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AIR STRATEGIES YOU NEED TO KNOW

This week I would like to continue our ongoing discussion of the strategies you will need to use when dealing with the complicated subject of airline pricing. You need to approach this matter fully armed, prepared to do battle.

Do Discount tickets require that you fly one airline the entire route?

Usually but not always. In the case of special “add-on” fares to an international destination you are often allowed to fly on shuttle or commuter flights. Your ticket agent may also be able to arrange “code share” flights. These are flights that are in the airline computers by contractual agreement between two different airlines who have agreed that they will share their planes on specified routes.

What about flying from the United States to Europe. Is it possible to make a stop in another U.S. city before going on to Europe?

This is always a bad idea. The bottom line is that it will always cost you several hundred dollars more than the least expensive round-trip ticket. If a stopover is something you feel you must do, you may want to try combining two round-trips. Do look at American and TWA. They will sometimes have a stopover option in New York en route to Europe. The surcharge is quite reasonable.

Is there a way to stopover in Europe without paying a fortune?

Many European airlines such as KLM Royal Dutch Airlines or Air France, will allow you to stopover in their hub city in Europe en route to somewhere else. They are anxious to have you visit their country because you will spend some money and you may want to return some day. So, if you're flying to Rome, a stopover en route need not cost a great deal.

Some sophisticated European travelers will book flights on a single international carrier with the idea of misconnecting,. This means that you will have to spend the night in the European city where you first deplane because you have arrived too late to make a flight out to your final destination on the same day. Many airlines will actually pay for your hotel room during a misconnect even if it deliberate.

What about charter flights? Aren't they less expensive?

Charters do have generally lower operating costs than most scheduled flights. Certainly, some charter companies are more reliable than others. But you mustn't assume that these charter flights are always “risky”. There are charter companies that have been in business for twenty years or so, and provide generally better service than the scheduled carriers. On the other hand, charters that are not well funded and that don't use modern equipment should be avoided at all costs.

Can you still find great deals flying as an air courier?

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Yes. But this is a very spontaneous way to travel and is totally inappropriate for most people. With that said, if you are content traveling alone, have a totally flexible schedule, and really love travel bargains, this might be for you.

Here's the basic deal. When you travel as an air courier you are giving up your right to check baggage in exchange for a sharply reduced airline ticket. You are allowed to bring one carry-on bag - that's it. The courier company uses your checked baggage allowance for packages being shipped overseas to their clients.

I want to make sure that you understand that there is nothing illegal or even suspicious about this practice. You don't need to even worry about what you are transporting. Courier companies face very strict federal legislation. In the vast majority of cases you are actually carrying documents that are extremely time-sensitive. The transport company cannot afford to have them held up in customs.

When you serve as an air courier you have certain responsibilities. You will be given an actual contract. Once you are booked on a flight, with a signed contract, your airfare is non-refundable. Some courier companies require that you pay a deposit fee, which is given back when you return home. Other companies charge a registration fee.

So what happens once you accept an assignment as an air courier? You will be asked to show up at the airport two to three hours before your flight is scheduled to depart. The representative from the air courier company will meet you and turn over your air ticket and any customs documents you will need when you land. On arrival, you will be met by another representative who will assist you through customs formalities. You will then go through the entire process on your return flight.

The public is under the impression that air couriers fly for free. In fact discounts of 50-60% are most typical. The best deals are in the off season to less popular destinations such as the former capitals of eastern Europe, or South America. About one out of every ten air courier trips is offered on a "no charge" basis.

Most of the trips are set up to give you one week at your destination but I've seen others that allow up to a month's stay. You are generally flown on major airlines in economy class. Best of all, you can earn mileage for these flights even though you are paying far less than any other passenger.

The growth of Federal Express pretty much eliminated the availability of domestic air courier routes. But many flights exist to the major business centers of Europe, Asia, and South America. New York, Miami, Los Angeles, and San Francisco are the major air courier departure points, but flights often leave from Chicago and there is some current good availability for couriers with access to O'Hare.

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Two companies, Now Voyager and Discount Travel International, both based in New York, serve as clearing houses for air courier companies throughout the U.S. Call Now Voyager at (212-431-1616) and you will be able to listen to an automated hotline that lists special fares and last-minute deals. The last time I called, I could have flown to Copenhagen for \$150 round-trip the following day. It would have cost me my marriage - but I would have saved a lot of airfare.

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