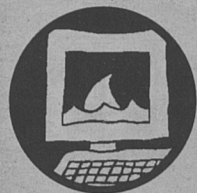


CYBER



SHARK

Bargain Travel Online? If You're Smart

BY MIKI THOMAS

Last year around this time, I surveyed a few GLBT travel sites. At that point, there wasn't a whole lot of publicity about booking flights or reserving hotel rooms via the Web. Most of the sites I found then were promotional pieces for different resorts.

However, over the past year,

more has been written about how the Web is becoming a personal travel agency where, from the comfort of your home, you can plan an entire vacation.

It all really started when Delta announced that anyone booking flights through its Web site instead of a travel agent would get a small discount. Soon, pundits started writing obituaries for the travel agency. (Of course, these were the same kind of pundits who once proclaimed that every American would be riding around in helicopters by 1980.)

Samit G. Choudhuri and Trevor Meers, who compared travel agents and their cyber-counterparts in the May 1999 issue of *Smart Computing*, did not agree. First of all, it seems that most trips booked through the Web are the low-commission variety anyway. More importantly, they found that a good travel agent can not only offer personalized service, but can help you find bargains in ways you wouldn't think of when booking online yourself. (No wonder Delta was so willing to have average Web users book their own flights.)

Still, it can be worth it to use the Web to plan that perfect vacation. You just have to learn to shop around, so to speak.

For starters, bookmark all the "all-purpose" travel sites you can — sites where you can not only book flights, but reserve hotel rooms and rent cars as well. Not all travel sites are the same; using many allows you to compensate for the weaknesses of each and lets you comparison shop easily.

If you can, register with those

sites. Registering with a site is often free and offers benefits such as email updates on travel and accommodation bargains. Some sites allow you to enter your credit card number as you register for easier online booking. If you're into convenience, consider it a bonus. If you're squeamish about sharing the information, check to see whether the site offers alternative payment plans.

Travelocity site. If you'd rather plan a step at a time, most major airlines, hotels, car rental agencies, package tours, and cruise lines have their own Web sites. Don't forget sites with a specific focus, such as Cheap Tickets, which allows registered users to search for the best airfares.

Most of the GLBT travel sites I've found on the web provide mostly general travel information, albeit with a GLBT slant.

Lesbiantravel.net. It was created to suit the needs of lesbian travelers, with links to lesbian-owned or friendly businesses and forums for comments and advice. For a small fee, the Webmasters can also create a Web page for your business to add to their site. It is still in the embryonic stages, but once Lesbiantravel.net is really up and running, it should be a great resource for the lesbian traveler.

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Of the many "all purpose" travel sites, a few have gotten attention from reviewers. Biztravel.Com received raves from Yahoo for its ability to figure out the right trip for you based on a profile you fill out online. *Smart Computing* liked Travelocity and its nifty "Map It!" feature, which lets you search for and print maps of cities around the world. (You can even get written directions to US cities and towns from wherever you may be located.)

Another site of note is Preview Travel. It not only profiles major hotel chains, it covers nearly 20,000 bed and breakfasts around the world.

But size isn't everything and may even be daunting; it took *Smart Computing* nearly 4 pages to explain navigation of the

Among the best sites I've found is Viajar Travel. It is available in both English and Spanish and is updated regularly. What sets this site above many others is that you, the traveler, provide the advice and stories about traveling around the world. On the May 1, 1999 edition, one traveler extolled the bath houses of Budapest, while a lesbian couple wrote about their cycling trip through Slovenia. Both articles contained photographs by the authors.

Viajar Travel also has two forums, one for advice and the other for "friends," so visitors to the site can exchange information and network with others. Another plus is its extensive collection of subway maps for major cities around the world.

A promising site is

If you can't get away till the snow starts flying, you may want to check out a couple of sites that have come my way. Both are for gay travelers going to Puerto Vallarta in Mexico. One site gives specific information about GLBT life in Puerto Vallarta, while the other is for a villa/resort. Both feature luscious photographs and beautiful graphics. Perhaps it is a sign of a successful Web site that after visiting them both, I went to Cheap Tickets to search for a flight to Puerto Vallarta.

Using the Web to find the best information for travel needs can be a challenge, but it is also an exciting way to become more involved in the process. It certainly gives more credence to the old saying that getting there is half the fun. ▼

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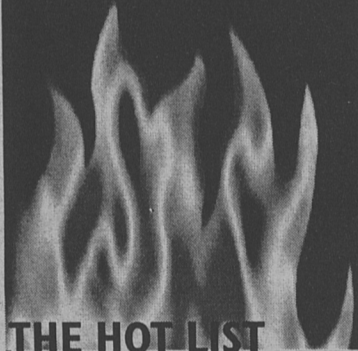
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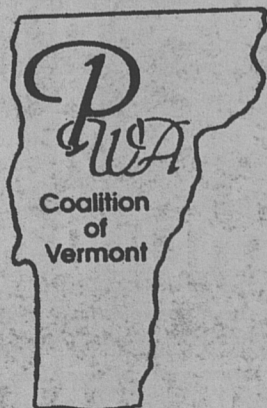
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