

TRAVEL

Frequent flyer shares strategies in travel class

BY HUGH GALLAGHER
STAFF WRITER

Be Kind to Gate Agent!
After logging numerous flight hours on Northwest Airlines, hovering for several hours over airports and playing air fare roulette, Bob Cowen has learned that the agent at the gate can be a time saver and a money saver.

Cowen of Farmington Hills is sharing this and other travel knowledge in three-hour classes for the Southfield and Farmington community education programs.

As a salesman for a communications software company, Cowen does a lot of traveling and he's taken notes on his experiences from "Halifax to Mexico and the southern Caribbean to Vancouver."

"I feel sick when I see people paying what they are paying for air fares and hotels and know they don't have to if they know what they're doing," he said.

"Two years ago, he decided to do something about it."

"I like selling and I like teaching, so I developed a class. I went to Southfield schools and they said OK, so I taught there for a year and then went to Farmington," he said.

His original plan was to help businesses save money on their necessary travel expenses. Though he originally designed the class for business, 80 percent of the students were leisure travelers.

Using an overhead projector, Cowen has carefully planned his class to combine the humor borne of traveller frustration with a planned attack that as

one student phrased it in a survey card "Puts me on a level field with the airlines."

And Cowen finds that he often learns as much as teaches.

"The class is three hours but it often runs 3-1/2 hours and more. There is a real interchange of ideas in each class," he said.

Cowen outlines his classes on two of his transparencies under "Travel Secrets." Save up to 50 percent on air fares, more frequent flyer mileage, first class seating, best seat on the airplane, eliminate connecting flights, get to the front of any line, find the best travel agent, preview resort/cruise, get lower hotel rates, reduce rental car charges, travel smarter, avoid delays and cancellations and change a "no change" ticket.

Cowen said there is no one way to get the best air deal, but offers several strategies that he has found to be helpful.

"I have a top dozen ways to get the best fares," he said.

Among his suggestions is to drive a little and fly out of Lansing or Toledo, where fares are cheaper; split your ticket and fly to a midway city on one airline and complete your flight on another airline, carefully planned it could save you hundreds of dollars; fly into a nearby city that is less fashionable, for instance fly to San Jose rather than nearby San Francisco.

"On trusting airlines, my advice is never trust airlines," Cowen said, only half facetiously.

"If you call Northwest directly, each time you will get a different price. They don't have time to

work with you. A travel agent will work with you," Cowen said.

Another Cowen rule is use a travel agent.

"I talk about how to find the best agent for you and for your type of travel," Cowen said.

He said recent cutbacks in agent fees paid by airlines have forced travel agents to charge for their services, but he said the work they do is worth the fee.

Cowen also teaches how to "survive and thrive" at airports, a subject that has become especially important in light of recent labor problems at Northwest, Detroit's hub airline.

"I have a Plan B if a flight is delayed," he said. "Who is the most powerful person at the airport and who can help you the most."

Cowen said he has been bumped twice from Northwest flights but has received credits and meal vouchers while others got nothing.

"Keep asking, keep asking," Cowen said. He calls it the Mommy-Daddy strategy. If Mommy says "No," go ask Daddy.

Another bit of advice Cowen offers is to avoid E or electronic tickets. He says get a paper ticket so that if you have to change airlines you can do it at the gate rather than waiting in a line at a ticket counter. Airlines aren't required to exchange E tickets until late 1999.

As a software salesman, he is also a promoter of using the computer as a travel tool.

"On the first day of class, one of the things I ask is what kind of travel do you do and do you

have internet access. I talk about what sites are good and which aren't," Cowen said.

The internet can be used to preview trips, find special travel agents, track down the latest changes in air fares and check the Department of State for travel advisories.

Cowen also shares some tips on hotel accommodations and car rentals. He advised taking advantage of every available discount such as AAA and AARP, sending for city brochures that often contain discount coupons and calling a hotel directly rather than calling a central 800 number.

On car rentals, Cowen advises walking the counters after you've called to get a price quote. He said rental companies will often have cheaper rates later in the day.

Several Cowen slides approach travel with humor to break the ice as the class begins. He advises you are traveling too much if "You go to a movie and reach for the seatbelts when you sit down; you don't mind coach to Europe because it's a short flight; the flight attendant recognizes you and knows your name."

But despite the humor, Cowen sees the traveler as a warrior who has to be properly armed.

"Beat them at their own game when it's coming out of your pocket," he said.

And, of course, once at the airport be nice to gate agents.

"They have to turn a plane around, unload and turn around in 30 minutes. You have to know when to leave them alone and when to hit them up for first



Experienced traveler: Bob Cowen, at Detroit Metro Airport, uses his experience as a business traveler to pass along his secrets of traveling less expensively.

class upgrade," he said.

Cowen will be teaching his class 9 a.m. to noon Saturday, Sept. 26, in Southfield and Saturday, Oct. 3, in Farmington and 6:30-9:30 p.m. Monday, Oct. 19, in Farmington and Monday, Oct.

26, in Southfield.

For more information on location and cost of the classes, call Farmington Community Education at (248)489-3333 and Southfield Community Education at (248)746-8700.

GREAT ESCAPES

Great Escapes features various travel news items. Send news leads to Hugh Gallagher, assistant managing editor, Observer & Eccentric Newspapers Inc., 36251 Schoolcraft, Livonia, MI 48150, or fax them to (313) 591-7279.

WEST MICHIGAN GUIDE

The 1998 edition of the West Michigan Travel Guide, published annually by the West Michigan Tourist Association, was released this week. The 144-page guide is a comprehensive compilation of attractions, activities and vacation destinations throughout West Michigan's 41

counties. The guide's Fun Index lists more than 350 things to do - including dune rides, cruises, summer theater, winery tours, museums, zoos and fishing charters.

For a free West Michigan Travel Guide, stop by the associ-

ation's Visitor Information Center at 1253 Front Ave., NW, just off U.S. 131 at exit 87. Or order at the Web site at www.wmta.org or by calling toll free (800) 442-2984.

MICHIGAN FOLKLORE

This year's Michigan State University Museum's Festival of Michigan Folklore presents "Traditions of Michigan's Thumb"

and "Fire Fighting Traditions" 1-7 p.m. Saturday and Sunday, Aug. 8-9 and 15-16, at MSU's Landon Field.

The Festival of Michigan Folklore is the state's largest annual museum exhibition of Michigan's cultural heritage.

For more information, call 1-(517)355-2370. The museum also has a Web site at www.museum.cl.msu.edu.

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Institute of Science

Check out our newly expanded museum and summer blockbuster exhibit, **The Robot Zoo!** Larger-than-life robotic beasts, including a giant squid with 18-foot tentacles, demonstrate how animals function in the natural world.

The Robot Zoo is sponsored locally at Cranbrook by FANUC Robotics North America, Inc.

Art Museum

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Cranbrook House and Gardens

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