

How has buying a plane ticket changed over the last 20 years? When you purchase a ticket, you really have to pay attention to all the small print that spells out the restrictions and specific circumstances for a refund.

"Well, the first thing you have to realize," says Bonni Simon, owner of GTI Travel "is that most of today's U.S. carriers are bankrupt. Accordingly, the restrictions on plane tickets, the advance purchase options, the refunds, not to mention the hundreds of dollars of change fees and taxes that we didn't have before are all coming into play. Twenty years ago, we didn't have deregulation in place so we had a situation where people were buying tickets that were generally good for at least a year or longer."

"Contrast this to today," she points out, "where they're only good for 2-3 months. The reality is that very few people flew 20 years ago compared to today and so the regulations and penalties just weren't as stiff. When you purchase a ticket, you really have to pay attention to all the small print that spells out the restrictions and specific circumstances for a refund. In our agency, for example, when we print out an international or domestic ticket, we print many things to accompany it such as the rules for canceling a ticket altogether or waiting until a few hours before your flight is supposed to take off. What we've seen are penalties which were fairly lax in the old days to now extreme repercussions. Let's say that you're an hour late to the airport and miss your flight. Twenty years ago, this wouldn't have been a problem. Today, that ticket would instantly become invalid."

Security issues since September 11th have also impacted the processing of ticketed passengers. 'At Los Angeles International," Simon offers as an example, "you have to be there two hours in advance. If you haven't gone through customs or through the security checkpoints and you're not in line half an hour before the plane starts boarding, they're under absolutely no obligation to board you."

Simon further explains that people are often misled by the ticket prices announced in the travel section of newspapers or on internet websites. "We estimate that approximately 350,000 fares come in per day and with each of those fares is a different rule. The only fares which are completely refundable are full-coach fares, business class and first class tickets. She offers an example of a first class fare to London being around \$11,000-\$12,000. "Something like that isn't going to have any restrictions on it because you're paying a great deal of money to take that trip and you're not the kind of customer an airline wants to lose!"

On a ticket that you purchase 30-75 days out, "Simon continues, it is a fully restricted ticket. For economy fares, this generally means no refund. You can however, generally book the travel for 12 months later. You'll also have to pay a penalty from the airline- generally a \$150 change fee-something else which passengers didn't have to do in the past. On top of that, if you're changing city pairs, dates, advance purchase, you're not only paying the change fee but there may also be a difference in airfare as well.

Another point of confusion she often addresses with clients is when a specific fare is quoted on one day but is gone by the next. "The fare used to hold for several days:, Simon says, "but today the quote doesn't hold past the time we

give it to you. For example, we tell you a fare is \$265, its \$265 at that very moment. However, the airlines can change that fare within an hour, they can change it at midnight,, they can change it first thing in the morning when they roll over their fare bases. Therefore we have to say to everyone who wants to purchase a ticket through us that we can hold their reservation for 24 hours but it doesn't guarantee the ticket price that was quoted. Inexpensive tickets, in particular, won't hold the fare.

"If you're working on getting your own ticket 24/7," Simon adds, "and sitting at a computer watching fares, there's always a chance a seat will be cleared and you can pounce on it right away. Unfortunately, you can also be on the internet for 24 hours straight without realizing that changes occur so quickly. It may not be the best use of your time."

Airplane configurations have also changed dramatically in two decades, Simon points out. By putting beds in the first class sections, this has put a squeeze in economy, a section that Simon refers to with a laugh as "steerage". "People who are paying \$200 round trip to the West Coast or \$400 round trip to London know what they're getting into. They know they're going to have their knees in their chin for 12 hours because that's what they're paying for."

Ancillary services are adding an additional burden to customers. Charges for baggage, priority boarding lines, better seats, meals on board are adding up to 30% of the price of the ticket, Simon adds.
