

Can you figure out airline costs these days? Looking at the endless price and schedule lists, it's like shopping at Sam the Sharpster's used car lot. Including some pricing that seems to be designed to confuse the senior buyer. For instance, while trying to book on American Airlines in March from New York's JFK or Newark's EWR nonstop to LAX in Los Angeles, I found great differences in prices. Depending on the time of day you fly, the price for its Economy Super Saver ranges from \$139 to \$299.



On the other end of the scale, the most expensive ticket, called First Flexible, ranges from \$1,507 to \$2,558. If I'm not mistaken, everyone sits in the same aircraft and arrives at exactly the same time. Of course, the wealthier flyers get bigger seats, free booze, dinner and other benefits. But, is it worth another thousand bucks to eat a steak TV dinner and sip champagne in comfy seats?

On most days, the best prices are for the red eye flights, those scheduled from about 9 pm and later, a favorite of night owls. A non-stop cross-country takes only about four hours, so it can't be that too uncomfortable in cheap coach seats. Of course, international flights are another story. On bargain lines, such as Virgin Atlantic, on certain bargain deals, you can take the red-eye from JFK to London for as little as \$180 each way.

Of course, you'll have to spend eight hours cooped up in a five-across seat like a canned sardine. But, if it would be of any comfort to you, there may be some flyers just a compartment or so away on the same aircraft, who are paying \$2,500 for a seat that tilts back to become an uncomfortably bent bed.

As a general rule, night owls who don't mind flying red-eye get the best prices on their airline tickets. For your next flight, check first with your favorite online agencies, such as travelocity.com, expedia.com, orbitz.com and several others. Sometimes, especially for last-minute deals, it may also be worthwhile to contact the airline's website directly.

Whatever your plans for flying, whether day or night, short hops or overseas, do your homework and get yourself the best possible bargain. Be flexible about schedules and maybe keep a bag packed in case you grab a last-minute bargain. Unless, of course, you prefer shelling out thousands extra for that bottle of cheap champagne and microwaved steak dinner.