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## Have mouse will travel

Planning for a holiday? Like many others, you'll probably need to spend some time searching for the best travel deals. The Internet could be a good place to start.

### All about convenience, affordability

by Rozana Sani and Izwan Ismail

THERE was a time when booking a holiday took almost as long as the vacation itself. But now, with the flurry of online accommodation reservation service providers, you can book your dream holiday at the click of a mouse.

These travel sites not only save you from the misery of long queues and haggling with travel agents, but also give you a peek into your hotel rooms, reviews of places you want to visit, eating and shopping joints, and all that you need for an exciting holiday.

### Surge in numbers

One such provider is HolidayCity.com (www.holidaycity.com), whose business-to-consumer Web site services worldwide customers. It presently offers more than 19,000 hotels in over 900 destinations worldwide and gets more than one million unique visitors monthly.

In Malaysia, the portal has tied up with about 200 hotels, which is only a tenth of the estimated

2,000 hotels in the country. So, there is definitely room for growth in the local market.

HolidayCity.com's chief executive officer Lee Lai Huat elaborates, "Currently, the number of Malaysian customers is relatively small – less than five per cent of our overall customers. We are, however, seeing a positive growth over the years for Malaysian bookers."

"For January to June this year, for example, there is approximately four per cent increase in the number of room nights booked by Malaysian bookers in comparison to the same period in 2007. We can safely assume it to be the direct impact of more Malaysians becoming Internet-savvy and comfortable with online booking, in part due to the popularity of the low-cost carriers."

Another interesting factor concerning the booking behaviour of Malaysians is the increase in the number of repeat customers.

"For January to June, there is a significant increase of 20 per cent in terms of the number of repeat Malaysian customers in comparison to the same period in 2007. And for our overall customers, there is a

30 per cent return rate so far, which is a healthy margin that signals customer loyalty," Lee says.

Apart from that, a large percentage of HolidayCity.com's customers – including Malaysians – book at least one month in advance.

"Due to our distinct advantage of being able to offer Best Available Rates all year round, our customers, including those from Malaysia, are assured of competitive rates at all times. So, regardless of them making advance or last-minute bookings, our customers can always find attractive, discounted rates," Lee says.



Lee claims HolidayCity.com offers competitive rates at all times.



Bernard says the lowest prices are offered to consumers online.

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## Less hassle

According to Malaysia Airlines' senior general manager, network and revenue management Datuk Bernard Francis, the factor that drives the popularity of online travel bookings is convenience – people can do it anytime, anywhere.

"The Internet is a 24-hour facility accessible at minimal cost from the comfort of the homes of many homes, offices and hotspots. As its accessibility becomes more affordable, it will naturally attract more users," he says.

He adds that airlines, on their part, leverage on this advantage by featuring their booking engine on the Internet as this facility is the most cost-effective and direct distribution channel.

"As a result, this is the channel where the lowest prices are offered, encouraging many to conclude their purchases online."

At Malaysia Airlines, the online booking engine currently contributes an average of 10 to 15 per cent of its total transactions.

Another factor driving the uptake of online travel bookings is the availability of value-added services.

"Malaysia Airlines, for example, also offers a variety of other online services to customers through this distribution channel. Now customers can use the online channel to check flight schedules, view details of holiday packages, check-in for flights, select seats, print boarding passes, and purchase hotel accommodation and travel insurance," Bernard says.

## Getting more than tickets

Consumers who buy their airline tickets online would normally get better deals than buying through agents or over the counter.

According to AirAsia, the advantage of online booking is that guests will have the opportunity to get the lowest fares as they are only available online.

Besides that, making an online booking is easy and convenient. Guests could book flights, accommodation and holiday packages via the online service. In-flight hot meals can be

pre-booked online and guests will save more as discounts are given for online orders.

Currently, 70 per cent of AirAsia's guests use the online booking system to book their flights and holiday packages. The company's top five destinations are Kota Kinabalu, Kuching, Langkawi, Bangkok and Jakarta.

For AirAsia, its promotions are available every month and promotional fares and travel period vary from month to month.

"Our plans for the online booking site is to use it to drive sales from October until December, with a promotion themed, Must go – 56 destinations to see before 2009," the company says.

## Online booking tips

A good travel booking Web site should

- Tell you exactly what's included in the price;
- Offer a secure booking page;
- Make it clear early on how much it costs to pay with a card;
- Have understandable terms and conditions;
- Be cheaper than phoning or booking in person; and
- Have a good frequently asked question section to help you solve any problems.

To get started:

- 1) Compare prices using general sites.
- 2) Be flexible to get the best price. Avoid peak periods (holidays, national celebrations and school breaks) and be prepared to travel at unsociable hours for the cheapest prices.
- 3) Look out for extra charges. Online travel agents do not get commission for selling flights with no-frills airlines, so they may charge a transaction fee if you book with them. To avoid this, book directly on the airline's Web site.

Some Web sites mark up the price of accommodation by as much as 30 per cent. Try negotiating this discount with the accommodation owner if you book directly with them.

Many companies charge extra for using a credit card. You will usually be charged either a flat fee or a percentage of the total price.

4) Always read the terms and conditions (T&Cs) before you book. There is usually a box for you to tick to confirm you have done this, and it's tempting to tick without clicking on the link and actually reading the T&Cs. Every Web site has different T&Cs, so make sure that you know what you're agreeing to.

5) Online security. You may be asked for a three-digit security number, but never your PIN.

Only give payment details (for example, a credit card number) on a secure site – never send them in an e-mail. The payment page should have an address beginning with "https://" or a padlock or a VeriSign logo at the

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bottom to show it's safe.

6) Make sure the Web site is genuine. Under the European Union law, for example, traders must provide an About Us or Contact page with a geographical address and e-mail. If you are concerned about any foreign Web site, try to access it a different way such as via a tourist board. If you are in any doubt, book elsewhere.

Soon after making the booking, you should receive an e-mail confirming all the details. This may be your only record of your booking, so print it out and keep it safe, as you'll need it to check in at the airport or pick up a rental car.

Source: www.which.co.uk

### Plan in advance to get best deals

ONLINE travel booking sites are fast gaining popularity among travellers. Many cited convenience and the attractive deals offered by Web site hosts as the main drawing factors.

For Universiti Putra Malaysia lecturer, Zainor Izat Zainal, the best thing about online travel booking is that there is no need to go through the hassle of booking through the phone.

"I like the idea that I can browse through the variety of available flights and range of prices at my convenience and later choose the best one," she says.

Zainor does not really set a time to log in for buying airline tickets online. "Whenever I feel like travelling, I'll log in and see what the Net has in store for me. So far, I haven't had problems with online bookings. The only problem is the slow uploading/processing, but I guess that's normal during peak hours."

To get the best deal, she advises people to book a couple of months in advance because the chances of getting cheaper prices are higher. "Other than that, always compare the range of prices offered by different airlines," she adds.

Accommodation-wise, resource manager Jasmine Chong Kwai Fun says one has to shop around first to get better room rates online. For her, reading the reviews provided by online Web sites is a must.

She adds that there are not many Web sites which offer cheap deals when making last-minute bookings.

Hotel Web sites are the main choice for trainee lecturer Dr Ezura Madiana Md Monoto when it comes to hotel bookings. She would select the destination and look at the respective hotels' facilities and current offers – particularly the "Internet hot deals" that are cheaper than the standard room rates.

"I usually book at least a month earlier. But even just one week before (your travels), you can find irresistible Internet hot deals," says Ezura, adding that she has used such service to book rooms in Damai Laut Swiss Garden, Colmar Tropicale, Kapas Island Resort and Guoman Resort Port Dickson.

She highlights that these Internet deals are only valid online.

"The thing is, you will definitely need a credit card. But it's a much easier way. Just watch out for those credit card bills!" Ezura cautions.

### Airline and accommodation portals

1) Malaysia Airlines (www.malaysiaairlines.com): The site offers visitors everything travellers need from the airline, from destinations, online bookings/payment and baggage information, to customer care and shopping.

2) AirAsia (www.airasia.com): Easy to navigate site. Users can make flight bookings, view flight info, check and change booking details, view products and shop, and ask for travel services.

3) Fire Fly (www.firefly.com.my). Malaysia's first community airline flying from Penang and Subang to exclusive destinations in Malaysia and Thailand from as low as 99 sen. Compared to MAS and AirAsia, the Firefly portal is much simpler.

4) Asia-Tickets.com (www.asia-tickets.com): A global online travel reservation system designed to save on time and money. Visitors can shop 24x7 for the best deals on airline tickets, hotel rooms, vacation packages, car rentals, cruises and travel activities instantly and securely.

5) Asia Web Direct (www.asiawebdirect.com): Provides visitors with comprehensive and updated travel information, tour packages and instant hotel room availability checks to make their reservations in advance. Clients are serviced by teams in call centres in Phuket, Bangkok and Kuala Lumpur, offering a helpful and swift service to facilitate confirmations, queries, itinerary changes and troubleshooting.

6) Cuti.com.my (www.cuti.com.my): A one-stop Internet travel reservation and information reference gateway for Malaysia. It offers a full range of travel services online, including ticketing, hotel and tour reservation, facilitating traveller research and planning before they reach the destination. Users need to register as members for transactions.

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