look at some of the newer startups and what they offer.

Internet prowlers are especially focused on airfares, and it's no surprise that so many sites focus on airfare searches. Two new startups — cFares (www.cfares.com) and Vayama (www.vayama.com) — offer similar claims and procedures.

Both in international travel, they 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. Although each presents a distinct “look and feel,” I see relatively few important differences:

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 and offers a membership option for \$ 50 a year that sometimes provides even lower fares, plus a few other features.

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 feature is a map of your route — pretty, maybe, but not very useful.

I recently tested both on a few sample round-trips in mid-October, in economy and business class, and I found relatively few differences:

Both provided essentially the same result for New York to London, in economy, Delta at \$ 353 plus tax, in business class, SilverJet at \$ 1, 776. 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 onestop connections on US Airways, at \$ 631 plus tax.

Although neither feature 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.

Overall, 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 you can book 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: As you know, you can transfer AmEx points into more than a dozen airline and hotel programs, but until now, you had to search each program individually to see if you could find a seat or room.

And if you've tried that recently, you know what a struggle it can be — especially for scarce frequent-flier seats. So the ability to search all the options for seats or rooms before you transfer is extremely attractive. Bravo to AmEx for a great idea.

Unfortunately, it's barely off the ground. So far, the only participating airline program you can search is AirTran, only for coach seats, and only for single travel dates — you can't ask, for example, for a round-trip any time in February. For now, the "finders" are little more than demonstrations. We'll probably have to wait a while for a robust program that will really help us find seats among all partners. 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 you might want to consider in Europe. For starters, it covers 12 major cities. Hotel coverage is fair — 24 in London, for example — a good start, but far from comprehensive. Aside from an annoying soundtrack, the displays are useful for checking a hotel. Send e-mail to Ed Perkins at:

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