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YOUR MONEY-When booking travel online, it pays to shop around

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Monday, 8 Jun 2015 | 10:00 AM ET

(The author is a Reuters contributor. The opinions expressed are his own.)

June 8 (Reuters) - When Christel Shea was trying to book a trip from Providence, Rhode Island to Greenville, South Carolina a couple of weeks ago, it took more than one online search for her to identify that the best buy was to fly into Charlotte, North Carolina and rent a car for the hour-long drive.

Shea, managing director of the group tour research site [TourMatters.com](http://tourmatters.com) (<http://tourmatters.com>), used a combination of Google Flights (<https://google.com/flights/>) and Bing Travel (<https://bing.com/explore/travel>), and then eventually booked through American Airlines because you cannot book directly through Google.

Her experience highlighted some important elements of travel searches: Being flexible can pay off, not only with dates but with destinations. And just as in retail, it pays to shop around because not all travel sites offer the same options.

Given the number of overlapping specialty search tools available, getting from research to the point of pulling the trigger and buying a ticket is a potentially endless pursuit for consumers.

Here are six travel tips from experts to make the most of your search time:

1. Set the timer for 15 minutes

It should not take you hours. "At what point is it worth going further to save a dollar?" says travel expert Russell Hannon of Breakthetravelbarrier.com.

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2. Pick a spread of sites

Most travel sites employ one or more of three massive airfare search databases - ITA, Amadeus, and Travelfusion - but all get different results depending on their focus.

For the best success, Hannon suggests using combo of Google Flights, Skyscanner (<http://skyscanner.com/>) and Kayak (<http://kayak.com/>).

Among other recommended sites by travel bloggers and experts: Hipmunk (<https://hipmunk.com/>), Hopper (<http://hopper.com/>), Momondo (<http://momondo.com/>), AirfareWatchdog (<http://www.airfarewatchdog.com/>) and Yapta (<http://yapta.com/>).

3. Look for special deals

Some sites do more than just aggregate pricing information. Online travel agencies like Expedia (<http://www.expedia.com>), Travelocity (<http://www.travelocity.com/>) and Orbitz (<http://www.orbitz.com/>) may have special pricing and loyalty incentives. But they can also add booking fees, and critics also say they do not present consumers with as many options.

Hannon adds that the online travel agencies also tend to place stricter terms and conditions on purchases made through them, potentially making changing flights more costly and cumbersome.

Going direct to an airline can be better, says Sheila Scarborough, co-founder of Tourism Currents (<http://www.tourismcurrents.com>). "Too often, intermediaries wash their hands of any responsibility once you've booked."

4. Go rogue

It might be cheapest to book a flight to a destination you have no intention of visiting. On Skiplagged (<https://skiplagged.com/>), you can find a deal using a less-accepted means like booking a multi-leg trip but getting off at the first stop (the real destination) because it is actually cheaper. United Airlines sued the start-up and its 22-year-old founder for selling travel that is "strictly prohibited," but the case was dismissed in May on a technicality.

5. Future shop

Some sites offer predictive pricing, which will give you a sense as to whether the prices are worth paying right now.

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For instance, Kayak notes for shoppers to either "Buy" or "Wait." Hopper will produce a report on a particular route, forecasting whether prices are rising or falling and make recommendations, such as the least expensive days of the week to fly.

On Google Flights, you can see what that same flight would cost on any day for most of the year ahead or tweak the number of days of the trip to see how that would alter pricing.

6. Set alerts

Many sites have deal alert features that will email or text you when prices drop on certain routes or simply when there is a great deal. Among the sites focused on alerts are Airfarewatchdog, Farecompare (<http://farecompare.com>) and GetFlyr (<http://getflyr.com/>).

It can lead to some great adventures. In the middle of May, Kyle Stewart, travel editor of [UPGRD.com](http://upgrd.com/) (<http://upgrd.com/>), got an alert on DealRay (<http://dealray.com>) of a \$450 roundtrip flight between Washington, D.C., and Beijing, China. So, he decided to fly there at the end of May with his wife and daughter for a long weekend, and was thrilled that he did.

"The highlight of the trip was getting on a train for less than \$1 for a 70-minute journey into the rolling hills just outside of Beijing," Stewart says. "We took a cable car ride to the Great Wall and walked it with our daughter."

(Editing by Beth Pinsker and Alan Crosby)

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