

ONLINE TRAVELER

New Web sites help save money and time

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While the usual virtual haunts remain available 24/7 for basic trip research and booking, a bevy of new and interesting Web sites are tailored to very specific travel needs. Among them:

www.yapta.com Did you know that most airlines offer a refund or travel credit when fares drop below the price of a ticket purchased at an airline's Web site? Well, the folks behind "Your Amazing Personal Travel Assistant" do, and they've set out to help time-strapped travelers recapture these lost dollars. Simply download the "beta" version of their software platform off of the Yapta.com Web site, and the Yapta "Tagger" will constantly monitor fares for every ticket you enter at the site. Information can be entered regarding tickets that have already been purchased or other tickets of interest -- in either case Yapta will notify you by e-mail every time the price drops on one of your "tagged" tickets (often these price dips last no more than a couple of hours). The beauty of the service is that so long as you contact the airline while prices are at the lower level, you get the refund or travel credit even if prices spike back up above your initial purchase price.

www.boardfirst.com Sticking to the simple-is-better theme, BoardFirst also does one thing and one thing only -- it helps Southwest Airline fliers ensure that they obtain the coveted "Group A" boarding status for their flight. For the rather reasonable price of \$5 a ticket, you no longer have to wait in front of your computer until exactly 24 hours prior to departure of your Southwest flight to gain admission to the first-to-board club. Simply enter your flight information into BoardFirst's system at least two days prior to travel, and their travel wizard activates at just the right time to secure a Group A ticket.

www.tvtrip.com Ever find yourself drooling over a set of dreamy pictures posted at a hotel's Web site only to find nightmarish conditions upon arrival? Forewarned is forearmed, and TVTrip is designed to do just that for travelers who don't like unpleasant surprises. Pay a visit to this site before blindly dragging your family to another unknown resort, as there's a decent chance you'll find useful videos of the rooms, lobby, facade and surrounding areas in TVTrip's ever-expanding inventory of filmed properties. Independence allows TVTrip to offer honest and unedited moving depictions of properties around the world, which in turn allows would-be visitors to look before they buy.

Two vacation rental sites: If you believe statisticians and travel pundits (and why wouldn't you?), the market for renting vacation homes has entered the boom stage. This corner of the Web is already a bit on the crowded side, yet simple (there's that word again), worthwhile options are always a welcome addition. Check out www.pickpackgo.com for the ultimate in customer friendly. Click on your state of choice, peruse photographs and descriptions of vacation rental properties that meet your requirements, and book through their online inquiry system. Also worth a look is www.rentalo.com, which, due to its one-year head-start on PickPackGo, offers a bit more in the way of listings. However, the pages at Rentalo tend to be on the cluttered side, and vacation rentals are mixed in with hotels and bed-and-breakfasts.

www.tripology.com Tripology's mere existence proves that reports of the demise of the once ubiquitous travel agent have been greatly exaggerated. The sheer number of Internet travel planning sites can be daunting for even the most tech-savvy among us, which (somewhat ironically) has created a growing demand for knowledgeable travel agents. Tripology's mission is to match consumers with specialized travel agents who can assist in planning non-cookie-cutter trips. Fill out a detailed trip request at the site's home page, and the Tripology algorithm matches you with one or more travel agents with matching expertise.