



more comprehensive booking service known as [www.Orbitz.com](http://www.Orbitz.com) that will go into full operation in June. But even before that happens, you can use ITAsoftware—as many smart travel agents are already doing—to improve your chances of always finding the lowest available published fare.

### WILL A NEW TECHNOLOGY VANQUISH THE OLD?

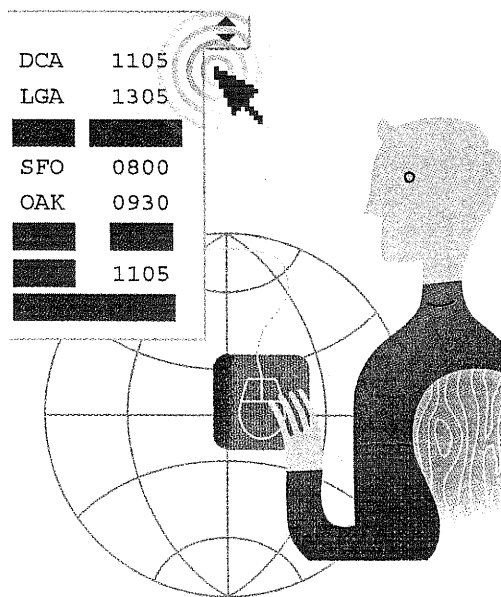
ITAsoftware.com and its eventual commercial application, [www.Orbitz.com](http://www.Orbitz.com), make their appearance at a time of increasing concern about the impartiality of the two dominant airfare booking engines, Travelocity and Expedia, which together have more than 70 percent of the online market for booking airfares. In a scathing report issued in October 2000 by the prestigious Consumers Union, both of the big travel Web sites (and two lesser ones) were cited for suspicions (not yet firm conclusions) of frequent bias; they do not always, according to the Union, impartially set forth the lowest fare or the best itinerary; in the Union's words, they do not consistently offer "complete and fair listings of all viable flights." The same claim was made several months earlier in congressional testimony by the president of Orbitz, longtime airline official Jeffrey Katz.

The booking engines for both Travelocity and Expedia are based on CRS ("computer reservations systems") technologies developed in the 1970s and scornfully referred to as "clunky" by executives at Orbitz. Though the Department of Transportation has issued several half-hearted rules for requiring the CRS services to be unbiased, those regulations do not apply to online use of the same systems. And the people at Orbitz make constant reference to their suspicion that both Travelocity and Expedia offer preferred positions on their site to suppliers that pay for the privilege; you agree to become a sponsor, and in exchange, the Web site "moves market share," according to Orbitz's angry young men. The very same suspicions have been voiced by others in the field.

Several low-cost airlines do not appear

at all on Expedia, according to our own examination of it.

A quick test of Travelocity reveals what appear to be questionable practices. Click to obtain an airfare, and you will sometimes be shown only the fare offered by an airline "featured" for that itinerary ("Travelocity.com is featuring the following airline..."). Only if you persist in demanding a broader choice will you then be given another dozen-or-so choices from a limited list of carriers. And yet, according to Consumers Union, even the broader list of flights continues to be "dominat-



According to the prestigious Consumers Union, none of the current airfare Web sites offers "complete and fair listings of all viable flights"

ed" on numerous occasions, in their words, by the advertised airline.

Travelocity denies this. Claiming its displays are non-biased, the Texas-based firm has recently announced it will retain an independent auditor to perform a statistical study of its cost-effectiveness. (Our own random and unscientific comparisons of responses from Travelocity and ITAsoftware to the same itinerary requests has usually resulted in lower fares from ITAsoftware.) As for Expedia, it has not yet—to our knowledge—disputed Consumers Union, though we can't say with certainty that it hasn't.

### 1] ENTER ITASOFTWARE.COM AND ORBITZ.COM FOR PUBLISHED FARES

ITAsoftware was developed over a period of several years in the late 1990s by doctoral students enrolled in the Artificial Intelligence Lab of M.I.T. Their goal: a brand-new, totally comprehensive and radically improved search engine for airfares that would literally canvass hundreds of thousands (even, on occasion, millions) of price and itinerary options for a single trip, and then display hundreds of them in a logical sequence. When you use ITAsoftware, you usually see at least 30 times the number of fares you'd obtain from Travelocity or Expedia, and on a large number of airlines, all set forth quite clearly, in unimpeachable fashion, and—so it's claimed—fairly and impartially.

But ITAsoftware merely advises about the existence of various fares; it does not reveal whether seats at those price levels are still available on particular flights, nor does it book a flight for you. For that latter service, you will need to await the final version of Orbitz.com, which has licensed the ITAsoftware technology and will go into full operation this June. Presently in its beta testing mode, Orbitz is owned by five airlines: United, American, Delta, Northwest, and Continental. When it was first announced about a year ago, it was initially named "T2," which insiders took to mean "Terminating Travelocity." (They

could also have called it "E2" for "Extinguishing Expedia.")

T2, later renamed Orbitz, was violently attacked in Congress and before the regulatory authorities by its competitors, who claimed its five airline-owners would monopolize the online market for selling airfares. Because of those sensitive antitrust issues, Orbitz has repeatedly insisted that its information will be utterly impartial and from all participating airlines (an additional 23 have thus far joined as associates). But it is clear that the five giant owners of Orbitz have no intention of sharing the huge income from online airfares with

upstarts like Travelocity or Expedia.

June is the date; pending that start-up, you can access a beta version of Orbitz.com or simply go to ITAsoftware.com for answers to your airfare questions. The heavily funded Orbitz will obviously become a major source of airfare information.

## 2] ENTER HOTWIRE.COM FOR DISCOUNT FARES

If Orbitz.com is meant to terminate Travelocity and extinguish Expedia, then the new Hotwire.com was designed to pummel Priceline.com and finish off Expedia's Flight Price Matcher. Hotwire is another airline-owned site (American, America West, Continental, Northwest Airlines, United, and US Airways) created in response to the popular "name-your-own-price" systems for purchasing secretly discounted airfares. The wrinkle introduced by Hotwire.com is that the responsibility for naming an acceptable price does not fall on the passenger, who too often is utterly unable to guess how low the airlines will go. Rather, using Hotwire.com, passengers name the dates and itineraries in which they are interested, and the airlines then respond with a discount price they are willing to accept. If the price is an agreeable one, the individual supplies a credit card number and only then learns the identity of the airline, the time of the flight, and so on.

Says Hotwire: "Once you've decided when and where to go, we challenge our airline partners to make their best discount offer. We'll show you the winning low price instantly—with no obligation to buy...At Hotwire, the airlines can offer their best discounts when they pick the times, and don't have to reveal their name to the public—just to the individual customer after a booking has been made."

Hotwire.com is now in full operation and is already being heavily used, although its success in the long run is as yet unknown. Certainly, the fact that it is owned

by several big airlines would seem to make it a powerful contender. Click on Hotwire.com to test the new approach.

## 3] OTHER TRAVEL DOT-COM'S WITH INFLUENTIAL CONNECTIONS

Travelocity, Expedia, Priceline, Orbitz, and Hotwire are given a hard battle by Lowestfare.com, Cheaptickets.com, Lowairfare.com, and Lastminutetravel.com. Lowestfare.com, owned by financier Carl Icahn, has the immense advantage of a long-term contract with TWA, enabling it to sell any TWA fare at a considerable discount. For almost all domestic flights, or flights overseas on TWA routes, you will



ITAsoftware.com, Orbitz.com, and Hotwire.com are all significant developments in the continual quest for low airfares

be well advised to see if Lowestfare.com can undercut all the mighty, contending Web sites we've named. (Icahn has a growing number of special deals with carriers other than TWA, as well.) It should be noted, at the same time, that TWA tends to dominate the listings carried on Lowestfare.com, according to Consumers Union. As for Cheaptickets.com, it was among the very first of the big, nationwide airfare discounters, and both its longevity (almost 15 years) and long-standing relationships with several carriers give it an edge in many instances. It should always be contacted for a quote, and it can be reached not simply on the Web but by phone at 800/377-1000. Finally, increasingly popular Lowairfare.com is well fi-

nanced and headed by travel entrepreneur Peter Sontag, who has created many immense travel organizations in his career.

## 4] THE TELEPHONE DISCOUNTERS

For the large number of people who find the Internet uncomfortable or inferior when compared to normal phone calls, the search for a low airfare should not overlook such telephone-based companies (though some have Web sites, too) as Travel Bargains (800/AIR-FARE), 1-800/FLY-CHEAP, and 800/CHEAP-AIR, all of them quite effective in reducing the cost of both domestic and international flights. And then there are the specialists, who are rarely undercut to the destinations of their expertise (that's because they have very special and close relationships with a small number of carriers servicing those destinations). To Asia, around the world, and along the Pacific Rim, TicketPlanet at 800/799-8888 or [www.Ticketplanet.com](http://www.Ticketplanet.com) is extremely effective and boldly trumpets in its ads that its flights to the Far East are considerably cheaper than Travelocity's or Expedia's. For flights to Europe, Travac (800/872-8800) and Council Travel (800/226-8624) are effective, as is UKConsolidated (800/577-2900) to England. For the capitals of Eastern Europe, try Sophisticated Travelers at 800/801-1055, Budapest Travel at 800/928-3273, or Nova Travel at 818/222-8300; for India try Hari World at 888/889-2968; to Central and South America, phone Pino Welcome Travel at 800/247-6578 or Solar Tours at 800/388-7652; for Africa, call Magical Holidays at 800/228-2208 or Premier Travel at 800/545-1910; for Japan phone Kintetsu Travel at 800/225-5543; and for Israel, phone Picasso Travel at 212/244-5454.

But in the meantime, take a look at ITAsoftware.com, Orbitz.com, and Hotwire.com; each is a significant development in the endless quest for low airfares. □

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