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# Secrets of an Airfare Ninja

Tips for surviving post-pandemic travel (without paying too much)

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Ninjas should be secretive, but I am on record as an [airfare ninja](https://www.parentmap.com/article/become-an-airfare-ninja-amazing-discounts-families) (<https://www.parentmap.com/article/become-an-airfare-ninja-amazing-discounts-families>). I spent a week in the Azores for \$900 per person (including hotel) and I've flown to China for free. But when I started planning my first post-COVID-19-lockdown trip to Spain, I found out that nowadays, you might need to be a ninja to get to your destination at all. The old advice generally holds true today, but new challenges call for new techniques.

**Spend time *and* money to save money.**

Parents know even more than ninjas about balancing time and money. Now, more than ever, you can save money by spending time on *extensive research* and *reading the fine print*. Find the kid-friendly (<https://www.reassured.co.uk/best-airlines-for-travelling-with-children/>) airlines along with the ones that tack on fees. Research supplementary travel insurance and the benefits on your travel rewards credit card. Find out what happens if you have to cancel your trip at the last minute due to COVID-19. Some airlines still allow you to rebook with no fees, but others have abandoned that priceless policy. This past summer, it was the rare itinerary that didn't result in at least one canceled flight. Will your airline automatically reroute you?

Sometimes you have to spend a little to save a lot. Old-time ninjas booked dirt-cheap fares on sketchy websites and cobbled complex itineraries across different airlines. Booking with only one airline or using well-known online travel agents (OTAs) such as Expedia (<https://www.expedia.com/>) won't get you the absolute lowest airfare, but doing so will simplify rescheduling and improve your chances for a refund when flights are delayed or canceled. AirHelp (<https://www.airhelp.com/en/>) advocates on your behalf for compensation. (It takes a cut if you receive anything.)



## **Be creative and flexible.**

Attacks on ninjas are never expected. Get creative with *flexible travel dates and routes*. Changing routes can save money and even improve your experience. Returning from Spain, I was rerouted from Frankfurt to Atlanta — which turned out to be far less crowded and stressful.

*Connecting flights are almost always cheaper than direct flights*, but for parents, the direct flight is often worth a higher fare, especially with today's higher risk of missed connections. A [recent study \(https://familydestinationsguide.com/airport-snack-surtax-data/\)](https://familydestinationsguide.com/airport-snack-surtax-data/) found that the average family spends 26 percent of its flight costs on airport snacks. Pack what you can, bring empty, refillable water bottles and budget for meals during delays.

If you can't avoid a layover, make it a long one. You reduce the risk of you or your luggage missing your second flight due to a delayed first leg. Since long layovers are awful, consider breaking up your trip with a stopover. Stopover deals have always been a good strategy for seeing more for less, and now they can also save headaches. Icelandair has a [famous stopover program \(https://www.icelandair.com/flights/stopover/\)](https://www.icelandair.com/flights/stopover/), but you can arrange your own. Summer is high season in most of Europe, but in arid Seville, summer prices drop enough to cover the cost of a train ticket or short-haul flight to someplace cooler.

## **Take note of these secret resources.**

Ninjas have lots of secret techniques and information networks. Airlines [became generous \(https://thepointsguy.com/news/pandemic-devaluations/\)](https://thepointsguy.com/news/pandemic-devaluations/) with their *frequent-flyer programs* during the pandemic, leading to a wave of devaluations. If you've got loads of points, use them now. Even devalued points are better than none, so keep using rewards credit cards. Remember, interest payments eat up airfare savings, so pay off your balance owed every month.

To find cheap fares, test different search engines. Over time, the best resources change, but [Skyscanner \(https://www.skyscanner.com/\)](https://www.skyscanner.com/) and [Google Flights \(https://www.google.com/flights/?f=0\)](https://www.google.com/flights/?f=0) are pretty reliable. Sign up for alerts to avoid missing out on short-lived travel deals and to avoid disasters. [Scott's Cheap Flights \(https://scottscheapflights.com/\)](https://scottscheapflights.com/) works a lot like a paid, personalized [Travelzoo \(https://www.travelzoo.com/\)](https://www.travelzoo.com/), but many deals are cheap enough to offset the membership fee. Even if you don't collect points, join your airline's frequent-flyer program to receive text alerts when your flights change or are canceled, to help you beat the rush to reschedule.



## Keep calm and ‘carry on.’

Despite luggage fees approaching the cost of a ticket, the odds of landing in the same place and time as your luggage have shrunk. Once your kids are old enough to pull their own (carry-on) weight through the airport, try to travel without checked bags. If you really need full-size suitcases, pack your carry-on with everything you need for the first 24 hours of your trip and consider purchasing [luggage trackers](https://www.gq.com/story/best-luggage-trackers) (<https://www.gq.com/story/best-luggage-trackers>), such as Apple’s AirTags, which help you track any missing gear through a Bluetooth connection.

Flying these days can be stressful, and a lot of it is out of your control. But have you ever heard of a nervous ninja? Whether you take inspiration from secret spy societies or the British, sometimes you just have to make the best of things. Find a cuppa and take a deep breath. You will reach your destination — eventually.

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