

# ONLINE AND/OR/NOT CD-ROM

## Travel information sources

By Péter Jacsó

This is a no-brainer, you might say. Everything is free on the Web, so why bother with CD-ROMs? Partly you are right, but partly you may be surprised if you read on. Travel planning means different things to different people. Making reservations for a return trip between Boston and New York and for a hotel on a corporate account is quite different from planning cross-country travel by car with two kids and a spouse, optimizing mileage, hotel expenses, and still doing sightseeing en route. There is something for everyone.

### Air & hotel

For business travelers and many pleasure travelers, the combination of these two services are the bread and butter of travel. For some kinds of travel planning, CD-ROMs just don't exist. Take airline fare, schedule, and routing information. Although about a decade ago both OAG and Reed, the two largest publishers of airline and hotel directories, tested CD-ROMs, online can't be beat. This is understandable when you realize that literally tens of thousands of air fares and schedules change every day.

In addition, by now every airline has a Web site, ranging from the barely acceptable to the excellent. Even so, these free Web sites are better than the expensive OAG database available through many professional and consumer services for a hefty fee. It reminds you of the flight reservation systems used by airlines in developing countries in the 1960s.

Except for some top-notch airline sites (Southwest, Singapore Airlines) that let me find the fares almost instantly without wading through too many questions, I use the two best mega travel sites on the Web for flight and hotel reservations (<http://expedia.msn.com> or <http://www.previewtravel.com>) that in turn are also the content partners for InfoSeek and Excite.

Yahoo! is probably the best browsable directory of Web sites, but its travel partner, Travelocity, leaves too much to be desired for me as discussed below.

These Web sites have very similar options, typically offering hotel and car reservations; however, the implementation is different. My favorite is Microsoft Expedia (<http://expedia.msn.com>) for its comprehensive destination guide, at-a-glance review of fares, schedules, and travel time, instant display of most hotels on excellent area maps, elegance in handling multi-leg trips, and swiftness in specifying flying preferences.

I use Preview Travel and another mega-site, FLIFO (<http://www.flifo.com>) for a special kick. Both quote me a number of fares and schedules, and then offer a Farebeater and Best Fare Finder option, respectively, to show how much cheaper I can make the same trip by only slightly changing the time of departure, or the preferred airline. The time alternatives and—unless you need to stick with one carrier for the mileage—airline alternatives are very com-

parable, especially when the price reduction is 30-40 percent. These guys obviously learned well from Hollywood the thrill of the cliff-hanger effect. For a Honolulu-Washington trip with a one-night stopover in San Francisco in June, the original price for my preferred times of departures would have been \$1,350. Unleashing FareBeater and Best

Fare Finder, I got an offer for a \$923 ticket for a less convenient but comparable schedule with the same airline, and a \$761 offer for a much less convenient (red-eye) flight with a good airlines that I had to forgo because of the potential of a strike. Expedia offered the perfect match for airline and departure time at \$989, still an impressive savings.

Many of the other mega travel sites pale in comparison in some regards. For example, Travelocity offers only three flight alternatives (Preview Travel can go up to 30, FLIFO up to 10, Expedia about 10-12), and it is irritating that after specifying departure times, Travelocity ignores them when presenting the alternatives.

There are a few CD-ROMs about hotels and motels, but these cannot hold a candle to the Web sites that have current availability and price information, and maps and photos of tens of thousands of accommodations.

Many chains have their own sites, but once again, the mega travel sites are better for hotel hunting and reservations and they have hotlinks to the facilities' reservation systems. Major tourist cities have their own directory of hotels, but they are often only browsable rather than searchable by location, price, room-type, facilities, and credit card types accepted, etc. Nevertheless, there is an excellent indepen-

(continued on page 10)

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"Most communication from school to parents comes home through kid-mail, sits in a backpack and ends up in a playground," explains Jonathon Carson, CEO of Boston-based Family Education Network. Improving school to parent communication is the mission of Family Education ([www.familyeducation.com](http://www.familyeducation.com)).

#### For parents

Family Education enables parents who own computers to gain specific information about their child's school 24 hours a day. Through Family Education, parents can learn about the school's curriculum, grading, and discipline matters, school board policy under consideration, confer with each other about educational matters, e-mail the school, and research how to finance their child's education.

Carson noted that of the 14,950 parents who accessed Family Education the previous day, its research shows that two-thirds will have logged on at work. Family Education Network "is a company that is focused on home-to-school connection, facilitating communication between the two, where there had previously been a massive breakdown," said Carson. Family Education Network's exclusive agreement with AOL as AOL's home-school link will enable it to expand beyond the 337 school districts representing 2,285 schools that have already signed agreements.

The Plainfield (N.J.) School System, which signed its agreement with Family Education in early 1997, has found that the service improves communication with parents. Free to the school system, Family Education enables Plainfield's schools "to connect to the community. It allows us to communicate with parents and parents to communicate with us through our write-in reply session," said Larry Leverett, superintendent of Plainfield schools. Through Family Education Network, the Plainfield school system provides and updates information on its curriculum, instructional programs, calendar of events, and even its weekly lunch menu.

Don't underestimate those lunch menus, noted Carson. Reading the lunch menu weekly enables parents to decide whether to give their child \$5 for lunch or have

# Family Education Network

*It enhances  
the parent-school  
dialogue*

By Gary M. Stern

them take a lunch, which is as important to parents as whether a person brings their umbrella to work if it rains.

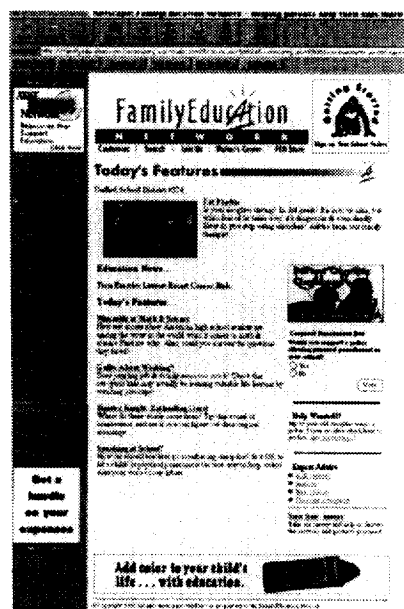
Further, Family Education Network broadens a parent's ability to communicate with a school. If both parents work and are unavailable during school hours and even after school, computer access provides parents an easy communication vehicle to connect to the school on weekends or during their free time. "A better informed parent is a parent who is better able to help their child with school," said superintendent Leverett.

#### Resources

Three of Family Education's resources provide invaluable parental tools. Its 8,000 pages of resource information organized by topics such as Parenting, Health and Safety, College, Special Needs and Best Practices offer tips on how to improve a child's education. Links to articles in *Education Week* and *Exceptional Parent* can also prove useful.

Secondly, parents can send e-mails to experts, including a Harvard psychologist, a pediatrician from a children's hospital, and a former principal, and receive replies within two business days.

Two hundred discussion forums also promote interaction and communication between parents.



Lastly, Family Education Network has forged partnerships with many educational organizations, such as the National PTA, National School Board Association, and Association of School Superintendents. "We are the official, exclusive home school Internet platform for local members," Carson states. In this way, Family Education Network "is trying to build a community of parents, educators, and local activists that genuinely care about the education of students and education system," he said.

Maryland has been the leader in trying to connect every one of its 20 school districts to Family Education. Each school possesses its own unique Web site, which is interconnected to other schools throughout Maryland.

In a study of 13 educational Internet sites by *Family PC* magazine, Family Education Network outrated Parent Soup, the Disney site, and Moms on Line as a resource network for children. *Family PC* noted, "If you are homeschooling your kids, have a child with a learning disability, or want to know how to deal with your toddler's temper tantrums, you'll find answers here. In the Search and Respond section, parents can find other parents who are sharing their experiences."

#### For students

While most of its resources are aimed at parents, it also has two services that appeal to students: a homework and college site. The homework site functions as a research center, enabling students to unearth answers to questions. Unlike AOL's own tutoring service, it does not rely on volunteers, a method which Carson felt could easily become overloaded and ineffective. The "college" site offers students the ability to research college and explore SAT preparation. The KidZone section also includes discussion groups aimed at children, plus a "fun facts" section.

Since Family Education Network opted not to charge school systems, it depends on advertising to support it. Reaching interested parents who are consumers, creating good will, and becoming associated with education has been an effective pitch to entice several advertisers including AT&T, Fleet Bank, AOL, and several children's book publishers to Family Education Network.

#### The time is ripe

Superintendent Leverett raised one critical issue, concerning parents who do not possess a home computer. Family Education helps widen the gulf between the "haves," the parents who own a computer and the "have nots," those who cannot afford a computer. Plainfield's students consist of 80 percent African-American students and 18 percent Hispanic, and only about one-third own a home computer. CEO Carson rebuts this point, noting that many parents have Internet access at work and that computer prices are becoming more affordable as prices fall below \$1,000.

We're trying to create improved communication between the private sector, the public, and non-profit sectors," Carson said. The time is ripe to reach more parents and increase their involvement in their child's education, he said. In the future, he envisions connecting one school system to another, improving communication between them. Family Education Network's will soon have easy access to AOL's 12 million members, which will go a long way toward reaching more of the 30 million American households with children. ♦

## ONLINE AND/OR NOT CD-ROM

(continued from page 3)

dent site: The Hotel Guide (THG) at <http://www.hotelguide.com>. It has information about 60,000 hotels all around the world and is very easily searchable.

#### Bus & train

This travel tool category is absolutely ruled by Web resources. However, buses and trains lose their appeal for travelers in the U.S. and this shows in the Web offerings. In Europe, train travel is still a booming business, and train services in Western Europe and—on some lines—in Spain are top notch. Not surprisingly, this shows in the quality of most of the related European Web sites.

As for nationwide bus information for the U.S. Greyhound (<http://www.greyhound.com>), it is somewhat disappointing. Although I can get fare and travel time information, there are no further details about the itinerary. These should be fairly easy to put up on the Web as the printed timetables are made from computer files and could be converted into HTML format.

Many regional transportation companies (such as the excellent Monterey-Salinas Transit system (<http://www.mst.org>)) have much better Web sites with more details, itinerary maps, and schedules.

Amtrak could also improve its Web site. If my destination cannot be reached by two changes of train, I have to break a trip to construct a trip to a common

hub. No advice is given about the best hub, and even when it is found, the two separate segments are not shown on the same screen.

Most regional train service operators, again, offer better online information service than Amtrak, and so do many European railway systems, like Deutsche Bahn AG (<http://www.bahn.de>) that shows how well a journey guide or a routing map can be implemented.

The Web site of RailEurope (<http://www.raileurope.com>) is as impressive as its comprehensive transportation system that covers the continent. Check out, for example, an Amsterdam-Budapest routing to see the perfect handling of constructing connections, and the presentation of alternative prices for different service (com-

fort) levels. In spite of its name, it also handles limited air, hotel, and rental car reservations when combined with railway travel. Most of the travel mega-sites also help you with cruise planning, but I did not test these.

#### Car travel

The travel mega-sites are the best sources for car rental information. There is no reason to go to the Web sites of the individual rental companies as they hardly offer anything more than the mega-sites, except for Avis (<http://www.avis.com>). It used to have excellent (though very large and slow to download) driving maps, and recently it teamed up with MapQuest to provide maps and driving directions.

## ONLINE AND/OR NOT CD-ROM

(continued from page 10)

This latter is a special category because of the obsession of most male drivers of not asking for directions. Now there are plenty of Web sites and CD-ROMs that can help them to get directions without asking a human.

For no-fuss, no-muss driving directions between two cities, there are some good Web sites. International Travel Network is the simplest, with a plain textual routing plan of turn-by-turn directions. MapBlast (<http://www.mapblast.com>) offers an easy versus fast routing alternative and also a routing map. Both use map data from Etak as implemented by Vicinity Corporation, but MapBlast enhances the data with options to show nearby hotels, restaurants, and a variety of other services from the yellow page directory of Switchboard, which acquired MapBlast.

Expedia uses its own excellent maps and turn-by-turn directions in a simple tabular format. The TripQuest module of MapQuest (<http://www.mapquest.com>) licences the maps from Geosystems and offers city-to-city and door-to-door directions. Turn-by-turn instructions are provided only for the former. It has a rather pestering attitude that provides unnecessarily exact addresses that you have to type in from a list of options instead of just picking one. On the other hand, it offers hotels, motels, and restaurants, as well as city and weather information, but no turn-by-turn maps.

Maps On Us (<http://www.mapsonus.com>) also has options for specifying intermediate stops, preferred and non-preferred road types, selecting lodgings by categories within a radius chosen by the user, but without price and amenities information.

So what can the CD-ROM travel planners, like Microsoft Expedia Trip Planner, Rand MacNally's TripMaker Deluxe, Delorme's AAA Map 'n' Go offer? All of the above and then some. Plenty of lodging, dining, and cultural/entertainment information along the way that can be filtered by numerous criteria; side-by-side display of the itinerary and the map; quick zoom-in/out and navigation operations; online connection for event and road construction information updates; many choices for route preferences, including scenic route category, budgeting, diary and travel album options.

All these are highly integrated with routing information and driving directions across Canada, the U.S., and Mexico in a consistent manner. Beyond the appealing common traits, each of these programs has its unique strengths and some minor limitations that I will discuss in my upcoming column in *Computers in Libraries* (published by Information Today, Inc.; <http://www.infoday.com>).

For anyone who wants to do a real travel plan for multiple destinations in the most convenient one-stop shopping manner, the above CD-ROM travel reference sources are well worth the \$30-\$40 street price. ♦

## Book Review

(continued from page 9)

pany success stories to build its case, but focusing on general principles rather than specific details.

The book is easy to read, but not simplistic. It is well organized into separate chapters for each of the main concepts—the "blur" itself, the "offer," the "exchange," the economy, organizations, people, capital and "Living the Blur." It moves from explaining how things are and where they are going, to advising on how best to take

advantage of the trends at the organizational and personal levels.

It is a valuable book for business readers. Each chapter articulates specific questions readers should be asking to determine how far along their business or institution has progressed in their adaptation to the new economy. These checklists can provide direction for those whose organizations are still mired in the past.

*Blur* is really a consultant report, with all its findings, conclusions, recommendations, and provocative questions, but presented palatably as a popular business book. The insights of the authors are

supported by extensive research conducted by team members of the Ernst & Young Center for Business Innovation.

In keeping with their own recommendations, the authors have packaged the book as a "blurred" offer (interactive, customized, learning and upgradeable), inviting readers to contribute to ongoing discussions, in which Chris Meyer takes an active part, at the book's Web site (<http://www.blur.site.com>). There one can also find reviews, chapter outlines, author information, searching questions with summarized responses from the book, and links to the related work of the Center for Business Innovation. ♦

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