Still deciding whether to use a travel professional for your next adventure? Read the article below...then call the team at Stone Arch Travel and let's get started!

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Lileks: $97 to Paris, or, lies the internet tells us

Taking a flight can be full of misery and anxiety; why shouldn't the experience of booking one be, too? JAMES LILEKS@LILEKS

How you made travel plans before the internet: Call a travel agent; wait; tickets show up in your mail. Obviously, this had to change. Now we use the tools of the web to make our own reservations. Yay. Taking a flight can be full of misery and anxiety; why shouldn't the experience of booking one be, too? Let's say you type "flights from MSP to Paris" into Google. The first link is an ad: "$97 flights to Paris." Whoa: How? Do they duct-tape you to the undercarriage, give you a tank of air and a baguette? No, the baguette's probably extra. You're intrigued, so you click.

The page should immediately redirect you to something that sells nutritional supplements made out of beets and pussywillow extract, because you just announced to the internet, "I will believe anything you tell me!" Instead, you get a search site that lets you choose from other search sites to get the best deal. This is like calling a travel agent who gives you the number of three other travel agents.

Three new windows pop up. The first says it's "searching the unpublished databases of tickets." As we wait, we envision a bored, chain-smoking Bulgarian 20-something wearing a track suit and slouched in a plastic chair while hacking into Delta just for us. This window comes back with a $528 ticket and starts a countdown: You have 30 minutes to take advantage of this deal, after which smoke will pour from your computer and all evidence of this intrusion is vaporized.

The second window has a ticket for $2,656. You forget about the mythical $97 ticket and think, "Man, I should jump on that $528 ticket before it vaporizes."

The third window crashes your browser because it's loading 52 flashing animated ads for rental cars.

So you start over. Now the Google search turns up a $320 ticket to Paris. Cold sweat beads on your brow. You haven't even begun to look and the deals are vanishing. The $528 ticket is $601 now, but at least the 30-minute clock has reset. You click for details, and they want your e-mail. You check the box that says, "Yes, I want to receive 16 e-mails a day with misleading offers that will clog my inbox until the sun gutters out into a lifeless ball of coal."

At this point, the dog starts to throw up something, and you can tell it's on the good rug, so you go to deal with that. When you return, everything has timed out. That's it. Paris is full.

Stop. Breathe. Then go to one of the big-name travel sites. Let's say we pick expedocityak.com. It's simple: Enter your dates and say you want flight and hotel — unless you're bunking in the park or subway tunnel, I guess. The site thinks for a moment and presents you with 489 hotels.

Scroll down. Hmm, the St. Vermin. Reviews are good: "Loved the crowssants in the morning, but the soap was hard. Stairs went up and down and had easily gripped banisters. Hot and cold running soup."

You click through the pictures of the room, and it seems nice. But, hey, what's this? A pop-up notice just announced that 67 people are looking at the Hotel St. Vermin now, and there are "ONLY TWO ROOMS LEFT." Then another pop-up notice warns you that there are hundreds of people looking at Paris hotels right now, and there are only 10 rooms left in the entire city.

Now you're twitching again, because you'll be damned if these people are going to beat you out of a night at the St. Vermin.

So you book it. And then you smile, imagining the 66 other people wailing because there's only one room left. You mentally close the door, imagining them brawling for the last one.

Besides, it's time to move on to booking the flight. This should be easier than finding a hotel because the options are simple:

A. Nonstop, so you can be reasonably assured of actually getting there.

B. Multiple flights with three airlines, transferring in Atlanta and Singapore with 14 minutes in each airport to get from Gate A1 to Gate G367.

You choose your flight, and prepare to check out. But hold on a minute: When you hit the button to buy the ticket, it was $1,426 with hotel, but now it's $1,994. What happened?

You don't dare click the back button, because that might release your room at the St. Vermin — you can actually imagine some stranger throwing your luggage in the hall. So you open up another browser window and try it all again. Hmm, there's still one room left at the Vermin. Now you're wondering what's wrong with it. What happened to those 66 people looking at it? Did they find something better? Maybe you should look, too?

An hour of internet digging later, you've found another hotel on page 49 of the search results; it's cheap, but it includes "complimentary windows," so you take it. Total price is now $1,984. You've just saved $10!

Last question: "Do you want trip insurance, in case you have to make changes in your plans?" Then comes the guilt that the entire travel industry will be thrown into a disorienting whirlwind if you have to change something.

"Sir, we were expecting you to be on this flight that leaves in six weeks. Now you're saying you want to go the next day. What are we supposed to do with that seat?"

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