

# Current Comments

## Re-Computing Air Fares— The International Traveler's Nightmare

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Many *Current Contents*\* readers do a lot of international traveling. So do I. I've commented on many problems I've encountered during travel—money exchange,<sup>1</sup> restaurants,<sup>2</sup> jet lag,<sup>3</sup> hotels,<sup>4</sup> etc. I could comment extensively on the inadequacies of the airlines, but one of the most frustrating problems I've encountered as a traveler involves the making of a simple change on an international airline ticket. I've wasted more time than I'd like to recount not just in making new reservations, but especially in having fares recalculated.

While some people can plan an extensive trip abroad without ever making the smallest change in their itinerary, I invariably find that mine changes unavoidably. When this happens even the most efficient airline or travel agent will need considerable time to make even the slightest change in an international ticket.

For years I've protested to airlines and travel agents about this problem. The procedures used are an insane waste of time for both passengers and airlines. Until recently I thought I was alone in thinking that way, but a colleague pointed out a recent article in *Atlantic Monthly* that addressed this problem.<sup>5</sup>

The *Atlantic* article stated that for at least one part of the problem, that of making reservations and finding flight times, the nightmare has ended. This part of air travel has been taken over by sophisticated computerized airline reservation systems that find appropriate

flights for passengers quickly and easily. The article described one such system operated by Swissair, but reservation systems are in operation at many other airlines as well.<sup>5</sup> The airlines also sell access to their reservation systems to travel agents, who can then find convenient flights for their clients. At one time, the American Society of Travel Agents (ASTA) tried to create an industry-wide computerized airline reservation system. But they were beaten to the punch by the individual airlines, who found that by offering their own individual systems they were in a better position to sell their own tickets.<sup>6</sup>

The computerized systems have greatly reduced the time it takes the airlines to make reservations, even on very complex itineraries. By pushing a few keys on a computer terminal, airline agents can cause the computer to display all the options available to a traveler who knows where and when he or she wants to go. This is a great improvement from the past, when reservation agents leafed through the *Official Airline Guide* published by Dun & Bradstreet Corporation.<sup>7,8</sup> The *Guide* lists, in two major editions of over 1,000 pages each (one for North American and one for worldwide flights), thousands of flights between cities all over the world. There are also abbreviated pocket-size editions.

Flight schedule information (not air fare rate data) contained in the *Guide*, by the way, is now available online to

residents of Coral Gables, Florida, who participate in the Viewtron Corporation Videotex experiment there. Viewtron is a subsidiary of Knight-Ridder Newspapers, a *Guide* spokesman told us. He also noted that information from the *Guide* is currently displayed on many airline reservation systems.<sup>9</sup>

Although computerized airline reservation systems have simplified the task of preparing itineraries, the second part of the air ticketing problem remains unsolved. The computation of international air fares remains as complicated and time-consuming today as it was before computers were introduced to solve the reservation problem.

My own travel agent tells me that, generally, the smaller agency has to leave the computation of air fares for a complicated itinerary up to the airlines.<sup>10</sup> While rates are published in the *Guide*, they are changed so frequently that the printed version is always out of date. This is true even though the North American *Guide* is updated twice a month and the worldwide guide is updated monthly.

Even though the airlines and larger travel agencies ought to have the expertise to do so quickly, it usually takes considerable time to compute fares on anything but straightforward flights. They can, of course, usually compute fares easily for their own flights. But it can take from 24 to 72 hours to come up with a fare for a complicated itinerary.

Recently I had to go to Sweden on very short notice. Once my plans were set my secretary called our travel agency, Cruiseco of Philadelphia, to give them the details. Before the airlines will quote a fare, you must know the dates and duration of your trip, your first destination, and the class of service desired. My travel agent called my complete itinerary into the airline and asked them to calculate the fare on a high priority basis, since I was leaving the next morning. To

calculate the fare for a trip from New York to London, with stopovers in Stockholm and Oslo, and a return via London to Philadelphia required two hours.

Why is it so difficult for the airlines to calculate air fares? The answer lies in the complexity of routes, fare regulations, and money conversions that must be taken into account. For example, on any given day there are hundreds of flights one can take to London, and several different fares that could be used to compute the price. These fares change on a weekly basis sometimes—different airlines offer promotional fares for month at a time, for example. And if the price of fuel skyrockets the airlines ask the Civil Aeronautics Board for a special fuel surtax. Sometimes the airlines offer fares that go into effect the next month, pending CAB approval, so at the time they compute your ticket the airlines aren't really sure what the effective rate will be.

Suppose you are traveling from New York to Bombay, India. You originally purchase an excursion fare ticket. Excursion tickets have some restrictions on the time and day of takeoff and the amount of time you can travel as well as on interconnecting flights you may take. If you change your mind and want to stop en route in Istanbul and Beirut, you may run into a lot of trouble recalculating the fares. At that point you are under the jurisdiction of the government of the country in which you stopped. Air fares differ from country to country. Your US based excursion fare is no longer valid. So suddenly a New York to Bombay flight becomes more complicated and more costly. You now must pay for the trip from New York to Istanbul, Istanbul to Beirut, and Beirut to Bombay.

The *Atlantic Monthly* article implies that a computer system implemented by Swissair has already conquered the fare

computation problem.<sup>5</sup> Not so, says Swissair spokeswoman Paula Gray.<sup>11</sup> She notes that only the "normal" basic fares can be stored in Swissair's reservation computer system. But once the fares and routings get complicated, a reservation agent has to take the customer's number and call him or her back — sometimes hours later. In the meantime, the agent refers the problem to the airline's special tariff department, made up of experts who compute air fares.<sup>11</sup>

For scientists and business people who do a lot of traveling, this bit of news offers little help. If you are just traveling to and from a scientific conference, you won't have many problems. But if you plan several stopovers along the way, you had better allow time for the fare calculation and even more time if there is a recalculation necessary while abroad. If you travel first class, you can have unlimited stopovers provided you don't exceed the allowable mileage for the longest leg of the trip. For example, you can stop over in Paris on your way to Rome from Philadelphia at no extra charge, because Paris lies on the air route to Rome. However a trip to Amsterdam on the way to Rome would cost extra since that city is to the north and off of the standard flight path. In July of 1978 I began a journey to Crete to attend a conference. I traveled from New York to Khania (in Crete) via Athens. I returned via Athens, Amsterdam, Oslo, Munich, Paris, and London and back to Philadelphia. I was charged \$534 for the trip from JFK to Athens (the longest leg of the trip), \$22 each way to Khania, and \$667.50 for my return trip from Athens, via Oslo, Munich, Paris, and London. With taxes my trip cost \$1,323 for a tourist economy fare.

Generally there will be enough added mileage available for you to make changes without penalty. But if you start out on an excursion fare it can be quite costly and inconvenient to change these

tickets en route, unless you've paid for the privilege before you leave.

Air France told us that the least expensive and least complex way of traveling is not to pay for the entire itinerary in advance at all if you can help it.<sup>12</sup> According to a spokesman, the best transatlantic fares are "point to point" fares to a given destination, for example, New York to Paris. Once in Europe you can travel between cities by purchasing cheaper special excursion fares available only abroad. But you must return to your original European point of arrival to begin your journey home.

Arranging your trip this way makes the computation of fares less complex. There will be little time wasted changing tickets. Since you pay for the ticket in the currency of the country originating the flight, you will not have to wait while an airline calculates conversions to another currency.<sup>11</sup> But these advantages may be outweighed for some by the desire to have their itineraries mapped out before they leave despite the fact that their itinerary may change.

The Swissair spokeswoman we contacted doubted that the calculation of air fares would ever be computerized because the fares change so very often. "To continuously feed changes into the computer would be very expensive," she asserted.<sup>11</sup> An official for Pan American World Airways agreed. He pointed out that while air fares for simple itineraries are already stored in most airlines' computers, it isn't worth the cost involved "to crank up the computer for an itinerary that is seldom used. . . ." With the complicated array of fares and routings available, the programming and computer time would be prohibitive, he noted.<sup>13</sup>

Apparently these people do not appreciate that the very complexity of the air fares problem is precisely why computerization of fares is inevitable. When things were simpler, manual methods

could suffice. I don't think that the programming problem involved is more complex than many other problems long solved by systems analysts and computers. The increase in computer memories and the advent of microcomputers will inevitably bring the airlines to terms

with this problem. In the meantime, if you can afford the time and energy, fly Laker.

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