

Headline Bypass The Internet For Long Haul Bargains
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Bypass The Internet For Long Haul Bargains

It is better to phone your local travel agent for deals rather than roving the internet, Ben Sandilands writes.

There are enough "errors" occurring on consumer internet booking sites to make anyone reconsider their use for anything but the most straightforward booking.

This month, for example, Zuji.com had Virgin Atlantic return economy seats to London for \$1599 before taxes and levies, a true bargain unmatched by the airline itself.

Yet when asked for bookings with flexible dates in the next four weeks, Zuji tried to sell the fare for a whopping \$5178. Virgin Atlantic's own website was so confused that when asked for the cheapest economy seats on any set of dates, came up with \$4303.90 yet offered its more spacious Premium Economy cabin for \$3310.43.

Shown the screen captures of these offers that had persisted for days, the airline's head of Asia Pacific, Mackenzie Grant, says: "We cannot explain this. "

However, Grant says Virgin Atlantic acknowledged that the web was inadequate for long-haul purchases and was actively urging customers to consult travel agents who could match their needs to its "real" prices.

For "unreal" economy prices, try \$13,687 return to London on Austrian Airlines on the Webjet site, or \$5087 on Qantas on the same days that Qantas.com was selling the trip for \$2138. The websites protest that their systems are doing nothing but displaying all of the fares in the central or global distribution systems.

That is the problem.

These outrageously costly options were never intended for general sale yet websites keep putting them on public offer.

They are fares the carriers have to create in order to calculate pro-rated costs for sectors flown on different carriers if a traveller is making a complex, multi-stop journey.

"Bizarre and dangerous fares populate the internet sites just as much as outstanding bargains," says Max Najjar, chairman of Axis Travel in Adelaide.

"There is the infantile concept of the internet, which sees it as some sort of benign cornucopia of cheap deals, and there is the real internet, which mauls the unwary or ill-advised all the time. "

Najjar says the internet doesn't even show the total inventory of available seats on flights or hotel rooms, or the best prices, and is incapable of merging these

and other components of a business trip into a best-value-for-money package.

"We have route deals for specific corporate clients who do a lot of flying between particular parts of the world. Agents are prohibited from advertising or promoting these deals, which offer exceptional discounts on premium and normal fares and can only be sold to specified customers," he says.

"The money that is wasted where people think they can beat the system by surfing the internet for hours, with no knowledge of the loopholes and ticketing rules, is truly amazing. People think backpackers and internet savvy individuals get the bargains. They don't. Corporate customers get them because winning their business generates far more for airlines and top city hotels than individual consumers."

In fact, the internet is neither impartial nor accurate.

On most of the bookings portals today, the rules are the same as they are in supermarkets.

The product you see on the eye level shelves or on the top of the first screen is there because it paid a premium for best position, just like a prime-time television ad or the inside cover spread on a glossy magazine.

The CEO of the Australasian Business Travel Association, Glenn Buckingham, says: "When people tell me all the bargains are on the internet, I ask them if they believe in fairies.

"Every time I look at a website offering the cheapest possible last-minute deals on hotel rooms, for example, I see prices that are invariably higher than the corporate rates available through a TMC [travel management consultant]."

Yet Buckingham says that TMCs are harnessing the convenience and power of the internet by providing online booking tools specifically designed to be used by any business that has a substantial need for travel product, be that airline seats, hotel rooms, car rental deals, insurance and transfers.

"Many of these products also include expenses substantiation and the automatic tracking and generation of expenses records for tax purposes, including the fringe benefits tax liability.

"These process savings are often more important to the business than the actual airfare."

The problems businesses have in securing bookings at a moment's notice, but also administering travel policy, have led to the invention of Self Booking Tools (SBT).

One of these SBTs, e-travel, is actually licensed to companies and TMCs by the Amadeus global reservations system, which is a major source of the fares quoted on general consumer sites.

Andrew Knowlman, e-travel's national business manager, says the product is designed to overcome all of the shortcomings of the consumer internet sites for corporate needs.

"We think the consumer sites work extremely well for individuals, but we devised this tool in conjunction with our travel-management product to integrate travel requirements with total travel and expense management," he says.

Step carefully

- The internet is often inconsistent and lacks good deals for long-haul travel.
- Corporate customers tend to get the best deals.
- However, online booking tools for travel are well-accepted.