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## E-TOOLS

# Tools and Apps to Help Manage Your Travels

Traveling can be challenging, and even just planning your travels can be time-consuming and frustrating.

**Will Fleenor** • Feb. 08, 2012



Whether you are heading to Greece for a holiday with the family or off to visit a client, traveling can be challenging, and even just planning your travels can be time-consuming and frustrating. Nothing is more unnerving than to arrive two hours late for a connecting flight and have no idea whether you are going to make it to your final destination in time for an important event or meeting. And this can happen no matter how many hours you spent working to find the best flight connections at the best prices. Whether you are traveling for business or pleasure, the last thing you want to do is be given an inadequate food voucher or be sent to one of those nearby airport hotels with sticky carpet!

But today there are many tools, including websites and internet-enabled devices using travel-related apps that can rescue you from unpleasant outcomes. Tools such as Google Maps are useful for finding directions and checking out public transportation and, if you have a smartphone with GPS, products such as NAVIGON MobileNavigator provide high-quality maps for your phone and allow voice communication for hands-free directions. Products like Evernote and Microsoft OneNote can help organize all the small details travelers have to keep up with. In practical terms, these tools can help you know where you are and keep track of all your up-to-date travel details. In this article, I give you a view “from 30,000 feet” of the types of tools available for empowering travelers. I also provide insights into some of the powerful new features that we could not even imagine only a couple of years ago.

## **Types of Travel Tools**

Unlike traditional software solutions wherein you usually get all your modules from the same vendor, cloud solutions (i.e., those for which there is no on-premise software to load) are services, not products, and fragmentation is the rule. For instance, you might choose one product to keep track of airline travel details and another to keep your appointments and calendar. Fortunately, the new cloud apps integrate well with other cloud apps in addition to traditional applications. For example, if you are currently an MS Exchange user, almost all these new cloud-based apps work well with Outlook and Exchange for email, calendaring and contact management. This article will cover three travel tool categories:

- Discount and bargain sites
- Tracking and reporting for business travel
- Credit card and club memberships

### **Discount and Bargain Sites**

The recession has made the travel marketplace very competitive, and there are a number of sites that can help you benefit from this competitive environment. If you are a frequent traveler you know these sites well, because they probably have saved you thousands of dollars over the years.

## Leading Travel Price Search Engines

[Travelocity.com](http://Travelocity.com)

[Orbitz.com](http://Orbitz.com)

[Expedia.com](http://Expedia.com)

[RentalCars.com](http://RentalCars.com) (Just got an intermediate-class car in Seattle for \$13.32 per day from a “top 5” vendor!)

[Hotels.com](http://Hotels.com) (Prepayment in full can save a lot for those who are sure of where they want to stay.)

[OpenTable.com](http://OpenTable.com)

[Priceline.com](http://Priceline.com)

[Kayak.com](http://Kayak.com) (Search using several search engines at one time.)

[IWantaCruise.com](http://IWantaCruise.com)

[Travelzoo.com](http://Travelzoo.com)

[Cheapoair.com](http://Cheapoair.com)

(You have to love the names of the last two!)

If you are a seasoned traveler, you also know that it pays to shop around and not always rely on the same price search engine. Sometimes, the actual seller’s site (as opposed to travel agencies and travel search engines) have packages that may even be cheaper than the rack rates, which makes the extra features a real bonus. This is often true with hotel chains and airlines — particularly if a package deal suits you and your travel dates are flexible. These promotions can sometimes be hard to believe, prompting you to wonder how air, hotel, car, and meals can possibly be offered at such a low price.

Of course, there are things to watch out for when you find a deal that seems just too good to be true. Here is a short list:

- Package deals may use charter airlines or non-chain hotels.
- Rental cars may not be actually AT the airport. One night, I rode in an old van for 20 minutes in the rain to get to the rental car facility, which was down a dirt road that was under construction.
- Hotels may be undergoing renovation — and you get what you pay for.
- Star ratings and neighborhood rankings for hotels may be generous to the hotel operator. Check things out on Google Earth.
- Refunds may be limited.
- Rebooking options may be limited.
- The fine print may stipulate some unpleasant possible consequences. For example, if your flight is cancelled, you may be the last one on the list to be rebooked.

## **Tracking and Reporting for Business Travel**

With more than 500,000 apps for the iPhone alone, it is not surprising that there are many choices for travelers. The few products covered in this section are good examples of the wealth of services currently available in the cloud.

### **TripIt Pro**

When your first flight arrived late and you were concerned about making your connecting flight, if you were like most travelers in the past you raced to the counter to be near the front of the line, which was not an effective plan on so many levels. Now, if you are a TripIt Pro user ([www.Tripit.com](http://www.Tripit.com)), you simply whip out your handheld device. Within a matter of seconds, TripIt Pro informs you of the status and gate location of your connecting flight as well as other available connections. This can mean the difference between making it to your destination and spending the night in an airport hotel in the connecting city.

TripIt Pro is the leading mobile trip organizer. It is an amazing tool that you can access through the Web or through apps on your smartphone or other handheld devices. If you are a business traveler and have not tried this product, you owe it to yourself to do so. Here are just some of the features of this cloud-based service:

- Sends instant alerts about flight delays, cancellations, and gate changes, right to your phone

- Provides alternatives when your flight is delayed, including flight status and open seats
- Tracks all your points from airlines, hotels, and other travel related vendors
- Stores all your frequent travel account information, balances, and expiration dates in one place (at last!)
- Monitors airfares after booking, and notifies you of any potential refunds or credits
- Allows you to automatically share all your travel plans with others
- Provides complimentary one-year memberships to Hertz #1 Club Gold and Regus Gold
- Affords complimentary access to 1,100 business lounges worldwide
- Works with the iPhone and iPad as well as Android, BlackBerry, and Windows smartphones

## **FlightView Elite**

FlightView Elite ([www.FlightView.com](http://www.FlightView.com)) provides real-time information about flight schedules, flight statuses, weather conditions, and more. For flights that are en route, users see an in-air flight tracker map with the flight path, the aircraft's position, and radar weather. You can also choose to receive alerts for flight status changes, including delays and cancellations, and gate assignment changes, even when the app on your phone is closed. The following are some of the features of FlightView Elite:

- Tracks flights by number or route
- Allows multiday searches for flights yesterday, today, tomorrow, and — in some cases — the next 90 days
- Shows in-air flight details, such as flight time remaining, duration, and planned gate and baggage claim information
- Has a calendar integration function that allows for the quick insertion of a flight into the device calendar
- Sends flight status alerts with immediate notification of flight status changes, delays, cancellations, and gate changes
- Includes visually compelling maps (e.g., flight tracker map for in-air flights and an airport delay map, both with current radar weather)

## **Concur Breeze Expense Reporting**

Concur Breeze ([www.Concur.com](http://www.Concur.com)) is an exceptional cloud-based tool for tracking and reporting travel expenses. It is designed for small businesses and provides a simple, cost-efficient expense management solution that integrates directly with

QuickBooks and other small-business accounting solutions. Users of this app no longer need to use a spreadsheet for their expense reports (as long as their employers agree).

Users can input and access expense report information with a Web browser, iPhone, or iPad or with a BlackBerry or Android smartphone. Receipts can be entered using a scanner or the photo capabilities of devices such as iPads and smartphones. This significantly reduces the drudgery most employees associate with expense reporting, improves the accuracy and timeliness of expense reports and management reports, and saves users time that is usually spent accounting and reporting.

We adopted Concur Breeze as our expense reporting tool earlier this year, and it has significantly improved the expense reporting and tracking process, both for our employees and for the office staff that takes care of accounting and reporting. The following are some of the functions we find most helpful:

- Record expenses with a smartphone (including capturing the receipt image with the built-in camera) and then simply toss the actual receipt.
- Securely import credit card charges that auto-populate an expense report.
- Tag expenses by client, project, or business unit to track where the company money is being spent.

With Concur Breeze, our accounting staff processes expense reports and eliminates data entry (and errors) by seamlessly transferring expense reporting data into our accounting software.

### **Credit Card and Club Memberships**

The airlines and hotel chains all work hard to get you to use their credit cards. They send paper mail and email daily, and they even have people standing in airports trying to flag down potential customers. The credit card industry is a big money business, particularly with the large purchases travelers make such as airline tickets, hotel bills, business lunches, and rental cars. Getting you to use their card saves them merchant fees on all these transactions. Since you are likely to use the card for other purchases, they also make money on the cards. Furthermore, the free travel you “earn” may be restricted to off-peak times, when seats would have gone unsold and therefore cost them little or nothing to offer as rewards. Because these cards are so profitable for the airlines, their offers to travelers are typically very attractive.

- Some Platinum American Express and other cards offer things like:

- Access to airport lounges
- Free checked bags
- Purchase protection
- Airline miles
- Double points when travel is booked through them
- In addition to some or all of the above benefits, airline credit cards may also offer some or all of the following benefits:
  - Early boarding
  - A high level of frequent flyer status with that airline
  - Preferred seating
  - Access to priority lanes for security screening
  - Discounts on in-flight food and entertainment
  - Complimentary travel certificates for a spouse
  - Bonus miles for signing up

With credit cards, you will need to choose the kind of rewards program that suits you best. Some people prefer cards that offer straight cash rebates. Others prefer cards that offer point systems that let you buy airline tickets based on the dollar cost of the tickets. With these two types of rewards, you don't have to worry about traveling on dates when seats are available using airline miles. Instead, you simply use your cash rebate or points to purchase tickets at current prices — there are no blackout dates to worry about.

Airline club memberships also offer a quiet, comfortable place to relax and/or work between flights. These memberships also provide elite access to airline ticket agents; if there are flight problems and you absolutely need to talk to a live agent, airline clubrooms usually provide immediate access with no lines.

## **Conclusion**

With each passing day, more good tools for travelers are being developed and released. Many of them — like the plethora of apps that exist for smartphones — are already at your command. You just need to take the time to learn how to use them. With so many choices, the question is, “where to start?” The answer is: Start anywhere, but just start! These tools can save you time, reduce stress, and help you make your travel experiences less costly and more pleasant.

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