

Travel Information on the Web: A Hands-On Tutorial for SCLS Librarians and Their Patrons

Note to librarians – instructions to the librarians are given in square brackets and [underlined] Links in the .pdf are blue but they are not really working links.

The Internet is a great source of travel information. We're going to look at several different types of travel resources. The travel information you may be looking for online generally falls into one of three categories: information on a particular destination, such as you might find in a guidebook; commercial sites where you can make reservations for flights, hotels, rental cars, etc.; and travel tools, such as maps, currency converters, health and safety updates.

Guides

A few years ago, many major travel-guide publishers were concerned that the Internet would hurt their sales. But actually it looks like the Internet has helped publishers build their brands and expand into new territory. Lonely Planet, Frommer's and other leading publishers have recorded growth rates of 15 percent to 25 percent per year over the past four years, as much of their guidebook content has moved online, where information can be updated more easily – and where they can sell advertising and link to sales and services. (The major travel-guide publishers are also now moving into wireless guidebooks, accessed either through wireless Internet service or downloaded to Palm or other hand-held devices.)

Among these major travel publishers, check out the sites offer by Fodor's (www.fodors.com/),

Lonely Planet (www.lonelyplanet.com/), Frommer's (www.frommers.com/), and Rough Guide (travel.roughguides.com/). It takes a little looking around to find the best features of each of these sites. For example, at the Lonely Planet site you'll see a Search box near the top left. It's easy to miss the three buttons underneath the box that say SHOP, SITE, and FORUMS. The SHOP button is automatically selected, so unless you change it to SITE, when you search for a destination you'll be directed to the guidebook on that location that is for sale. If you switch to SITE before you search, you'll find links to features on the destination, including events, attractions, getting there, getting around, maps, slideshow and other features.

Each of these sites allows you to browse as well as search for destinations. Just like the print versions, some are better for background information, history, and attractions; others better for restaurant and hotel reviews. [Pick a destination ahead of time and try a search for it at each of these guidebook sites if you want to demonstrate the comparative features, or in a hands-on workshop suggest that participants compare information on the same destination at several of the guide sites.]

Two more sites that offer extensive guides to selected cities are Time Out (www.timeout.com/) and City Search (www.citysearch.com/). There are also a number of specialty guides available, such as Family Travel Files (www.thefamilytravelfiles.com/index.asp), which focuses on places and activities that would be fun for families traveling with children; and SoloTravelPortal (SoloTravelPortal.com), a clearinghouse of information on topics like single travel, how to find travel companions; over-50 travel; women's travel opportunities; travel guides; travel packages; entertainment; volunteer and internship opportunities; travel enhancements; and solo dining.

If you are flying in or out of a major airport for the first time and want to know what to expect – layout, ground transportation, hotels, car rentals, etc. check out Airport guides

<http://www.airwise.com/airports/index.html>

There's a lot of information, but also many "sponsored" links (in other words, paid advertising) at About Travel and their Budget travel subsite (home.about.com/travel/, budgettravel.about.com/). But some of these might be just what you're looking for – want to rent a villa in Italy or a condo in Florida? To get to less commercial information, choose a destination from the list at the main site, and look at the subject list. At the Budget travel site, you'll find a link to latest airfare sales by airline. It is not an exhaustive list of all fare deals for a particular airline. Every effort is made to keep the listings current, but don't depend on this page alone. Click on the links or go to your favorite airline's Web site and check for yourself. Their list of worldwide airline web sites is at airtravel.about.com/cs/airlines2/index.htm. [At all of the About.com sites, links may take you to an independent external site – what they call a "featured link" that is displayed under the About.com frame. To get to the true URL of the external site, click on "Turn off this top frame" in the top left corner.]

Also worth checking are Travel-Library.com (www.travel-library.com/) for personal travelogues, trip reports, and worldwide tourist information, and the online version of Conde Nast's Traveler magazine (www.concierge.com/).

Many of us like to vacation closer to home, or do our traveling on weekend getaways, so don't

forget to check out the Wisconsin Department of Tourism (travelwisconsin.com/), where you'll find a trip planner, calendar of events, snow reports, accommodations, and much more.

Of course, a great way to get information on a specific destination is to check the official web site or visitor's bureau of the area. The easiest way to find these is through the major search engines. For example, if we go to Google (www.google.com) and search for "Door County", we'll find hits for the Door County Wisconsin Chamber of Commerce Vacation Travel Guide (www.doorcountyvacations.com), Door County Navigator, (www.doorcountynavigator.com), Door County online (www.door-county.com), and others. If you're looking for ideas and unusual destinations, try away.com.

Booking

Many people are using the Internet to book flights, cruises, hotels, and rental cars, and sometimes there are special prices that are available only to those who book online. [Before demonstrating any sites for reservations, you may want to discuss any applicable policies pertaining to use of your library's computers – for example, many sites will require registration before reservations can be made, something you probably don't want patrons to do at the library's computer.]

Although you may not want to do your actual booking online, these web sites provide information on schedules and prices. You can either go directly to a company you are interested

in (airline, hotel chain, rental car company) which again, are easiest to find through a major search engine or links at one of the travel guide sites we've discussed, or compare prices by going to one of the online brokers. These include Travelocity, Orbitz, Expedia, Cheap Tickets, Cruise.com and Metrostar. If you are looking to make airline reservations, these are good places to find out which airlines fly to your destination, but the prices they offer or the routes that come up are not necessarily the lowest prices or the most logical itinerary. It would be wise to double check any flight you are considering by going to the airline's own site. [Because we do not want to appear to be endorsing any of these brokers, links to these sites are not on the web page of related links. They do appear on the handout with a disclaimer.]

These brokers also are convenient places to see the range of hotels that might be available in an area, although they usually focus on the various hotel chains. This is not the way to find a quaint inn or Bed-and-breakfast. Metrostar (www.metrostar.com) also maintains a comprehensive list of the major hotel chains of the world accompanied by logos and links to their respective web sites. For real budget travel, there is a site for hostels worldwide at Hostels (www.hostels.com/index.html).

Tools

Need a map? Driving directions? Here are two sites that provide maps and directions, although there are some drawbacks. As a recent article in the New York Times pointed out, "occasional problems arise when software fails to choose best route between Point A and Point B as

delineated by user, sometimes sending driver on longer journey than necessary; shortcuts are generally not given and drivers will do better using mapping services for trips over major thoroughfares, rather than small underused roads.” (New York Times, January 16, 2003).

Map Quest www.mapquest.com/

Map Blast www.mapblast.com

If you are planning a trip abroad and find prices for hotels and events in the local currency you can convert the amount to dollars with the Universal Currency Converter (www.xe.net/ucc/).

Somewhat closer to home you might want to check road conditions before a trip. We all know Wisconsin is known to have two seasons: winter and road construction, so of course the Wisconsin traffic information available at www.dot.wisconsin.gov/travel/road/index.htm includes winter road conditions and detour and construction information. For national traffic and road closure information, check www.fhwa.dot.gov/trafficinfo/index.htm.

Some other useful links for travel in Wisconsin and elsewhere are found at http://wisconsin.statesite.com/wi_travel.html where you can check gas prices, find Public RV dump sites, the RV Propane Fill Station Locator, and other practical information.

Travel warnings

Travel Warnings are issued when the State Department decides, based on all relevant information, to recommend that Americans avoid travel to a certain country. Countries where avoidance of travel is recommended will have Travel Warnings as well as Consular Information Sheets. Consular Information Sheets are available for every country of the world. They include such information as location of the U.S. Embassy or Consulate in the subject country, unusual immigration practices, health conditions, minor political disturbances, unusual currency and entry regulations, crime and security information, and drug penalties. Consular Information Sheets generally do not include advice, but present information in a factual manner so the traveler can make his or her own decisions concerning travel to a particular country.

http://travel.state.gov/travel_warnings.html

Health alerts

Health information on specific destinations, information on outbreaks of concern to international travelers, vaccination recommendations, health information about specific cruise ships (since there has been recent concern about gastrointestinal illness aboard cruises), information for travelers with special needs such as disabilities, pregnancy and breast-feeding, and IV.

<http://www.cdc.gov/travel/>

You can search for Sanitation inspection scores for cruise ships at www.cdc.gov/nceh/vsp/