

## Virtual voyager

By Laura Bly

# Lower fares, more choices from a new online service

Online travelers will have to wait several months to check out "T2," the code name for a new airlines-owned reservations site its creators hope will dominate the rapidly growing arena of Web ticket sales.

But the biggest weapon in the still-unnamed site's arsenal — a remarkably powerful and nimble method for finding low airfares — is already winning converts at its own Web site.

Developed by former grad students at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, ITA Software's pricing tool bypasses the computer reservations systems used by airlines, bricks-and-mortar travel agents and online travel agencies to quote fares.

What it does: impartially evaluates up to a billion fare and flight combinations for each travel request, then slices and dices the data into a clear, intuitive format.

The new system, nearly eight years in the making, "puts into the hands of novices what would take a great travel agent hours of research to do," says Robert Cowen, a Detroit-based frequent traveler and salesman for a calling-center software firm.

Cowen researched 14 itineraries through ITA Software's site and Travelocity and posted the results on his Web site, [www.netcom.com/~rcowen](http://www.netcom.com/~rcowen).

Cowen's findings: ITA Software "consistently finds lower fares for both leisure and business travelers, is easier to use and (is) much less frustrating."

"It has some enormous advantages over anything else out there," adds Henry Hartevelde, travel analyst with Forrester Research.

To be sure, those advantages carry some significant baggage. The ITA Software site requires users to register before checking fares, and it only prices flights to U.S. and Canadian destinations (though some

### How to check it out

To try the beta (pre-release) version of ITA Software's airfare pricing tool, you have to register a log-on name and password at the firm's Web site ([www.itasoftware.com](http://www.itasoftware.com)). Since the site doesn't let you book flights, be sure to print out the fare code information for the flights you request.

foreign cities will be added later this year). Unlike such online agencies as Travelocity and Expedia, the site doesn't let shoppers request the lowest fare in a given market, regardless of date, and it doesn't include any hotels, car rental companies or other travel suppliers.

The biggest drawback: After they find a flight, would-be passengers have to go elsewhere to book it — at an airline site or online agency, through a regular travel agent, or with a call to an airline.

But for anyone who has bemoaned the limitations of existing booking sites — and that includes many of the estimated 11 million who actually purchased travel online last year — ITA Software's "work in progress" is progress indeed.

For starters, the site does a faster, more complete and more reliable job of answering the questions "Could I save money by leaving from or flying into a different airport?" and "Would the fare go down if I left or returned at a different time or on a different day?"

Travelers can specify how far they'd be willing to drive to or from another airport (25 to 100 miles), and ITA Software will calculate all possibilities in one click. Though current reservations systems limit each fare search to a window of a

few hours, the new method supplies options up to two days out.

Once ITA Software crunches the data, it displays results in a simple-to-read format that groups fares by airline, airport and flight time. Would a two-stop trip be significantly cheaper than a non-stop? How long are the connecting flights, from departure airport to arrival airport? The answers are available at a glance.

ITA Software even alerts travelers when the flights they choose might raise such concerns as tight connection times, prop planes or a change of terminal or airport.

The prospect of such a formidable tool winding up in the clutches of the airlines — whose jointly owned "T2" site has already inspired antitrust complaints from travel agent organizations — is spurring innovations elsewhere in the online travel industry.

This week, Expedia launched its own flight pricing service as part of a "build your own trip" fare-search option. Though no match for ITA Software's version, Expedia claims that the first incarnation of its system offers at least 100 times more flight choices than competitors, with enhancements on the way.

Future homes for ITA Software's pricing system, including Wal-Mart's new travel site, are still in negotiation, says CEO Jeremy Wertheimer. The company's own site may let travelers book as well as research flights for a still-to-be-determined fee (a service most online agencies offer free).

But even in its early stages, argue fans like Robert Cowen, ITA Software is a winner: "No matter how much paint you put on top of the old systems, you still have the same thing under the hood. Here, the difference is like manual vs. cruise control."

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Airlines	Flight Times										Airports
Low fares from	Continental Airlines	Southern Airlines	United Airlines	Northern Airlines	US Airways	Delta Airlines	American Airlines	TWA	MesaJet Express	Shuttle Airlines	Al Canada
\$223											
<b>Nonstop</b>	From	From \$222	From	From	From	From	From	From	From \$202	From	From
<b>One stop</b>	From \$223	From \$221	From \$224	From \$234	From \$224	From \$236	From \$240	From \$262	From \$311	From \$262	From \$292
<b>Two stops</b>	From	From \$224									

**Comparison shopping:** The ITA site has 'enormous advantages,' but there's some baggage involved.