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HOW TO ARRANGE YOUR AIRFARE IN CONJUNCTION WITH AN INTERNATIONAL TOUR.

“Don’t confuse your travel agent with God”.

- Kenneth R. Morgan – American writer

We are deadly serious when it comes to selecting the best air schedules for our valued clients. Nothing is funny about lousy air schedules with punishing layovers or cancelled vacations that result in huge financial debits. The matter of how best to arrange airline tickets is a confusing subject to many travelers. So let’s look at the options and try to select the very best scenario for your tour next vacation abroad:

HOW SHOULD I BOOK THE AIR IF I AM BOOKING A TOUR?

If you are planning a tour booked through a major company like Globus, American Express, Pleasant Hawaii, etc. you will likely have two choices. You can have your agent book the air or you can go with the tour operator’s air program. In the case of tours, an air schedule is generally available within one week of making the reservation. If you are traveling to Europe and have booked a tour, your agent will be faxed a likely air schedule.

Here’s the problem. The tour operator has no interest in finding you the best air routing; they are interested in keeping their costs down. Many of the most popular budget tour operators such as Globus, Trafalger, and Insight, maintain tour prices at less than \$125 per day. That doesn’t leave a lot for inflated air tickets. That’s why you might see an air schedule to Paris, for example, that takes you through New York or St. Louis via TWA, even though non-stop air to Paris on United, American, and Air France is available from Chicago.

The up side is that you will generally receive your air schedule in plenty of time to cancel the air and do it independently through your agent. Here are a few things to understand about the process:

The vast majority of tour brochures list prices on a “land-only” basis.

This means that air is additional. This is helpful for those using frequent flyer miles to know the exact cost of their vacation.

Many brochures also offer inclusive air and tour rates assuming you are leaving from New York:

It would, of course, be impossible to list separate airfares from all US cities. So many brochures with tours to Europe just list the airfare from New York. Your agent will then add in something called an “air add-on”, which is a supplemental charge for those traveling on the tour out of Chicago.

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For tours to the Orient or the South Pacific, it is common for travel brochures to list an air-inclusive price out of Los Angeles or San Francisco. You would then be charged an “air add-on” out of Chicago.

Understand how tour companies select air schedules from Chicago and other major cities:

Every tour operator, except those in the ultra-deluxe category like Travcoa or Abercrombie & Kent, tries to negotiate the lowest airfare. So-called “contract carriers” are selected from each major gateway. The contracts signed between a tour operator and an airline often give the airline the right to assign specific flights. So even though the non-stop flight from Chicago may have available seats, an airline may require you to change planes because the value it will receive for that ticket is less than the price it can receive selling the non-stop flight to individuals instead of a tour operator. Make no mistake about it, tour companies are under absolutely no obligation to provide passage on the “most convenient” flights. Their only responsibility is to fly you to the destination – one way or another.

The quality of the tour operator usually dictates the expense they are willing to absorb to see to it that their customers are not routed poorly. But do not expect your travel agent to have any influence on the selection of flights. That is between the tour operator and the airline.

Expect an air schedule within one week of making your reservation:

If the tour company does not have its air routing/carriers selected, it will provide your travel agent with a “likely” routing based on previous operation of the program.

The Best Strategy:

Once the tour company has provided its air schedule, your travel agent will prepare an “air analysis” for your vacation, laying out the benefits and negatives associated with the tour operators air schedule. In fact, you may be better off arranging your air independently.

One question to ask concerns transfers between the airport and your first night hotel. Most tour operators do not provide transfers unless you buy their air program. However, it is often possible to purchase the transfers once you have provided your air schedule.

But be careful:

If you have booked your air through the tour operator and taken out the tour operators travel insurance; weather and equipment delays will usually be covered. If you make your own air arrangements, you are on your own if you are unable to meet the group on the first day of the tour.

WHY NOT ALWAYS BOOK THE AIR YOURSELF? ISN'T IT BETTER TO SELECT YOUR OWN FLIGHTS?

Let's suppose your tour of Europe begins in Paris and ends in Rome. That means that you will have to fly into one country to begin your tour and fly home from another country. That makes it difficult to purchase a round-trip ticket. Quite

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often, in fact in the vast majority of cases, the tour operator is going to provide a fare that you cannot match independently. This will be a tour-based fare that either uses two airlines or uses connections on the same airline to get you where you want to go.

On some itineraries that begin in one country and end in another, you will actually have to buy two one way fares if you do your own air. This gets prohibitively expensive.

The Best Strategy:

If you are taking a tour that is round-trip from the same city, do ask your agent to investigate the options of purchasing your airline ticket directly.

Make certain that you fully understand the concept of "internal air". This means that the tour company is holding space on flights that are a part of the tour and are, therefore, vital to book on your behalf. If, for instance, you are traveling to East Africa, the internal flights might be priced along with the international air ticket. Do your own air and you lose the internal flights. They will have to be booked separately by your agent.

But Be Careful:

If you do the air yourself and not through the tour operator, you have to be prepared for schedule changes or flight cancellations. These are your responsibility – the tour company will not do anything to help.

So the bottom line – Use the tour operator's air and you will probably save money, receive complimentary transfers to and from your hotel, and get some assurance that the tour will wait for you should the air schedule be delayed.

Do the air yourself and you will probably pay more, but you will be able to select the routing and the aircraft type of your choice. But if anything goes wrong – don't expect the cavalry to come to your aid.

Several of the world's largest tour operators have told us that at least 75% of the consumer complaints that they receive have to do with getting passengers to and from the tour gateway. By understanding how the system works, you will be better prepared to handle any decisions that have to be made when you book your vacation.

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