

[ TRAVELWISE ]

## HOW TO FLY CHEAP

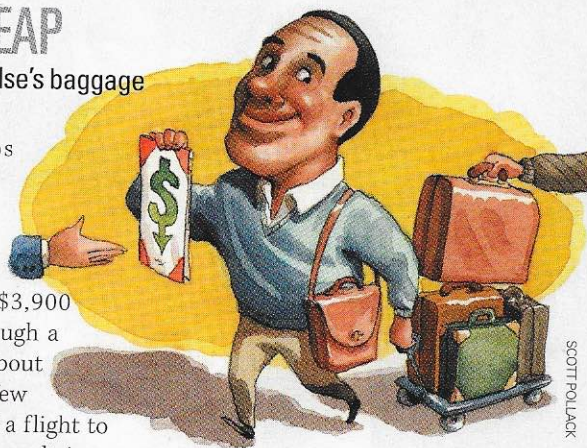
The benefits of someone else's baggage

**J**ason Stevens of Los Angeles needed to fly to Thailand on three days notice to close a business deal but couldn't afford the \$3,900 roundtrip airfare. Through a friend, Stevens heard about courier travel. After a few phone calls he boarded a flight to Bangkok for just \$450 roundtrip.

Companies all over the world use couriers' checked baggage allowance to transport their cargo in exchange for drastically reduced airfare. The savings can be as much as 85% of the cost of a roundtrip ticket, according to Bruce Causey, president of the International Association of Air Travel Couriers (IAATC). At press time, IAATC was offering a roundtrip flight from San Francisco to Singapore for \$150. By comparison, Internet giants Travelocity and Expedia had the same flight for \$750. Causey says that although 85% is an extreme-case savings, these discounts are available often, especially if the courier/passenger is flexible and available to travel at a moment's notice.

John Ferry of the Air Courier Association says a person can book courier travel as much as 60 days in advance and in some cases all you carry is paper work, meaning you don't have to give up your baggage allowance.

The traveler's responsibilities? Arrive at the airport on time to meet a courier



SCOTT POLLACK

service representative. They will hand you the necessary shipping documents, customs forms, and ticket. At your final destination, hand the documents to a designated representative at the airport and you're done. The tickets are roundtrip with liberal return dates.

There are, however, several caveats:

- In some cases, you'll only have carry-on luggage if the company has used your checked baggage allowance.
- A companion ticket will cost full fare.
- Unless it's a rush job, expect to pay for your own hotel accommodations.

The IAATC ([www.courier.org](http://www.courier.org)) and the Air Courier Association ([www.aircourier.org](http://www.aircourier.org)) both charge membership fees (\$45 and \$29, respectively) to link prospective couriers to more than 30 courier companies, and both organizations can assist you in making the appropriate travel arrangements. If you would rather contact the couriers directly, look in the Yellow Pages under Air Courier Services or Messengers.

—Michael Bennett

CREDIT/SOURCE

[ PRICELESS RESOURCES ]

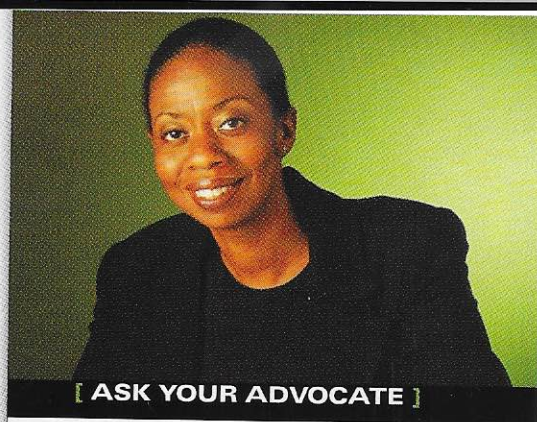
## HAPPY TRAVELS

Free European Railpass Guide

**E**xploring the European continent by rail provides two options: buying a railpass or purchasing tickets at train stations as you travel. Railpasses are more economical. Years ago there was only one—today there are a variety (literally hundreds) from which to choose. *The 2002 Guide to*

*European Railpasses* by Rick Steves is a free 64-page guide to help you decide how to best plan your trip. Write to Rick Steves, Europe Through the Back Door, P.O. Box 2009, 130-4th Avenue North, Edmonds, Washington 98020, or visit [www.ricksteves.com/rail](http://www.ricksteves.com/rail).

—Sonia Alleyne



[ ASK YOUR ADVOCATE ]

## DO WHAT MAKES SENSE



As a new homeowner, I would like to know how soon someone can refinance their mortgage. What costs are associated when refinancing at lower mortgage rates in today's market?

—B. O'Neal

You did not mention how new a homeowner you are, but according to Robert Withers, president and CEO of First Alternative Mortgage Corporation, all you need to wait for is the paperwork on your original transaction to be finalized, about 30 to 90 days. "You can refinance [almost] immediately. The question is whether the rates are low enough so that it makes sense," says Withers.

You should also know that there are several reasons to refinance a home:

- **To build equity faster by shortening the term of your current mortgage.** Understand that a shorter mortgage term means a higher monthly payment. Would you be able to afford the payments?
- **To take advantage of lower interest rates.** You would have to determine whether interest rates have dropped significantly since your purchase for you to benefit.
- **To take cash out of your home's equity.** If you can refinance at a lower rate, the money you save can be used for renovations or consolidating debt.

The costs associated with refinancing involve the same costs as your original mortgage: points, closing costs, and in some cases, penalties (see "Home Free" in Consumer Life) depending on your contract.

Shop around for the best mortgage broker and the best rates, and visit [www.mortgageselect.com](http://www.mortgageselect.com) and [www.mortgage101.com](http://www.mortgage101.com). These Websites include online calculators to help in your assessment.

—S.A.

Mail your consumer questions to Ask Your Advocate, BLACK ENTERPRISE, 130 Fifth Ave., New York, NY 10011 or send an e-mail to [alloynes@blackenterprise.com](mailto:alloynes@blackenterprise.com).

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