



Skytrax, Kayak, OAG

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Early spring is the time to get your summer vacation and/or your conference travel planned. Depending on the destination, your airfare may be the most expensive component of the trip. The quality of service rendered by the airlines sets the tone for starting your vacation/conference travel, and it can ruin a holiday. I chose two databases, Skytrax and Kayak, as my picks. They get you the most bang for the buck, based on their rich, informative, and free content combined with sophisticated software.

The pan is the new Travel Planner Pro database and service of the Official Airline Guide (OAG) that has had a monopoly in print format for decades on airline routing and schedule information, but in the web universe, it is unlikely to survive for long in spite of some recent improvement in its software that remained 1960-ish for too long. It is a subscription-based system, and it does not even provide fare information parallel to showing the schedule and route options (as every system does). This requires a separate step, making this the most awkward and inefficient travel information retrieval system that I have ever seen. It adds insult to injury that it received a 2008 Web Award (not to be confused with the Webby Award), and it costs \$912 for a year (the minimum subscription period); I also found erroneous data during my test.



the picks

SKYTRAX

There is not much choice in economy class for domestic travel within the U.S., Canada, Africa (except for South Africa), and North/Central Asia beyond mediocre, bad, and worse. Europe's traditionally very good airlines (KLM Royal Dutch and Scandinavian airlines) and airports (Amsterdam in the Netherlands; Frankfurt in Germany; and, especially, Heathrow in London) also show declines in quality. Domestic travelers in most countries (except in a very few, mostly Asian countries, territories, and/or city-states, such as Thailand, Malaysia, Sri Lanka, Singapore, and Hong Kong) must live with mediocre airlines and airport facilities. The best they can do is find low-cost carriers—most of which are as good as the traditional carriers, but they charge much less.

There are many fluffy rankings of airlines and airports in various magazines. Among the few substantial ones, SKYTRAX (www.airlinequality.com) is far the most comprehensive, respectable, and independent. *Condé Nast Traveler* has substantial listings, but it focuses too much on business-class and first-class travelers—their fake Hollywood-ish lifestyle and *Vanity Fair*-inspired haute couture. An ultraglossy print publication, the magazine depends too much on ads from many airlines, hotel, and car rental chains.

Skytrax provides almost enough background on its free website (except for the detailed algorithm of calculating the points from the surveys), and it has the most experience in creating and editing daily such score lists. It is not perfect, but most of the information it offers is unique and useful. Just don't take all the claims at face value; the rankings of the airlines (www.airlinequality.com/StarRanking/ranking.htm) and airports (www.airlinequality.com/AirportRanking/ranking-intro.htm) are based on surveys and interviews, plus additional research and auditing by the producer.

Skytrax claims to cover 620 airlines and 645 airports. However, the numbers are far fewer. On the airline ranking list, there are entries for 263 airlines, but 51 (20%) have no score because the airlines, such as Aloha Airlines (Honolulu), ATA (Indianapolis), and Sterling (Copenhagen, Denmark), went out of business. The 1–5-star scoring should be more refined. The six airlines in the five-star group and the 35 in the four-star group are fine for clearly distinguishing the leaders, but there is a huge crowd in the three-star category with 126 airlines, which is more than half of all the airlines scored. There are 44 airlines in the two-star group, and only one earned one star: Air Koryo of North Korea.

As it often happens, the five-point scale leads to results in which the average dominates. I agree with the choices in the

top two categories, and I am particularly happy that the ranking reconfirms the superiority of the lesser-known, excellent airline Asiana from Korea, while relegating to the second category the much better-known Korean Air (because of its pervasive television ad campaign), which has seats that are less comfortable and flight attendants who must have spent too much time in military training.

Similarly, the low-cost carrier, Air Berlin (Germany), is rightly in the superstar group, and although Air Lanka (Sri Lanka) was demoted to the three-star group, it deserves the four-star ranking. Then again, so would two outstanding low-cost carriers in the region: Air Asia (Malaysia) and JetStar Asia (Singapore), which are in the crowd of the three-star airlines. The airlines of Southeast Asia, Oceania, and the Middle East dominate—rightly—the five-star and four-star categories. None of the traditional U.S. airlines (American, Northwest, United, Delta, and Continental) and only a very few of the traditionally good Western European airlines (Air France and Lufthansa) could make it to either of these categories.

The number of airport reviews and ratings are far fewer, and the ranking does not yet reflect the opening of the superb new terminal in Singapore, which makes that country's longtime winner or second-ranked Changi Airport again No. 1, as even its public areas are much more comfortable than many of the sorry business-class lounges at the majority of the airports around the world.

I am often skeptical about customer reviews and trip reports. But in Skytrax, most reports about the airlines, the seats, the airports, and the business lounges were competent and informative. The section about the seats is particularly important for the big and tall gals and guys, and the tabular summary of the seat pitch in Economy, Economy Plus, Business, and First of more than 171 airlines is excellent. The special section about the flatbed-type seats is also of great help for those who upgrade to business class. It will certainly help me choose a Lima to Buenos Aires flight knowing that Aerolineas Argentina has a generous 34" seat in economy class, while the seats of the other airlines that take the route barely exceed 30", yet the fares are similar.

Explore the complex Skytrax site by clicking around on award categories to see not only the winners but also the runners-up (www.worldairlineawards.com) page. The substantial coverage of budget airlines is a great advantage, and, hopefully, it will make more passengers realize that using this relatively new but exploding genre of airline services provides much more bang for the buck. Of course, airlines keep changing their aircraft, routings, seat arrangements, and seat widths (available for many airlines at www.seatguru.com), so the slogan is trust but verify. In spite of some deficiencies, Skytrax is an excellent resource to use to do your homework and to help you choose the best option for your travel.

KAYAK

Kayak (www.kayak.com) is one of the best of the federated travel search engines—not in finding the best fares but in terms of the amount of information provided and in the way



Small excerpt from Skytrax's score card for Asiana Airlines

it presents information to foster educated choices at a glance (or two). It is not a travel agency like Orbitz, Travelocity, or Expedia, as it does not sell tickets. It finds airlines and travel agencies that sell tickets for the selected route. It is like a referral service, but it's much more. Its forte is providing at-a-glance overviews, along with useful cues. Interestingly, the founders of Kayak were the founders of the previously mentioned three travel agencies. They wanted to move forward and let the customers see more and learn more about the options—faster.

Kayak learned the best features of my two longtime favorite, travel-related federated search engines: the superb QPX system of ITA Software, Inc. (my pick in my September 2007 column) and SideStep, which I reviewed in 2005 (<http://web.archive.org/web/20060213022740/reviews.gale.com/index.php/digital-referenceshelf/2005/07/sidestep>). Kayak executives liked SideStep so much that they acquired it—a typical move in many industries, buying your biggest competitor. Kayak now uses ITA Software as a back-end search engine. It deserves praise for doing it very well, in a state-of-the-art format, systematically enhancing the service.

You can see the airlines that serve a particular route and the prices of those flights; you can also view the stopover cities (if any), red-eye flights, length of the connection time, and flight times. You can use check boxes to limit the search to nonstop and/or one-stop flights and to preferred airlines and aircraft types. A sliding scale allows the filtering out of flights by price and/or by flight duration. All this happens in less than a second and can be undone instantly if the results are not what was wanted. Items on a results list may be deleted individually, further thinning the list. The results can be printed, emailed, or bookmarked with a single click.



Variety of flights at widely differing prices shown at Kayak—and options for instant refinements

Kayak can't always find the best fares because it does not search many of the best budget airlines sites. For example, in Southeast Asia, it does not search Air Asia, Thai Air Asia, Tiger Air, or Nok Air, which have the least expensive but very reliable flights. These airlines' flights are good, if not better, than the "national" airlines that fly the same routes, such as Garuda or Vietnam Airlines. There are exceptions: Kayak searches, for example, the top-notch JetStar Asia airline, with its unbeatable fares. There are two things Kayak could do to be the best travel search engine. One is to include a warning symbol if the airline on the given route has had late arrivals above a preset limit. The other is to include the top 40–50 budget airlines in its search.



the pan

OAG TRAVEL PLANNER PRO

OAG, the *Official Airline Guide*, was the bible for all travel agents in the preweb 1970s. The two huge volumes occupied half the desk of the travel agent, who used them to find route and schedule alternatives from point A to point B. The agent then had to construct a fare for the preferred trip. In the late 1980s, OAG became available on Dialog (www.dialog.com) as a gateway database (you used the target site's menu system, not Dialog's). It was very primitive and expensive. After a few years it was removed from Dialog (but it remained on Prodigy and a few other online services). In mid-November 2008, I learned that the new OAG Travel Planner Pro website (www.oag.com) won the 2008 WebAward in the B2B Standard of Excellence for Outstanding Achievement in the Website Development category.

I could not wait to try it out. However, a subscription service for a digitized version of the print edition (although with additional notebooking and foldering functions), priced at \$76 per month with a minimum of a 1-year subscription, is unbelievable. True, it has information about most flights of most airlines, which may be good news for the businessman in Ulaanbaatar, Mongolia, who wants to get to Pyongyang, North Korea, on Air Koryo—an itinerary not widely covered by other sources—but the airline schedule would be the least of the traveler's problems (and neither Kyoro nor Mongolian airlines offer more flights than could be memorized by a third grader). In its favor, the completeness of OAG's site means you can find routing and schedule information for more budget airlines than at my favorite BestFlights site (www.bestflights.com.au).

The rest of OAG Travel Planner Pro is, however, a big disappointment in every regard. The biggest design problem is that fares are not shown in conjunction with schedules. You must choose a flight without knowing the price (as in the

1960s). True, several flights may be added for checking the fares in a separate step through WorldTek (the partner company of OAG that does the fare searching) but without the sophistication of Kayak or QXP. Some common options, such as specifying the flexibility of your departure and/or your return days and time and automatically verifying seat availability before showing the results, are missing.

The second problem is that OAG Travel Planner Pro shows very few direct schedules and selections. In my case it showed only three alternatives for the Honolulu to Bangkok, Thailand, route, omitting the two alternatives, Japan Airlines or China Airlines, which I always use simply because they offer shorter flights that arrive in the afternoon or evening, rather than after midnight. The flights also have far better seats and cheaper fares, and they require far fewer miles for upgrades—plus they are more direct than the flights shown.

United, Continental, and Korean Air flights do not show up in the initial results list. The latter is particularly annoying because the Delta flight is a code-share flight; Korean flies both the Honolulu to Seoul and the Seoul to Bangkok legs, but Delta charges \$1,099 for the Korean Air flight that Korean Air itself sells for \$765, according to Kayak. The inexperienced user would not know about this.

In fairness, there were 24 more flights when I asked for more connecting flights. But the next day, it showed 44 connecting flights, so that seemed, at first, to be a better choice. However, looking at the insane routing and duration time (through London in 39 hours 40 minutes; through Los Angeles in 29 hours; or through Beijing in 39 hours, with a 16-hour layover) may frighten the passenger away—even without knowing the price you pay, literally, for these cruelties.

No doubt, Travel Planner Pro goes out of its way to help the searcher. Realizing that I searched for a one-way trip from Honolulu to Bangkok, it volunteers to search for return flights and offers the option to come back with Korean Air (under Delta code) at 6:30 a.m.—on the same day I am scheduled to arrive just past midnight. If the inbound plane would be late, I could not even get through the long passport and customs line, turn around, and check in.

Travel Mode	Depart	Location	Arrive	Location	Number	Stops	Duration	Shortcut
✕✕	07:00 AM	HNL M	03:40 PM	BKK	UA 934/BA 002	Via LHR	39:40	Remove
✕✕	07:00 AM	HNL M	03:40 PM	BKK	UA 934/DF 302	Via LHR	39:40	Add
✕✕	08:15 AM	HNL M	10:45 PM	BKK	JD 4/BA 910	Via SYD	21:30	Add
✕✕	08:15 AM	HNL M	10:45 PM	BKK	JD 4/DF 301	Via SYD	21:30	Add
✕✕	08:15 AM	HNL M	10:45 PM	BKK	DF 284/DF 301	Via SYD	21:30	Add
✕✕	08:25 AM	HNL M	06:30 AM	BKK	AA 270/TG 795	Via LAX	21:30	Remove
✕✕	08:40 AM	HNL M	10:35 PM	BKK	CI 917/KL 9879	Via TPE	20:55	Add
✕✕	10:00 AM	HNL M	06:05 PM	BKK	NV 29/CA 959	Via PEX	20:55	Remove

Implausible routing and layover alternatives hog the results list in OAG

What is worse are the errors of commission, especially in light of the proud claim that the daily updated OAG has the most accurate information. I looked up a trip to San Diego and was surprised to see that Hawaiian Airlines offers business class. The reality is that for quite some time, there has not been business-class seating on any of the U.S. airlines to and from Hawaii.

The airlines worked hand in hand on this so that their customers' mileage would be consumed quicker at the first-class rate. The business-class section was simply relabeled first class, and the honeymooning and vacationing travelers would not get the first-class accommodation that they would see on, say, Asiana, Singapore Airlines, Cathay Pacific, Emirates, or in the movies. The person in charge at OAG should wake up and make the changes of classes to reflect the facts. I saw this misinformation in many of my test searches. I also saw the reverse: OAG offering first-class seating on airlines that gave up on this class and introduced Business Plus instead.

The biggest and most disturbing frustration came when I checked flights from Auckland, New Zealand, to Honolulu for an upcoming lecture tour in Australia and New Zealand. OAG offered a seemingly perfect nonstop flight on Air New Zealand for the day after my last talk, on June 2. I was pleased because my earlier efforts could only find such a flight 3 days later.

Travel Mode	Depart	Location	Arrive	Location	Number	Stops	Duration	Shortcut
✕	10:30 AM	AKL I	06:15 PM	HNL M	NZ 910	Non-Stop	8:45	Remove
✕	10:30 AM	AKL I	06:15 PM	HNL M	NZ 910	Non-Stop	8:45	Add

OAG lists a flight that does not fly on the day requested—nor does it fly on the next day.

As it turned out, when I tried to book that flight, it was a phantom, existing only in the mind of Travel Pro software. This is not only gross by itself, but it also grossly undermines my trust in OAG. The erroneous data in OAG would be a permanent Damocles sword when working on a complex trip with several stopovers. In this case, the viable alternative of coming back through Malaysia and Korea, perhaps after giving a lecture both in Kuala Lumpur and Seoul (as if that was in the cards). I really don't see much reason to subscribe to this service when many of the travel information systems offer much more efficient and state-of-the-art systems.

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