

TRICKS OF THE TRADE

Cheap Fare Connection

How airfare-comparison sites stack up. By DAVID APPELL

Airfare-comparison sites are not all alike. But who really wants to monitor all of them? In the last year or so, two new sites, **Airfarewatchdog.com** and **FareCompare.com**, have entered the fray. Together with granddaddy **Air-fare.com** and others such as **BestFares.com** and **Kayak.com**, these sites can make it easier to find the deals. To determine which one might work best for you, ask yourself these questions:

Where am I going? FareCompare and Kayak include practically all published fares worldwide. Meanwhile Air-fare keeps track of around 50 airports only in North America, BestFares' "Snooze You Lose" section doesn't cover South America, Asia, or Africa, and Airfare-

Do I want an alert? Air-fare and BestFares don't send out individualized alerts, but the others do, once you register for selected departure cities; with **Travelocity.com's** "Low Fare Alert," you're allowed up to five departure airports. Typically, these e-mails are simply summaries of what's out there, but in the case of Airfarewatchdog and Travelocity, you get word when fares on your routes have dropped enough to qualify as exceptional deals (FareCompare alerts to price drops, too, but sometimes for piddling amounts such as \$10).

How specific does the information need to be? With the exception of Airfarewatchdog, most sites don't check to see if seats are actually available before they send alerts.

Am I willing to pay? BestFares, for example, doesn't give you all its best stuff unless you cough up a \$60 annual membership.

watchdog performs best for North America and parts of the Caribbean.

Do I want to know about low-fare airlines? Air-fare, FareCompare, and Kayak include JetBlue but not Southwest; BestFares has Southwest and JetBlue. Airfarewatchdog includes both, along with lesser-known carriers and fares listed only on airlines' own websites (that's because the info is cherry-picked by staffers instead of number-crunching computers).

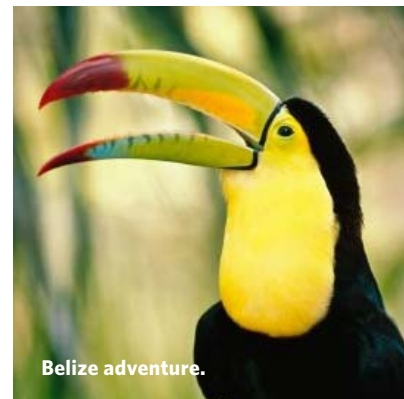
NOTED WITH DISMAY

Airline Customer Service Fails the Test

Feel like you get lost in a voice-mail maze every time you call your airline? You've got company. A new report card issued by the consumer website Gethuman.com, a mostly volunteer project dedicated to improving the quality of phone support in the U.S., gave the major airlines failing grades for their phone service. With the notable exception of the discount airlines (Southwest, Jet-

Blue), German carrier Lufthansa, and small carrier Spirit, the airline industry averaged a big fat F. They were graded on a variety of criteria, including whether the caller can dial "0" at any time to speak with an operator, whether the company offers an accurate estimated wait time, whether the customer has to repeat information, the length of voice prompts, and whether representatives can communicate clearly. Duh, like thousands don't already know this. The real test is, will airlines do anything about it? —CHRISTOPHER ELLIOTT

A call center in Bangalore, India.



A*List Tropical Travel

The **Caribbean** goes on sale at winter's end, around mid-April, and prices stay low into the fall. If you want to avoid hurricanes, book your trip in May or early June. Remember, however, that the chances of a storm hitting your particular destination when you are there are slim, even during the Atlantic hurricane season (June through November). Here, we've listed a few great deals:

THE ESCAPE Five days in the **Turks and Caicos**, from \$647 per person. The "Escape to Paradise" package includes accommodations at Ocean Club Resorts; three breakfasts, lunches, dinners, and drinks; and round-trip airport transfers. Available from April 10 through December 20. (800-457-8787; www.oceanclubresorts.com)

THE BARGAIN A week in the **Dominican Republic** at Natura Park Beach Eco-Resort & Spa, from \$859 per person. The package includes round-trip flights from Philadelphia (other departure cities available, prices vary), accommodations, all meals and beverages, sailing, snorkeling, tennis, etc. Select departures between April 12 and June 28. (www.applevacations.com)

THE ADVENTURE Five nights in **Belize** at Journey's End Resort, from \$1,275 per person. The "Survivor Island Mayan Adventure" includes all meals, two Maya ruin tours, a cave tubing tour, and a zip line tour in the Belize jungle. Available through July. (800-460-5665; www.journeysendresort.com)

THE TASTE Four nights in **St. Lucia**, from \$459 per person. The "Taste of St. Lucia" package includes accommodations at Coco Palm Hotel, fish-fry street party, rum distillery tour, four-course dinner, and a manicure and pedicure at the Spa at Coco Palm. Available through 2007. (866-588-5980; www.coco-resorts.com) —EMILY KING

