

The world at your finger click

Which? Holiday experts reveal their top tips for booking a flight, a hotel, car parking, or even your whole break online

You need a holiday, but where do you go? In the past, most of us would have flipped through a few brochures for ideas.

Today, more than eight in 10 *Which?* members use the internet to get ideas and to buy some holiday products. A few clicks of a mouse let you compare the history, culture and, of course, weather of places from Australia to Zambia.

You can go much further, though, and book every aspect of a trip online. In this report we show you where you can book flights, hotels and even airport parking.

Getting started

■ A search engine such as www.google.co.uk lets you narrow your hunt

using keywords like 'family-friendly'.

■ If you find holiday brochures inspiring, you can download them from many tour operator websites – customising your brochure to ensure you receive only destinations of interest.

■ Some sites, including airlines and online travel agents, contain extensive destination guides with information on resorts, hotels and tourist sights. Try www.easyjet.com, www.expedia.co.uk and www.thomson.co.uk.

■ Review sites such as www.tripadvisor.co.uk let you read the views of people who have been to a destination before. TripAdvisor has more than 15 million reviews of attractions, hotels and restaurants, and more than a million traveller

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photos – great for seeing how a hotel or destination really looks. Some sites have a forum where you can ask about things like the best hotel rooms and excursions.

■ Check the weather at www.worldweather.org, UK school holiday dates at www.direct.gov.uk and events at www.whatsonwhen.com. If you are a skier, the Ski Club of Great Britain (www.ski-club.co.uk) gives details of snow reports, resorts and ski companies.

FLYING

Booking online can ease the hassle of arranging a trip

Book a flight

Our research shows that *Which?* members are more likely to buy a flight online than any other holiday product. Sites such as www.kayak.co.uk, www.skyscanner.net and www.travelsupermarket.com let you compare prices, flight times and departure points of different airlines. Not all airlines are shown on all sites.

Choose a seat

Some airlines let you pick a seat online, during or after booking – useful if you want to bag your favourite window seat. You may be charged for this – especially on charter or no-frills flights.

Website www.seatguru.com is helpful in choosing a seat. Select

your airline and plane from the A-Z list, then look at the seat plan to see which are best and which to avoid. It lets you see which planes have extra legroom. No-frills and UK tour operator's charter airlines tend not to feature, but you can search long-haul specialists such as British Airways and Virgin Atlantic.

Check-in

Some airlines let you check in online, avoiding queues at the airport. Print your boarding pass and, when you arrive at the airport, take cases for the hold to the drop-off point and head for security and departures. Check-in procedures may differ between airlines, so check before



travelling. Checking in online may save cash; some no-frills airlines charge extra for checking in at the airport.

Make sure

Are the details of all passengers correct? A mistyped name could cost up to £70 to change.

Have you selected the right airport? Your destination may have more than one – some no-frills airlines use minor airports further

from the main city or resort.

Will you be charged extra to check bags in at the airport? This could make a difference when comparing prices.

Satisfaction survey

In our recent passenger satisfaction survey (see *Which?* July 2008, p40), Bournemouth-based Palmair was the best short-haul airline. Singapore Airlines was the best long-haul operator.



HOTEL ROOMS

Rest easy with your choice of accommodation



Once you have chosen your destination, check for available hotels and prices using an online travel agent, such as www.expedia.co.uk. You can also browse review websites such as www.tripadvisor.co.uk to see how your preferred hotels fare. Check the hotel website as it may have exclusive offers or price guarantees on rooms. It's also worth calling the hotel to see if it can offer a better deal, especially for last-minute bookings.

PACKAGE HOLIDAYS

Look out for discounts

Many tour operators offer discounts on travel agent and brochure prices if you book through their websites. Sign up to get emails of offers and look out for discount weekends.

Websites such as www.travelsupermarket.com let you compare prices, destinations and accommodation.

Is it a package?

If you choose a flight and accommodation separately, the chances are you won't legally have chosen a package, even if you selected them from the same website. However, if there's no choice but to buy everything together at a set price, it would be a package.

Why does this matter?

People booking packages get the protection of the Package Travel Regulations 1992 if



changes are made to the holiday, it isn't up to standard, or the package firm goes out of business.

If you book a 'DIY' package, make sure you have other protection. Book items using a credit card and make sure your insurance policy covers insolvency. Remember you will be covered only for the part of your holiday that has gone bankrupt.

Timing

It's often cheaper to fly at unsociable hours or to avoid

school holidays. A tourist destination that attracts few business travellers can be a cheap place to visit midweek as there is less demand.

Flights are usually cheaper the earlier you book, but if you're flexible, accommodation can be cheaper closer to your departure day (especially if you're going out of season). Websites such as www.lastminute.com and www.latehotels.com, specialise in late hotel bookings.

Package holiday prices are trickier to predict. *Which?* *Holiday* monitored the price of several over nine months, and found savings when booking early and late. Don't assume the price of the holiday will keep going down – if you see something you like and can afford, book it!

EXTRAS

These may seem like little things, but the cost of them can soon mount up

Airport parking

Try www.holidayextras.co.uk or www.airport-parking-shop.co.uk to compare prices. If you plan to use an on-site airport car park, the earlier you book the better. *Which?* *Holiday* found the drive-up price was, in some cases, more than double the cost bought in advance. You can often book a long way ahead.

Travel insurance

Visit www.which.co.uk for Best Buys. Policies can be confusing. When you compare prices online, consider details of the policy, what it covers and how much excess will be charged.

Car hire

Booking car hire on the internet can save you money, but watch out for further optional charges

when you pick up your car.

Most firms offer the chance to reduce your excess by paying a daily fee, typically called Super Collision Damage Waiver. This can cost about £10 to £12 a day for a small or compact car, so the bill soon mounts up.

Instead, consider taking out specialist insurance to cover you against a higher excess. This costs from £2.98 a day for European cover (annual policies are also available) and it's often a cheaper way to reduce your liability. Sites such as www.questor-insurance.co.uk offer this cover online.

Which? Holiday tips

■ Pay by credit card for online bookings. If you use a card to pay for a product or service costing more than £100 and

less than £30,000, you get protection under section 75 of the Consumer Credit Act 1974.

■ Only give payment details on a secure website. The payment page should have an address starting <https://> or a padlock or a VeriSign logo at the bottom to show it's safe.

■ Never send payment details by email or give a Pin number.

■ Read terms and conditions before booking and watch out for optional extras, such as insurance, added by default. Select only what you need.

