

# How I Became an Airfare Ninja - ParentMap

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# How I Became an Airfare Ninja

It's boring work, but the payoff is amazing trips for your family at huge discounts



Not to brag, but I am an airfare ninja. My family is about to spend a week in the Azores for \$900 each, including airfare and hotel. Last summer, my daughter and I flew to Qingdao, China for free.

How do I do it?

Well, the truth is, ninja-ing is slow, boring work. But the results can be legendary. Here are my top strategies for flying for great airfare deals for families.

## 1. Patience, grasshopper (or spend time to save money)

Parents know more than ninjas about the balance between time and money. You can leverage your time in favor of cheaper fares with extensive research. As soon as I started saving for a trip to China, I started researching fares. When I found a \$630 fare, my spreadsheet showed it was the cheapest in two years.

I checked fares from all West Coast hubs, and researched the cost of getting to them. I ended up flying out of Vancouver, B.C. It was cheaper to drive to B.C. and park at the airport than to fly to China from Seattle. By taking an afternoon flight, our travel fit into one very long day, avoiding the cost of a hotel in Vancouver, which would have canceled the savings.

I've also learned to **take the time to read the fine print**. Notice which airlines offer lower fares for children (many foreign airlines are great about this). Pay attention to fees. Which airlines charge for checked baggage and how much are they charging? A \$35 bag fee can cancel out fare savings if you have too many bags (who can travel light with kids?).

**Pro tip:** If you find a great fare from another city, buy the tickets and start researching. You have 24 hours to cancel your plans if you can't find an affordable connecting flight.

## 2. Don't look at the finger (or be open to opportunity)

An airfare ninja must see the big picture and be flexible enough to **take advantage of unexpected solutions**. My low fare to China wasn't possible from my usual departure and layover cities. When there is a choice, **connecting flights are almost always cheaper than direct**. For parents, the direct flight is often worth a higher fare, but **keep an eye out for stopover deals**. Example: Icelandair offers a **week-long stopover in Iceland** at no additional airfare before continuing to your final destination.

Being flexible with your travel dates can save a lot of money. Tickets to China in July cost hundreds of dollars more than in May. Even a couple of days can make a difference; use flexible date searches to see short-term variations. Last year we celebrated Christmas with family in Arizona on December 23. Flying home on Christmas Eve instead of December 26 saved \$150 on airfare.

**Pro tip:** Ignore advice to shop on Tuesday — new fares can appear at any time.



Nicaragua. Photo by Brian Johnson & Dane Kantner on [Flickr CC](#)

### 3. Secret weapons: Frequent flyer deals and more

We all know that airlines' free frequent flyer programs can reap free or discounted flights, but don't forget to pair it with the secret weapon of the airfare ninja, rewards credit cards. This approach, of course, is only effective if you pay your cards off every month. Otherwise interest payments eat up any airfare savings.

If you usually travel to the same place (like my mother, who visits Seattle several times each year) airline loyalty can pay big rewards. A cobranded credit card will accumulate points in your frequent flyer account every time you charge anything. The

**Southwest Airlines Rapid Rewards Visa** is the best of these, I've found.

If you prefer visiting new places, look into a cashback card. When I went to China, the rewards balance on my **Barclaycard Arrival Plus credit card** was about \$650, reimbursing one of the tickets. An **online tool** can identify the best travel rewards card for your spending and travel habits.

You don't have to stop at one card. Points collecting is time consuming and requires great attention to detail, but it is a hobby — or lifestyle — that allows some people to juggle dozens of cards and travel frequently for free. These obsessives congregate on **Flyer Talk**, where the forums are informative, but not always beginner-friendly; **The Points Guy** and **Mommy Points** are good introductory sites.

**Pro tip:** Some companies allow employees to apply miles accumulated from work travel towards personal flights.

## 4. Use your information networks

Ninjas have secret information networks. Play around on different search engines to find the ones that work best for you. **SkyScanner** is a favorite among points collectors. It shows what each leg of your trip costs, and it offers a “cheapest month” search.

Bypass Kayak and Orbitz and use the same search engine the points collectors use: the **ITA Flight Matrix**. ITA Flight Matrix is powered by Google, and produces the same search results as **Google Flights**, differing primarily in the way they display search results. I have also had good luck booking international flights directly through **Vayama**.

**Flight Network** is a great online travel agency, and prices in Canadian dollars are lower than they appear on your screen.

## 5. Maintain vigilance

A ninja must be vigilant, but even a ninja must sleep, so an alert system is necessary to avoid missing out on short-lived travel deals. **Airfare Watchdog** is great for domestic fares. Sign up for email notification of all deals out of SeaTac, or for specific routes. **Travel Zoo** notifies subscribers of travel discounts on fares, cruises, package vacations and even local activities. I booked my Azores trip when it was included in Travel Zoo's weekly “Top 20” email. **Sherman's Travel** is a similar service.

Twitter is great for timely notifications. Besides your favorite airlines, follow accounts like **@TheFlightDeal** (recently: Portland to Kuala Lumpur \$665 round trip), **@SecretFlying** (recently: Seattle to Zurich, \$416 round trip) and **@WeeklyFlyer**, which announces airline sales and promotions.

## 6. And then there's the luck factor

How did I eliminate the last \$600 from my China airfare? My return flight from Shanghai to Vancouver was overbooked, and dozens of passengers were involuntary bumped. The airline booked us on the next flight for free, and reimbursed me \$700 for the trouble. Sometimes even a ninja needs a little luck.