

## The Web - for all your worldwide travel needs

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Someone once said that the Web is great for finding a needle in a haystack (that perfect boutique hotel), but not so good at finding the haystack (i.e., figuring out where in the world you want to go).

What follows are a few Web sites to help you with your haystack-hunt, and also a couple of delightful time-wasters:

**Custom planning:** A new Web site, Triporati ([www.triporati.com](http://www.triporati.com)), attempts to do what a good travel agent would do: listen to your interests, preferences and druthers, then suggest a destination that's right for you.

The site's still in its beta phase, but it seems to be working well. I tried it out by listing my interests as beaches, rock climbing and eco-tourism, my travel window as the month of February, my lodging budget as under \$50 a night and my focus as Asia. It immediately recommended Thailand's Andaman Coast, which I know from experience is the perfect choice.

On a single page, it gave me almost more information than I could process: a description from veteran Thailand guidebook writer Joe Cummings; a monthly weather chart; links to Wikipedia and Wikitravel pages about the destination; links to Flickr photos and YouTube videos of the place; links to a Google map; a list of "must dos;" a calendar of events; a link to the visitors' bureau; a summary of recent news from the Andaman Coast; a link to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention page; a link that allows you to search for airfares on 15 different sites; U.S. State Department advisories; visa information; a link for booking hotels; and more.

I'm exhausted just typing this.

(Full disclosure: One of the people behind the site is my friend Larry Habegger, executive editor of Travelers' Tales Books and author of World Travel Watch.)

**YouTube:** We've come to think of YouTube as the go-to place for video of campaign gaffes and kittens playing the piano. But, in many cases, it can be a good way to preview a prospective destination.

You may have to sort through a plague of poorly edited home movies, but there are often gems to be found.

My colleague Spud Hilton is leaving for Australia's Eyre Peninsula, and a quick search of YouTube yielded several unsigned but professionally shot videos that appear to come from the local tourism board - footage of whales, sand dunes and waves crashing. It may not be comprehensive, but it's a quick and easy way to get a general feel for a place.

**Bulletin boards:** Looking for a good dermatology clinic on Koh Samui? For a vegan restaurant in Slovakia? For someone with whom to share a ride from Penjikent to Dushanbe, Tajikistan? Online bulletin boards hold an amazing compendium of travel knowledge, much of it more up to date than any guidebook on the market.

The two best ones I've found are Lonely Planet's Thorn Tree Travel Forum (named after a onetime watering hole for budget travelers in Nairobi), [www.lonelyplanet.com/thorntree](http://www.lonelyplanet.com/thorntree); and Rick Steves' Graffiti Wall, [www.ricksteves.com/graffiti](http://www.ricksteves.com/graffiti).

Post a question, and chances are you'll hear from someone who's been to your destination in recent weeks or is there right now. Steves is usually best for Europe (for information on specific destinations, click through to the Travelers' Helpline), Lonely Planet for the rest of the world.

And remember, treat advice you receive as you would any information gleaned from a stranger.

Live cams: You've got to love the Swiss: Before you hand over 91 francs - that's about 80 bucks - to ride the cable car to the 9,750-foot summit of the Schilthorn, they let you check out the view from the top on a live cam next to the ticket booth. If the top's socked in, as it often is, you might as well save your money. But there's no need even to travel as far as the ticket booth: You can check out the view over the Internet.

It's just one of thousands of live cams available on the Web. In a few minutes of surfing I watched live streaming video of traffic in London's Trafalgar Square (pretty light; that new fee for city-center driving seems to be working); checked out the beach in Waikiki (overcast at the moment); watched a couple of guys play pool in an Amsterdam cafe (I think even I could beat the guy with the goatee) and got an Oswald-eye view out the window of the sixth floor of the Texas School Book Depository in Dallas (compellingly creepy).

These views tend to be raw and unadorned, and they're a good reality check after you've perused destination brochures with all the graffiti, power lines and rain clouds Photoshopped out.

How to find them: Just type in the name of a destination and "live cam" into your search engine. Alternatively, visit [Earthcam.com](http://Earthcam.com) and Camvista.com, which have links to many dozens of cams around the world.

Time now for a couple of beguiling time wasters:

See food: Have you ever yearned to scroll through thousands of pictures of airline food? Me neither. But that's what you'll find at [www.airlinemeals.net](http://www.airlinemeals.net), one of the more obsessive niche sites I've ever stumbled upon. There's even a nostalgia section. If you want to see what TWA was serving in the 1950s, or Pan Am in the 1960s - or what Air Mozambique is offering today - this is the site for you. Of course, as airline after airline eliminates meals, the whole site will one day be nostalgia.

So that's where it went: Each day airlines lose 10,000 pieces of luggage. Most of it is eventually reunited with its owner, but what about the rest? I'd always suspected it ended up in outer space, orbiting Earth in the vicinity of the Van Allen radiation belt. But the truth is even stranger: It makes its way to a tiny Alabama town in the foothills of the Appalachian Mountains.

That's where you'll find the Unclaimed Baggage Center, which fills an entire city block in the town of Scottsboro. Seven thousand new items - mostly clothes, but also cameras, jewelry and more - arrive there every day.

You can't buy it online, but the store's Web site ([www.unclaimedbaggage.com](http://www.unclaimedbaggage.com)) is a dangerously compelling place to linger while you're supposed to be doing something more productive.

it lists, among other things, some of the stranger items that have turned up (a suit of armor; a 1,500-year-old, mummified Egyptian falcon; a one-of-a-kind camera designed for NASA; the guidance system for an F16 fighter jet; and a live rattlesnake), and it also lists some very wise things to do to ensure your luggage doesn't end up there.

The Competent Traveler runs the second Sunday of each month. John Flinn is executive editor of Travel. To comment, visit [sfgate.com/travel](http://sfgate.com/travel).