

# Itineraries

The New York Times

## ON THE ROAD

### A Little Clarity In the Fuzzy World Of Airline Fees

By JOE SHARKEY

FOR several weeks, I've been looking hard at the questions about airline fees.

And one thing is clear from my conversations with business travelers, travel managers, air travel analysts and even government officials. They're all looking for some consensus on how to define the fees, how to disclose them, and how to account and budget for them.

That will be no simple matter, by the way, not when many airlines are coming up with all sorts of new fees. Those fees added an estimated \$21.5 billion worldwide to fares in 2010, according to a recent study by IdeaWorks, the air travel consultant, and Amadeus, the reservations network.

For corporate travel managers — the people who draft and enforce the policies on whether you can put that \$15 extra charge for an aisle coach seat on your expense account — the issue has been especially vexing because those fees are often hard to anticipate or even identify.

Kobie Whisenant, the travel manager at Gambro Renal Products, can tell you firsthand. Gambro is a recent client for a new service by AirPlus International, the travel accounting technology company, that combs through air travel spending reports and breaks out fee costs by specific category.

You might initially peg Ms. Whisenant as one of those travel managers who just cracks the whip on hard-pressed travelers who are only trying to achieve some small creature comforts in increasingly trying conditions in the air. But her position is far more nuanced than that.

True, the new reports she gets from AirPlus are important in "addressing those individuals who are in violation of our travel policy," she said. "I can see when somebody is buying upgrades or extra seat legroom," for example, she said. "Rather than relying on our employees to code their expense reports correctly, I take this report and see the data."

The detailed trip breakdown allows the company to better "get our hands around how much we are spending not only on airline tickets, but on all the fees," she went on, and to identify "who is violating policy" on which charges are allowable under company policy.

But when I asked Ms. Whisenant, who was speaking last week at a Web conference organized by AirPlus, to explain which fees her company does allow travelers to expense, her answer did not sound all that severe.

"We will pay for one checked

bag; anything beyond that would be a personal expense," she said. "We will pay for one beverage, not multiple beverages."

Among the things the company will not reimburse are extra fees for travelers opting for upgrades or for extra frequent-flyer mileage credits, which are among the literally hundreds of fees that airlines list on their booking menus.

That detailed information on exact spending is important for enforcing travel policy, and also for budgeting and for negotiating with airlines on overall corporate travel, she said.

A travel manager, armed with accurate data, can press an airline client to drop certain fees in exchange for corporate volume, for example.

The system is not foolproof because airlines remain reluctant to adopt uniform procedures for reporting on the wide range of fees they charge. Some of those fees can even vary by the status and fare class of a customer.

The airlines, meanwhile, "are continuing to make up new categories of fees, and applying various fees to packages," said Matthew

Talbot, a product manager for the AirPlus service.

Domestic airlines, incidentally, say that no new categories of fees were introduced last year. But, according to the Transportation Department, checked bag fees alone accounted for \$3.4 billion in extra charges last year — against just \$464 million in 2007, the year before most airlines began charging for most checked bags.

It's still not clear how much those fees are adding to the costs of air travel, incidentally.

In a widely quoted study done last summer, the Consumer Travel Alliance said that hidden fees added an extra 26 to 54 percent to the cost of a ticket. The estimate examined only charges for checked bags and extra legroom on nine airlines flying four major domestic routes.

Last week, however, AirPlus released a report that indicated that fees might not be as big a part of air travel costs as that. It analyzed travel spending during the first quarter for a multinational company that it did not identify and found that the fees represented only 3.1 percent of total travel spending of \$2.3 million.

AirPlus says its new fee reporting system is based on exhaustive analysis of spending and hundreds of kinds of fees, and represents a step toward providing "clarity" for making better decisions about travel budgeting.

"We are keenly aware that airlines are providing different levels of detail regarding fees," said Richard Crum, the company's chief executive.



CHRIS GASH

### A new service finds the little extras in travel expenses.

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LAURYN ISHAK FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

After moving to Singapore from Australia, Annette Lang, center, opened a Western-style cooking school.

## Plight of the Expat Spouse

### Relocating Overseas Can Challenge Dual-Career Families

By TANYA MOHN

Overseas assignments are more brisk after the recession, but accompanying spouses and partners still struggle to find work abroad, too.

An annual survey of global relocation trends found that 61 percent of companies surveyed expect to transfer more employees in 2011 than in recent years, higher than the historical average of 57 percent. But only 15 percent of spouses employed before going abroad were able to find overseas assignments, about 10 percent less than in 2006.

Scott Sullivan, an executive vice president of Brookfield Global Relocation Services, publishers of the annual survey, said that "trailing" spouses in the current uncertain market are especially reluctant to give up jobs — and a second income — at home because of risks to future earning potential and career development.

The lack of employment opportunities abroad for partners "wasn't as much of a challenge to companies 20 to 30 years ago," Mr. Sullivan said, but with the rise in dual-career couples, "it's become a huge issue across the board." He added, "Companies can't find the best people to go on assignments, so the talent pool for highly skilled international employees is deteriorating."

Yvonne McNulty, an assistant professor of international business at James Cook University's Singapore campus who studies mobility issues, said, "The dual-career issue remains the No.1 reason for refusing assignments."

Some 20 years ago, financial compensation packages for expatriate families were more robust, with higher salaries and other perks like drivers, club memberships and first-class airfare for home leave so a spouse could afford not to work. Today, while packages are lower over all, "companies are being more proactive" in helping spouses find work, Ms. McNulty said.

"It has gone from nice to have to a must-have strategic support service," said Susan R. Ginsberg, vice president, global services for Ricklin-Echikson Associates, a human resources consulting firm with professional coaches in 50 countries that specializes in career and transition assistance for spouses and partners overseas. During negotiations, the offer of support can be "key to ensure that it doesn't become a deal breaker."

Navdeep Boparai, originally from India, recently relocated to Houston with

her husband from England. She worked as an auditor for Deloitte, and hopes to find similar work in this country. Her husband's employer, an oil and gas company, is outsourcing counseling through Ricklin-Echikson. Even before the move, a consultant helped her write an American-style résumé, learn about the local job market and salary issues and prepare for interviews.

The adjustment has not been easy, Ms. Boparai said. "The working culture is totally different. Americans are always checking their e-mail. Here, work is life, it defines them." She said that she wanted to know what to expect. "Otherwise," she said, "it could be a bit of a disaster."

Cultural issues as well as foreign languages, licensing and certification, and obtaining work permits are often obstacles to spouses getting jobs in new countries.

Kathleen van der Wilk-Carlton, executive director of the Permits Foundation, a nonprofit group based at The Hague, the Netherlands, that advocates for the

Mrs. Wilk-Carlton said. "As global business increases, that is only likely to get worse."

Once couples relocate, adjustment is critical. Expatriate spousal dissatisfaction is the biggest reason that assignments fail, many experts said.

"And the chances of failure are huge," said Margery Marshall, president of Vandover, a global transition support company that works with spouses on career strategy.

A failed relocation or early return can cost about \$1 million. That figure is multiplied with group moves, which are on the rise, Ms. Marshall said.

Her firm advises relocated spouses on how to connect to professional associations and build networks, find volunteer work, locate local mentors and when to consider classes.

Annette Lang successfully dealt with work challenges by becoming an entrepreneur.

It was not work permit or certification issues that prevented her from finding a job when she moved to Singapore, a country with favorable laws for expatriate spouses.

"I loved what I was doing," said Mrs. Lang, who had been head of product development for an Australian company supplying major department stores with holiday gift items using food. "I was sent around the world shopping, spending other people's money. But to set up this type of gift item business in Singapore would be virtually impossible," she said, because of the logistics and high cost of importing specialty foods.

At a dinner party at her home one evening, she got the idea for a business. A guest, impressed that the housekeeper prepared such delicious Western-style food, asked if Mrs. Lang could teach her domestic worker.

Most household staff, Mrs. Lang said, "have little exposure to our Western ways of preparing food. I have this fantastic helper really keen to learn, so I had trained her to cook healthy Western food, and how to adhere to Western sanitation standards."

After the dinner party, Mrs. Lang said, "I set out to create a business to train helpers, starting with training lessons in my home."

Today, she owns and runs Expat Kitchen, a Western food-focused cooking school, and in four years she has taught more than 1,000 students.

"My dream is to take it to every Asian country," she said.

### Language and cultural differences may be obstacles to finding work.

improvement of work regulations for the partners of expatriate employees, said that when the foundation was set up in 2001, "only a handful of countries allowed spouses to work automatically or easily." But, she added, "There's been a significant improvement."

The foundation published a survey in 2009 of 3,300 expatriate spouses in dual-career families, relocated by more than 200 employers in 117 countries.

More than 80 percent of those not working wanted to work, and those who worked were found to be more likely to report a positive impact on adjustment, family relationships, and general health and well being. They were also more willing to complete or extend current assignments or to go on new assignments than nonworking spouses.

Only 18 percent of respondents said they had received adequate career support from their spouses' employers.

Concern for career issues was highest among spouses or partners who were male, unmarried, younger and university graduates, all growing demographics,

## FREQUENT FLIER

### Sensing the Wonder of Science, in Flight

I HAVE a bachelor's degree in physics and a master's in social science. I do a lot of cultural anthropology and I find airports fascinating.

I love watching people in crowd situations. We all know that many factors are conspiring to suck the last drops of romance out of modern air travel, but I do what I can to keep each flight an adventure.

When I'm at the airport, I entertain myself by looking at how the airport staff corral us into place. This mirrors discussions that I've had with science festival directors about how to make sure that everyone at a crowded open lab event has a chance to use at least one piece of big lab equipment.

There is, or at least could be, a certain science to this. For example, I've recently convinced myself that the free pretzels never had anything to do with airline

thinking about customer service. I think it must be all about crowd control: nobody can move when all the trays are down and carts are in the aisles.

As the manager of the Science Festival Alliance, I have been on "festival tour." Don't wax nostalgic about the baking soda volcanoes you made for your middle school science fair project. Science festivals are completely different. These events are more celebrations of science and technology, much like an art festival. The science festivals usually last several days to a week, and allow people to do hands-on activities and meet with some of the nation's top scientists.

They're really cool, even if you didn't like science. I always laugh, though, at the misconceptions people have about the field.

I don't mind talking to my seatmates about anything, but science topics often shut conversations down. There's a lot of trauma out there about math and science, and it's really sad. Honest, people still remember their sci-

ence projects back in middle school that didn't work. A lot of people never got electricity, for example. I didn't either.

Or they'll say science and math are really complicated. Sometimes they think the only type of scientist is an Albert Einstein or a Stephen Hawking or some guy who wears goggles and a lab coat. They can't wrap their heads around the idea that scientists and engineers can come in all shapes and sizes.

But once we get talking, people are really open to the idea of science festivals, and that makes me very happy since what we are trying to do is rekindle wonder and curiosity. I think sometimes that gets stamped out of you when your science project didn't work back in school.

But science and wonder are all around us. You just have to take time to notice.

A lot of people work on the plane. They keep their blinders on and treat the whole experience as if they're in an invisible shield.



SUNG KIM

Ben Wiehe is manager of the Science Festival Alliance of Cambridge, Mass., which promotes science and technology fairs.

I work on the plane but try not to keep my blinders on. The whole process of flight is amazing. I always make time to take pictures out the window. Sometimes I take more than 150 shots of clouds, the interplay of light or interesting shapes of land. Maybe I'll only get one good shot, but so what? I've seen the world from a different perspective.

Natural wonder and curiosity are typical science festival themes, and one time I found I was staring out the window and a young kid in the next row was doing the very same thing. As we emerged above thick cloud cover, the young boy behind me gasped in wonder, "It's the land above all lands."

Exactly, I thought.

Q. How often do you fly?

A. About twice a month, both domestic and international.

Q. What's your least favorite airport?

A. I'm sorry Boston, but it's Logan. Every time I'm there, I realize there are nicer airports, plus I can never get a cab.

Q. Of all the places you've been, what's the best?

A. Granada, Spain. Wine, tapas, incredible seafood, flamenco music and naps in the afternoon. Really, what's not to like? If I could spend the rest of my life someplace, Granada would be the place.

Q. What's your secret airport vice?

A. I know people are going to hate me, but my behavior really isn't premeditated. I tend to show up late at the airport and always get some special treatment to get through security quickly. I always do feel bad about it.

By Ben Wiehe, as told to Joan Raymond. E-mail: joan.raymond@nytimes.com