

## Holiday on ice



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The Internet has been a revolution for the travel industry. So they say. And indeed, the Internet has initiated an evolution towards on-line reservation systems that has created a new, but harsh reality for the independent travel agency. Unfortunately, for the average traveller itself this has generated little added value.

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We are close to the end of the summer holiday season here in Europe, so it is a good moment to relax a bit and to look back at some past experiences in the live of the average traveller.

So now and then, my dear spouse and myself are in need of a short vacation trip. In general, we do have a rough idea of a preferred destination. Unfortunately, these trips are never planned for long in advance, so our final destination is most often a matter of availability instead of pure choice and preference. Nevertheless, it was an opportunity to explore the added value of above Internet revolution.

As said, the rumour goes that the Internet has transformed the travel industry and I do agree. The opportunities and possibilities created by this new medium disseminating information, providing direct access to reservation systems, etc. has indeed overthrown major parts of the travel business supply chain.

Previously, travel agencies were often mandatory, unavoidable links in the reservation process with little added value. With the Internet, much of these intermediate positions have become obsolete or they survive by providing extra services such as free transport to the airport etc.

However, apart from this trend towards more on-line reservation, little has changed for the traveller itself. Prices are not exactly lower than before. Consolidation in the market has eliminated several players and reduced differentiation and choice. And finally, the quest for the perfect holiday trip has not really become easier.

In theory, the Internet can be an excellent medium to collect information, compare prices, and have a global view on the offering of multiple tour operators. And indeed, there is a multitude of portal sites that claim to provide these types of services.

Unfortunately, reality is less encouraging. Most of these sites also exhibit some degree of unwanted filtering of information. This can be because they have some privileged relationship with tour operator X, because some of the smaller players cannot readily provide the information in the format they require or simply because they don't care too much about the completeness of their information.

The net result is that a traveller who wants to get a "complete" view on the options available still has to do his own piece of research, first identifying the suitable candidate tour operators and then, trying to get a closer look at the individual offerings. None of these have become really easier with the Internet.

### Starter

I should have known better after my first attempt.

The first website I visited, the one of the largest Belgian tour operator, gave me a "not available" warning. Instead of the homepage, I got a pretty picture with the message "Unfortunately, our website is not available at the moment. Our apologies for this inconvenience."

Well, as Duke Nukem would say, "shit happens". Overall, websites are rather fragile beings that require so now and then a serious health check and some revitalisation.

However, it became a bit more puzzling when, almost a week later, this website still displayed the same message. As said, some degree of unavailability is unavoidable, but a travel reservation website that is unavailable for a week is not exactly state of the art. So I gave it a closer look.

And indeed, the real culprit rapidly became visible. A year ago, I had visited this same site and stored the address in my favourites list. Apparently, in the mean time, the structure of the site had been changed and this address was no longer valid. Normally, this should have given me the regular 404-error.

Of course, such 404-error page isn't the most interesting one on the Internet, so most companies do implement some mechanism that will intercept this error and will display a user-friendlier page that informs you about the address change and preferably, guides you automatically to the correct location.

Apparently, an attempt had been made to implement something similar here. Unfortunately, the result was not completely perfect.

## Main course

This hurdle (and the unavoidable Flash intro-screen) passed, you are ready for the next step and the next disappointment.

As already mentioned, in theory, the Internet can be a perfect medium to collect information, compare prices, etc. about your planned trip. In reality, most travel websites are only a poor replication of the paper brochure.

Travel brochures are organised according to a classical tree structure: country / region / hotel. In combination with the table of contents, this provides a suitable structure for a direct search. In addition, it is also a convenient structure for a more random exploration of the information, simply because it is easy to scroll through a paper brochure.

Today, the same tree structure is used on most travel websites. Unfortunately, scrolling through pages is the last thing you want to do here. Navigation on a travel reservation website is acceptable if you precisely know what you are looking for. However, it is completely unsuitable for a more random exploration of the available information, whereby you first try to get a general idea of the offering, before gradually closing down on your own preferences and interests.

The way most travel websites are organised today, such way of exploring the contents is nearly impossible or at least, extremely boring and time consuming. You have to re-enter again and again the same dates, selections and preferences. Selections are also very binary on the Internet, which often makes that you get either too little or too much information. You always have to follow the structure of the site in order to get to the next item, continuously navigating back and up and down... Simply having a quick look at the details of some 10 hotels for the same location will take ages on the Internet, whereas it only takes a couple of minutes in the paper brochure.

Therefore, the current generation of travel websites brings little added value for the traveller who still has to make up his mind. In essence, the "added value" is limited to a few extra pictures, some additional information and of course, the on-line reservation.

## Dessert

But OK, I finally find the travel organisation and the destination that both suit my preferences and my budget and I hit the "Select" button.

A wonderful world becomes available. As a start, they can provide me a detailed price calculation for my trip, including all the additional options I have selected. Excellent!

Unfortunately, they have to inform me that no price calculation can be done when Norton Internet Security is installed on my machine, unless I add (via the "advanced options") the address of their site to my list of trusted sites in order to solve the problem.

What the heck is this? Numerous times I have made reservations and purchases, including on-line payments, via the Internet and never was I asked to do something similar. Why? Do they need a few extra

CPU cycles of my PC in order to get the calculation done?

I cannot understand this. These days, people are increasingly worrying about the vulnerability of the Internet as a medium for on-line transactions and payments and here, they are simply asking me to swing the door wide open!

Anyway, now that I have already reached this level of frustration, little harm can be done. I will remove their address afterwards.

A couple of pages and input forms later, I finally arrive at the page with the button to give my final confirmation. They tell me that after this, I will get another screen where I will be able to enter my data for the on-line payment. Push that button!

I get an empty screen with the text "There is no availability yet or you haven't selected a region". It doesn't really sound like a positive confirmation for my booking.

## The bill

I have read numerous articles stating that most people use the Internet to search information regarding products they want to buy, but that they prefer to do the purchase itself via the more traditional channels. Apparently, there are some good reasons to do so.

Myself also, I have finally dialled the number of their reservation helpdesk. The friendly lady that answered my call immediately could tell me that I had to completely stop Norton Internet Security on my PC. Otherwise, it would never work. Ah, another seamless integration of technology!

"Are you going to give it another try via the Internet?" she asked. She also could do the reservation for me on the spot, but then I would not get the five Euro discount that is offered for an on-line booking.

"Forget about the discount!" I replied. "Make the damned thing happen!"

Have fun!

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