

VIRTUAL REALITY by Steve Stecklow

Got 50 Bucks? Fly to Fiji

A look inside the world of obsessive Web watchers who pounce on fare errors

STEPHEN MUTKOSKI, a 37-year-old lawyer at Microsoft near Seattle, was thrilled recently to find a mistaken fare online for business-class flights to Europe—just \$33 plus taxes. He quickly booked trips for himself and his wife in July, August and Thanksgiving week. The catch: The flights are to Larnaca, Cyprus. From Toronto.

"I just figure we'll get to Toronto somehow," Mr. Mutkoski says. He and his wife plan to be on Long Island, N.Y., in mid-July anyway, so what's a slight detour to the Mediterranean via Canada? Mr. Mutkoski knows little about Larnaca, but as he's hoping to take at least two of the trips they've booked, he'll be getting to know it well.

For Mr. Mutkoski and a cadre of other hard-core travel bargain-hunters on the Internet, the journey mainly is about saving breathtaking amounts of money—never mind the destination. Mr. Mutkoski found his Cyprus deal on a travelers' Web site called FlyerTalk.com, where he saw a message that Italian airline Alitalia was offering "wickedly low" business-class fares on the route.

There's a loose network of obsessives who keep apprised of prices not just on mainstream travel sites like Travelocity, but also on a growing number of other sites that specialize in detecting "unusual" prices across the Web. Many are mistakes, from a round-trip Los Ange-

les-to-Fiji excursion for \$51 to a Holiday Inn resort room in Thailand for three cents a night.

Not every airline, hotel or travel Web site always honors prices like these when they are caused by glitches—Travelocity, a unit of Sabre Holdings, in March refused to accept hundreds of bookings for a Japanese Hilton for \$3 a night. And consumers usually have little legal standing when it comes to forcing vendors to honor mistakes. But a surprising number of companies do, as the people I met on a venture into this Web community can attest.

In the case of the Cyprus deal, Paola Lui, a spokeswoman for Alitalia, says the airline will honor the bookings of 509 passengers who jumped on the mistaken fare and were ticketed. "In a certain sense, it was our fault," she says, explaining that an employee "forgot to add two zeroes" while typing in the fare.

TRAVEL-INDUSTRY officials say pricing errors remain rare, and that internal computer systems designed to flag suspiciously low prices snare most of them. But with millions of transactions taking place all the time, and humans still responsible for entering many rates into computers, errors are inevitable. "It is completely impossible that we are totally flawless," says Bala Subramanian, senior vice president for distribution and brand integration at

Hilton Hotels.

What has changed, everyone agrees, is how quickly consumers now learn of mistakes and rush to cash in. There are now at least four Web sites that publicize travel-pricing glitches and a global online community of people ready to go virtually anywhere if the price is low enough. One site, FareAlert.net ("Home of the Legendary Deals!"), notifies more than 50,000 subscribers of pricing errors via email, and offers rewards like gift cards for useable tips people send in. "If it looks too good to be true, we want to know!" the site proclaims.

The online epicenter of travel-deal discovery is FlyerTalk, a sort of methadone clinic for frequent-flyer and hotel-stay program addicts. In its highly trafficked message forums, users exchange tips, strategies, news of the latest travel promotions, and the best ways to achieve and maintain "elite" status in various programs. They also pass along reports of pricing errors.

Many error seekers lucked out in February when they saw messages on FlyerTalk reporting rooms at a Holiday Inn resort hotel in Phuket, Thailand, for less than three cents a night. Tristan Embury, a credit manager in London, quickly took advantage on the hotel chain's Web site. He booked the hotel for six months. "Just an insurance policy," he says. "I figured, what the heck, it

Travel for (Almost) Nothing

Airlines and hotels don't always honor reservations based on pricing errors, but many travelers get lucky. Four Web sites that specialize in finding the most unusual deals:

AIRFAREWATCHDOG.COM

Specialty: "Unusually low," unadvertised airfare specials that aren't just pricing errors, though some of those are included, too. Verifies that seats are actually available before posting any deals.

Recent Deal: Tickets from several U.S. cities, including Milwaukee and Kansas City, Mo., to Acapulco, Mexico, on American Airlines for \$0 plus taxes.

FAREALERT.NET

Specialty: Sends email alerts on "out of the ordinary" airfares and hotel rates, which usually means pricing mistakes. Offers rewards like gift certificates for useable tips.

Recent Deal: Business-class tickets on Alitalia from Toronto to Cyprus for \$39 Canadian, plus taxes. Alitalia honored 509 tickets.

FLYERTALK.COM

Specialty: A haven for thousands of frequent-flyer addicts. Its members discuss all sorts of deals, including pricing mistakes, on its message boards, especially the Mileage Run and Hotel Deals forums.

Recent Deal: Spread word of a 3 cents/night rate at the Holiday Inn Resort Phuket in Thailand, found on another site.

FREETRAVELING.COM

Specialty: Deals mostly in hotel pricing errors found on popular travel Web sites, like Travelocity.com.

Recent Deal: Another site, TripRewards.com, had "find a lower rate and your stay is free" offers for Super 8 hotels in two cities. FreeTraveling found and posted lower rates, so FreeTraveling users could get free stays via TripRewards.

wouldn't cost me anything."

Like others on FlyerTalk, Mr. Embury later received a letter from the Thai hotel manager confirming the "once-in-a-lifetime" deal and blaming it on "a human error." A spokesman for the hotel chain, InterContinental Hotels Group, explains, "We honored the rate as we felt our customers booked the rooms in good faith." Mr. Embury says he ended up canceling the reservations because he and his wife, who is a doctor, couldn't get away. But he's still holding onto four round-trip, first-class air tickets from Toronto he bought—three to Hawaii and one to Alaska—for roughly \$35 each, plus

a \$26 booking fee. "I may not go, but it's great having that option there," he says.

ON APRIL 1, Mark Schonbach, the 24-year-old co-founder of FareAlert—"it's just a hobby," he says, declining to disclose his real job—sent out a mass emailing about a Travelocity listing of \$3-a-night, executive-floor hotel rooms at the Hilton in Osaka, Japan, after getting a tip from a subscriber. Word quickly spread to FlyerTalk, where one visitor wrote, "Just booked it. We'll see what happens with this one."

Hundreds of bargain-hunters tried to

take advantage. But two days later, Travelocity Chief Executive Michelle Peluso posted a message on FlyerTalk saying that unlike some other pricing errors—including the \$51 flights to Fiji last year, which were honored—"the accurate price was shown at several points during the booking process." Travelocity offered consumers either one night at the \$3 rate or a discount on a future trip package.

Dana Harris, who works in public television in North Dakota, did get to go to Acapulco, Mexico, in January after paying \$102 in taxes for round-trip airfare on American Airlines from Minneapolis. He booked it on the airline's Web site after learning about it from an email from Airfarewatchdog.com, a year-old site that employs a small team of people who scour travel sites looking for bargains, both mistakes and legitimate ones. A spokesman for American Airlines described the fare as "obviously in error" and declined to explain how it happened or how many people took advantage.

Mr. Harris, who is single and says he is in a position to "do whatever I want, whenever I want," traveled by himself. He told me the six-day vacation cost around \$500, with the biggest single expense not the airfare, but a toll road he took to see pyramids outside of Mexico City.

Unlike some other pricing-error deals where beneficiaries arrange to meet and celebrate, he says he didn't encounter anyone else who had gotten the bargain airfare. But he couldn't resist mentioning it to some other passengers on the plane. "They were jealous, of course," he says.