

# One-Stop Shopping For Airline Tickets

Founded by a staffer at the MIT Artificial Intelligence Lab, startup ITA Software claims to have a better way to book travel online. **BY MICHAEL SHAPIRO** CAMBRIDGE, MASS.

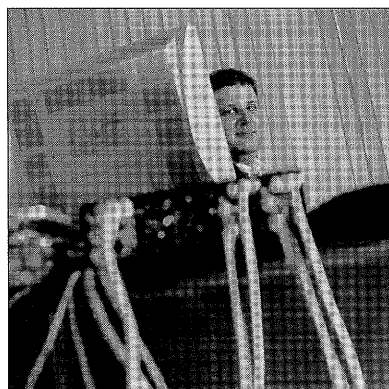
**F**ROM THE TIME COMPU SERVE PUT Sabre's computer reservation system online in 1987, wired travelers have been asking the same question: Is there one place I can search that offers all the available options for flights and prices?

Given the confoundingly complex way air itineraries are arranged and priced, the answer has never been a resounding yes. Web-based travel agencies have made it easier to get a sense of multiple options. But sites like Preview Travel and Expedia don't let travelers easily evaluate some useful but complex options — all airports within 50 miles of a particular destination, for example.

ITA Software thinks it has solved the problem. Founded by Jeremy Wertheimer of the MIT Artificial Intelligence Lab, the Cambridge, Mass.-based company has created a new way to access the hundreds of millions of possible airline and airfare combinations — and to respond to complex queries in seconds. Rather than simply trying to put a consumer-friendly veneer on a standard reservation system, ITA gathers data from the same places the computerized reservation system gets it, then organizes it more intuitively.

The ITA system, now in beta testing, offers a range of options not commonly found on other travel sites. For one, it allows visitors to see information from alternative airports within a specified distance of first choice. Fliers can also choose flexible dates for travel — up to two days — to find cheaper fares.

Another feature of the system is its sophisticated ability to sort the results



Wertheimer: Ready for takeoff.

of a search. The best deal for a nonstop flight from San Francisco to Chicago might be listed as \$286, but travelers willing to make one stop could get a \$198 fare. Or a traveler might see that the best deal is on United, but that American Airlines is only \$11 more; if the traveler wants to get frequent-flier miles on American, he might choose the higher fare. Other online travel agencies can provide the same data but ITA's system makes it easier to find.

Suzi LeVine, Expedia's product manager, notes that in some big cities Expedia lets users search all major airports simultaneously. And though users can't specify precise times, they can search for every morning or afternoon flight with one click.

What makes ITA unique is the ease with which people can match their preferences and the number of options it can display for each query. Consider a trip from San Francisco to Phoenix: A traveler can instruct ITA to consider all flights leaving SFO or airports within

75 miles between 8 and 10 a.m. Dec. 9 and returning from Phoenix or other airports within 50 miles between 3 and 7 p.m. Dec. 16. The results show the lowest fare by airline, by number of stops and by time of day.

ITA, with a staff of 10, intends to launch its airline booking service in January or February. But its business model is up in the air: Wertheimer isn't sure whether ITA will join forces with an existing travel company or fly solo. It already has licensed some of its technology to Amadeus, an airline reservations system that acquired a 20 percent stake in the company last year as part of a deal. Asked if Amadeus is the leading suitor, Wertheimer says, "There are lots of conversations going on. ... I'm in a different city every day." Madrid-based Amadeus is 75 percent-owned by Air France, Iberia and Lufthansa.

Wertheimer became interested in airfares in 1992 while studying artificial intelligence at MIT. Thomas Cook, one of the world's leading travel services, had offices in Cambridge, and he became fascinated by the Sabre reservation system used by the company. To Wertheimer, Sabre seemed an automated version of a cumbersome manual process. "I'd been building tools for optimization," he says. "It was the kind of problem I knew about."

Wertheimer and a couple of friends began work on a way to produce faster, more precise results. After getting his Ph.D. from MIT in 1996, Wertheimer worked briefly for Biztravel.com, but when the company decided to use a standard computerized reservation system, he left to develop the technology on his own. He hired a friend, borrowed money from family members and maxed out his credit cards to build a prototype.

Will ITA's product be the one and only technology to find the best airfares? No. Given the multiplicity of unpublished reservation deals and supplier-only specials, it will always pay to shop around. But for travelers seeking a powerful tool to efficiently target their flight options, ITA could turn out to be a good place to start. ■

