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Senior Travel: Pick the right international hub

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Ed Perkins on Travel
Senior Travel
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If you're planning an overseas trip this spring or summer, you may well have to change planes at an airline "hub" somewhere. And the choice of where to change can have a big impact on how smooth your trip will be. Here are my suggestions for hubbing.

The best hub is no hub. If you can find a nonstop flight schedule at a reasonable fare, take it, even if it means a little extra driving to a bigger airport at either end. No matter how smooth the process, compared with a nonstop, changing planes adds a minimum of two hours to your flight time and more likely four or five hours. Changing planes also increases your chances of delay, missed connections, misdirected baggage, and other such ills.

These days, you can find plenty of nonstops for most big U.S. cities to most big **European** and Asia cities, and some nonstops from medium-sized U.S. cities to big overseas cities or from big U.S. cities to medium-size overseas spots. And the chances of finding nonstops will increase as airlines finally start taking delivery of the new 787s, which are designed for long-haul routes with insufficient traffic to support the biggest planes.

Hub to cut costs. Even on routes with nonstops, however, you can sometimes find a lower fare on connecting flights. I just received a press release from Finnair, for example, that promotes round-trips from its U.S. gateways to Moscow, via a **Helsinki** connection, that are about \$200 less than round-trips from those same gateways just to Helsinki. For travel next spring, Polish airline LOT is currently pitching connections to a handful of major European cities through Warsaw that undercut nonstops by as much as \$400. These cases illustrate a common situation on long-haul routes. Even though flying you nonstop costs the airline less than making you connect, airlines know that many of you will pay a premium for the convenience of a nonstop. The result: connecting fares that undercut nonstops. You see this quite often on long-haul trips within the U.S. and from the U.S. to Europe. The big airfare search engines are pretty good at posting these deals: On **Expedia**, for example, the summary box for any trip search often shows lower one-stop fares than nonstop fares.

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Choose the most convenient hub. When you have a choice of hubs -- at roughly the same fares -- try to select the most convenient connecting itinerary.

-- Total flight time usually trumps other reasons for choosing a connecting itinerary. And, contrary to what you might think, the shortest distance usually isn't as big an influence as the connecting time. If you're flying from Chicago to Europe, for example, an Atlanta connection may involve more miles than a connection in New York, but a shorter connecting time may offset the mileage difference.

-- Try to avoid hubs with a bad history of delays. According to a recent trade report, the most delay-prone U.S. international connecting hubs are O'Hare, Miami, Newark, JFK, San Francisco, and Baltimore; the best are Charlotte, Houston Bush, Dulles, and Seattle-Tacoma.

-- Overseas, most travelers give high marks to the big Asian airports. In Europe, most travelers I know avoid London and Paris when they can and instead hub through Amsterdam, Munich, or Zurich. Helsinki is apparently an easy hub, as is Reykjavik on flights to/from Northern Europe. Try to avoid hubs with multiple and separated terminal buildings, especially if you have to connect between two different airlines. You may have to leave and re-enter security.

-- Avoid connecting at a U.S. hub on an inbound international itinerary. Typically, you have to claim your baggage, go through customs, leave the security area and re-enter the check-in system -- baggage and security. By contrast, most big international hubs outside the U.S. let connecting travelers remain in "transit" status without having to check in all over again.

Clearly, you often have limited choice of hubs. In those cases, just make sure you leave enough connecting time to compensate for the occasional delay or glitch.

Send e-mail to Ed Perkins at eperkins@mind.net. Perkins' new book for small business and independent professionals, "Business Travel When It's Your Money," is now available through www.mybusinesstravel.com or www.amazon.com

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