

Adopting overseas? Ask for discount on airfare

HELP IN THE AIR | Some airlines secretive about specialty airfares

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It's been drilled into our heads that the best way to get a cheap airline ticket is to buy it well in advance of your travel date.

But parents adopting children from overseas often have no idea when that date might be. And once their adoption agency gives them the go-ahead to bring home their child, they typically have only a matter of days to make all the arrangements.

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Irina and Andy Prutch of Yorkville traveled to Russia last year to adopt their daughter, Anastasia. They were surprised that a one-way ticket for Anastasia would cost more than a round-trip.

(Keith Hale/Sun-Times)

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TIPS:

- If you're adopting an infant, ask your travel agent or the airline reservation clerk to seat you in the bulkhead section with a bassinet (provided on a first-come, first-serve basis at no additional cost). Bassinets will hold infants up to 20 pounds and 26 inches. Also, ask if they offer baby meals on the flight. Some airlines will provide jars of baby food.
- Don't forget about buying your child's one-way ticket. Infants under the age of 2 years will need a lap ticket (generally about 10 percent of an adult fare) to sit on parents' laps. Older children will need their own seats and will be charged the same fare as adults.

Rather than get stuck paying a premium for last-minute tickets, parents can benefit from adoption airfare discounts. For example, Northwest Airlines "Special Delivery" program has benefits that include 65 percent off the price of full-fare coach tickets, open returns and no penalties for cancellations or changes. (Parents must show proof of U.S. residency and provide legal documentation of the adoption.) Details at Nwa.com/features/adopt.

Some 17,438 overseas adoptions by U.S. parents took place this fiscal year, according to U.S. State Department statistics.

Not all airlines are eager to publicize news about these special adoption fares. The media relations spokespeople for other major airlines either ignored our queries about discounted air fares for adoptive families or point blank said they didn't offer any. However, when we called the reservation lines for Delta, United and Cathay Pacific and questioned the customer service reps, they all said they offer discounted fares.

"Airlines are very secretive about specialty air fares," says Ed Perkins, contributing editor for Smartertravel.com. "They don't advertise them and they're just not going to tell you about them unless you specifically ask. So ask."

Perkins cautioned that consumers need to know the ramifications of their discounted tickets if they can't leave or return on the dates they booked. For instance, will the airline charge a premium to change a ticket if your child is too sick to fly on the date you've planned or if bureaucratic red tape is holding up your departure?

"Given how complex some of the airline policies can be, the best bet in some of these situations is to pay a travel agent to handle this for you," Perkins said. "He or she will have access to consolidator deals and will know which airline is offering the best fare. This is one case where it makes sense to pay someone to deal with the hassles for you."

Portland, Ore.,'s Azumano Travel American Express has been in business for 60 years working with corporate and leisure clients. For the past 15 years, they've also become one of the go-to travel agencies for adoptive parents booking flights overseas. Azumano has adoption fare contracts with a number of airlines, including Cathay Pacific, United, Delta and Northwest.

"A lot of our parents do their research and already have a general idea of what these flights should cost with a few weeks notice," says Erle D'Penha, an Azumano travel consultant. "They could probably do it themselves, but what they're paying us for is our knowledge, relationships and ability to get them seats when the online sites say they're all booked. Sometimes people will look online and won't see options to leave from the cities they want to, but we'll be able to find other hubs. The travel Web sites won't always look for all of those flights. We can help find more options."

Indeed, we gave Azumano dates for a hypothetical trip to Seoul, South Korea. We came up with a \$3,000 economy fare with two days advance notice. Azumano came up with a nonstop flight on the same carrier for less than half that price.

Not all carriers offer discounted fares, but there are other ways to get around paying full price. Check to see if you have enough airline miles to use toward a ticket. When Yorkville's Andy and Irina Prutch traveled to Russia last year to bring home their adopted daughter, they were surprised to find that a one-way ticket for their child would cost more than a round-trip ticket. But they weren't allowed to purchase a round-trip ticket for her.

"It would've cost us almost \$3,000 for a one-way ticket for our daughter," says Andy Prutch. "We ended up using my miles on American Airlines for her seat. My company's travel agent didn't charge us any fees, so we only paid \$52.70 for her total airfare. It was definitely the way to go for us."

Also, it never hurts to be nice to the reservation clerks.

While Shannon Mogilinski of St. Charles didn't get any discounts, she did get an upgrade.

"When my husband and I traveled to Russia to adopt our daughter in 2003, we mentioned to the reservations clerk at British Airways that we were adopting a child and that we were carrying humanitarian aid to several orphanages," Mogilinski said. "She gave us a complimentary upgrade to business class. If we hadn't said anything, we would've been sitting in coach."

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