



User experience research & design

# Flights online – ensuring your site takes off

A usability study of UK travel websites



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## Introduction

### The market opportunity

The size of the European travel marketplace was said to be worth €49.4 billion in 2007 and is growing to an estimated €67 billion in 2009<sup>1</sup>. Flights have become a commodity where profit margins are being squeezed by competitive forces and government legislation.

At the same time the number of UK adults choosing to carry out their holiday planning and booking online has continued to grow over the past 10 years. A survey carried out by YouGov in 2007<sup>2</sup> revealed that 31% of online British adults plan to conduct all of their holiday planning, including bookings, online in 2008. A further 36% plan to conduct most of their planning online, while only 4% will avoid the Internet for travel purposes during 2008. At the same time, many businesses are empowering their staff to arrange and book their own business travel for themselves.

Given the sector's huge growth and potential, it's essential that the top travel sites leverage every advantage available to them to be more effective in this highly competitive marketplace. Usability has been proven to deliver highly compelling commercial benefits to businesses by reducing the risk of drop-offs. This is particularly important for highly transactional travel agent and airline carrier sites.

### About this report

In February 2008, Webcredible investigated the usability of 20 travel websites in the UK, evenly split between travel agents and airline carriers.

Increasing the usability of a travel website will increase the success users have in finding and booking flights – it's as simple as that. Improved usability will also lead to an increase in loyalty and return site visitors, and an improvement in the perception of the online and offline brand. Usability is particularly important for those travel brands that rely entirely on their online channel to sell their products and services.

### Who is this report for?

This report is aimed at anyone involved with a website trying to sell flights and related travel services online, including: marketing managers, Internet managers and web developers. Although our analysis focused on travel websites, the guidelines are highly transferable to other websites. The report assumes no prior usability or technical knowledge.

## Methodology

Webcredible analysed the websites of 20 UK online travel agents and airline carriers in February 2008.

Each website was evaluated against these 20 best practice guidelines and assigned a score of 0 to 5 for each guideline, with 5 being the maximum. With 20 guidelines in total, websites were assigned a total Web Usability Index rating out of 100.

The guidelines against which we benchmarked the 20 travel sites were:

### Flight search

1. Provide a clear and well designed 'first step' of the booking process
2. Offer functionality to aid the booking process
3. Provide an effective calendar
4. Allow flexibility when completing the first step

### Search results and flight summary

5. Provide a clear results page
6. Allow manipulation of the results
7. Make pages "share friendly"
8. Support comparison shoppers
9. Display the full price (or an estimate) as early as possible
10. Make it easy to refine the search or look for another flight
11. Provide information on each airport
12. Use a clear flight confirmation page

### Booking pages

13. Provide a contact number through the booking process
14. Use appropriate up-selling
15. Display a clear progress bar
16. Ensure your flight cancellation/change rules are clear and findable

### Errors and error handling

17. Provide a clear error summary
18. Ensure all errors are clearly highlighted next to the individual form fields
19. Provide explicit instructions on how to correct errors
20. Ensure the system is able to cope with common errors

## Results

### Executive Summary

The 20 travel websites received the following scores in total, out of 100:

Website	Total score
Opodo ( <a href="http://www.opodo.co.uk">www.opodo.co.uk</a> )	67
British Airways ( <a href="http://www.britishairways.com">www.britishairways.com</a> )	65
Travelbag ( <a href="http://www.travelbag.co.uk">www.travelbag.co.uk</a> )	62
STA travel ( <a href="http://www.statravel.co.uk">www.statravel.co.uk</a> )	58
Lastminute ( <a href="http://www.lastminute.com">www.lastminute.com</a> )	56
Virgin Atlantic ( <a href="http://www.virgin-atlantic.com">www.virgin-atlantic.com</a> )	55
Ebookers ( <a href="http://www.ebookers.com">www.ebookers.com</a> )	54
Expedia ( <a href="http://www.expedia.co.uk">www.expedia.co.uk</a> )	53
Travelocity ( <a href="http://www.travelocity.co.uk">www.travelocity.co.uk</a> )	53
BMI ( <a href="http://www.flybmi.com">www.flybmi.com</a> )	53
Flight centre ( <a href="http://www.flightcentre.co.uk">www.flightcentre.co.uk</a> )	52
Thomas Cook ( <a href="http://www.thomascook.com">www.thomascook.com</a> )	49
First Choice ( <a href="http://www.firstchoice.co.uk">www.firstchoice.co.uk</a> )	48
Airline network ( <a href="http://www.airlinenetwork.co.uk">www.airlinenetwork.co.uk</a> )	47
Easyjet ( <a href="http://www.easyjet.com">www.easyjet.com</a> )	46
FlyBE ( <a href="http://www.flybe.com">www.flybe.com</a> )	46
Thomsonfly ( <a href="http://www.thomsonfly.com">www.thomsonfly.com</a> )	44
XL.com ( <a href="http://www.xl.com">www.xl.com</a> )	44
Ryanair ( <a href="http://www.ryanair.com">www.ryanair.com</a> )	40
Monarch ( <a href="http://www.flymonarch.com">www.flymonarch.com</a> )	38
<b>Average score</b>	<b>51.5</b>

With only 3 websites scoring over 60%, and with so many top Internet brands scoring around the 50 mark, there's clearly significant scope for these market leaders to improve the usability of their online offering.

As the number of users intent on booking their flights online is set to increase in 2008, the opportunity to travel agents and carriers can only be realised by delivering a first class user experience. If users can't find the flights they want and successfully get through your booking process they'll likely pick up the phone or go somewhere else.

## Travel agent vs. carrier websites

Splitting up the websites into travel agents and carriers reveals the following rankings:

Travel agent website	Total score
Opodo ( <a href="http://www.opodo.co.uk">www.opodo.co.uk</a> )	67
Travelbag ( <a href="http://www.travelbag.co.uk">www.travelbag.co.uk</a> )	62
STA travel ( <a href="http://www.statravel.co.uk">www.statravel.co.uk</a> )	58
Lastminute ( <a href="http://www.lastminute.com">www.lastminute.com</a> )	56
Ebookers ( <a href="http://www.ebookers.com">www.ebookers.com</a> )	54
Expedia ( <a href="http://www.expedia.co.uk">www.expedia.co.uk</a> )	53
Travelocity ( <a href="http://www.travelocity.co.uk">www.travelocity.co.uk</a> )	53
Flight centre ( <a href="http://www.flightcentre.co.uk">www.flightcentre.co.uk</a> )	52
Thomas Cook ( <a href="http://www.thomascook.com">www.thomascook.com</a> )	49
Airline network ( <a href="http://www.airline-network.co.uk">www.airline-network.co.uk</a> )	47
<b>Average score</b>	<b>55.1</b>

Carrier website	Total score
British Airways ( <a href="http://www.britishairways.com">www.britishairways.com</a> )	65
Virgin Atlantic ( <a href="http://www.virgin-atlantic.com">www.virgin-atlantic.com</a> )	55
BMI ( <a href="http://www.flybmi.com">www.flybmi.com</a> )	53
First Choice ( <a href="http://www.firstchoice.co.uk">www.firstchoice.co.uk</a> )	48
Easyjet ( <a href="http://www.easyjet.com">www.easyjet.com</a> )	46
FlyBE ( <a href="http://www.flybe.com">www.flybe.com</a> )	46
Thomsonfly ( <a href="http://www.thomsonfly.com">www.thomsonfly.com</a> )	44
XL.com ( <a href="http://www.xl.com">www.xl.com</a> )	44
Ryanair ( <a href="http://www.ryanair.com/site/EN">www.ryanair.com/site/EN</a> )	40
Monarch ( <a href="http://www.flymonarch.com">www.flymonarch.com</a> )	38
<b>Average score</b>	<b>47.9</b>

The main differences observed between travel agents and carriers were:

- There's a significant disparity across all criteria between travel agents and carriers
- Carrier sites are generally less transparent when it comes to total pricing choosing to add additional costs later during the user's booking journey (this



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shouldn't come as a surprise to people in the industry with the recent news from the Office of Fair Trading)

- Due to the smaller volume of flights available, carrier sites have less need to offer more sophisticated features for manipulating search results by sorting and filtering
- Travel agents are typically more transparent with call centre contact details during the searching and booking process (this could be due to differences in the types of commercial businesses and their approach to customer service)

In general, both travel agents and carriers aren't taking full advantage of the growing acceptance of Web 2.0 sharing tools. The task of planning a flight is often a social activity and users will expect to have tools to support this group task. Many of the travel sites don't even provide rudimentary printer-friendly templates so pages print out properly.

Finally, with the growing number of airlines flying to new and mysterious-sounding airports, many of the sites aren't being upfront about where they're based and how users will get there. This kind of information is critical when planning a flight and it's essential that travel sites support users in achieving their goals.

Please consult the appendix on p29 for a full breakdown of scores.

Category: Flight search

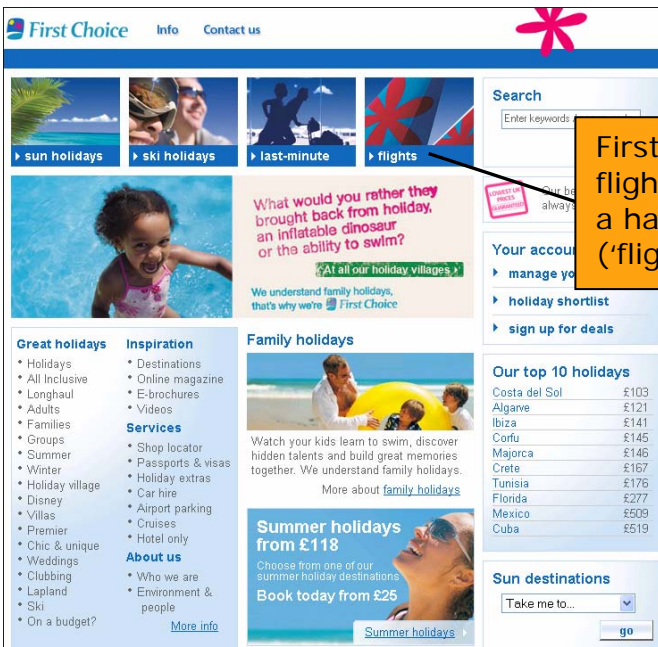
**1. Provide a clear and well designed 'first step' of the booking process**

**Overall average**  
3.9 (out of 5)

**Travel agent average**  
4.1 (out of 5)

**Carrier average**  
3.7 (out of 5)

Many web users arriving on a travel site aren't looking to browse around – they usually have a target holiday location, and want to immediately find out how much it'll cost to get there. By displaying the start of the booking process on the homepage, travel sites clearly communicate how users can start on this journey and give users the chance to get going straightaway.



The websites generally fared well for the guideline, with 15 out of 20 scoring 4 or 5 out of 5, and the majority being marked down for not having a clear process or the form simply not being clear enough on the page.

Category: Flight search

## 2. Offer functionality to aid the booking process

### Overall average

2.1 (out of 5)

### Travel agent average

2.6 (out of 5)

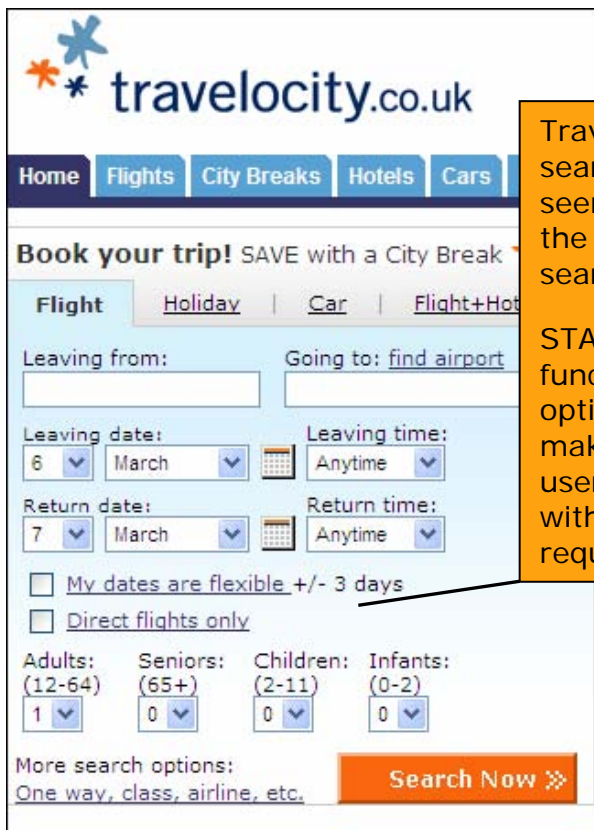
### Carrier average

1.6 (out of 5)

A person booking a flight through a high street travel agent can make special requests that are taken into account when searching for flights (such as wanting to travel in business class, or not wanting any changeovers). When booking online these needs are still present and should be supported through the booking process.

The following options should be provided:

- ☐ Flexible dates
- ☐ Direct flights only
- ☐ Multi-flight trips
- ☐ Class



The screenshot shows the travelocity.co.uk website with a flight search form. The form includes fields for 'Leaving from', 'Going to: find airport', 'Leaving date' (6 March), 'Leaving time' (Anytime), 'Return date' (7 March), and 'Return time' (Anytime). There are checkboxes for 'My dates are flexible +/- 3 days' and 'Direct flights only'. Below these are fields for 'Adults: (12-64)', 'Seniors: (65+)', 'Children: (2-11)', and 'Infants: (0-2)'. At the bottom, there is a 'Search Now' button and a link for 'More search options: One way, class, airline, etc.'

Travelocity offers good search options without seemingly adding to the complexity of the search itself.

STA Travel's search function has limited options potentially making it harder for users to be specific with their requirements.



The screenshot shows the STA TRAVEL website with a flight search form. The form includes fields for 'From' (London (All Airp.)), 'To', 'Departure' (24 Feb 08), and 'Return' (07 Mar 08). There are checkboxes for 'One way flight' and 'I am a student'. Below these are fields for 'No. of Travellers' (1) and 'Traveller 1' (I am under 26). At the bottom, there is a 'SEARCH' button and a link for '> Advanced Search'. A note at the bottom says 'Speak to a real person - call our friendly experts at 0871 2300 040'.

The websites generally scored poorly for this guideline, with just 4 out of 20 achieving 4 or 5 out of 5.

Category: Flight search

### 3. Provide an effective calendar

#### Overall average

3.1 (out of 5)

#### Travel agent average

3.0 (out of 5)

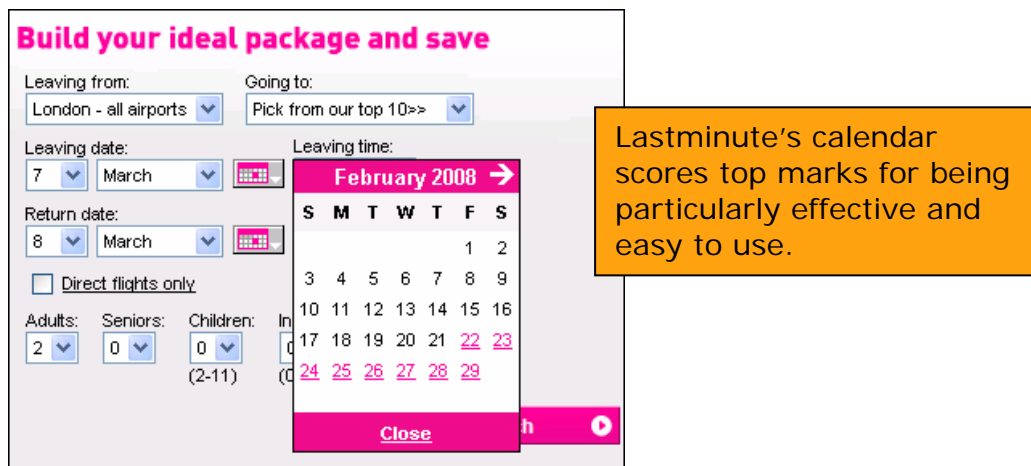
#### Carrier average

3.2 (out of 5)

Entering dates into websites can be an erratic business – it's very easy to enter the wrong date without noticing. Most sites now offer a 'calendar' feature, displaying the dates per month, allowing people to select their required dates more easily.

A calendar feature should adhere to the following good usability principles:

- The icon used to signify the feature is clear
- The next and previous links are in the same place for each month
- The calendar is easy to close
- The calendar does not obstruct the date field that it's populating
- The calendar should be closely associated with the relevant point
- Users aren't forced to use the calendar if they do not wish to
- The 'return' calendar begins on the 'leaving' date



**Build your ideal package and save**

Leaving from: London - all airports  
Going to: Pick from our top 10>>

Leaving date: 7 March  
Leaving time: February 2008  
Return date: 8 March

Direct flights only

Adults: 2 Seniors: 0 Children: 0  
(2-11)

Close

Lastminute's calendar scores top marks for being particularly effective and easy to use.

19 of the 20 sites offered the calendar feature, but this doesn't mean the sites were successful, with only 8 scoring 4 or 5 out of 5. The majority fell short on 1 or 2 of the above guidelines.

Category: Flight search

#### 4. Allow flexibility when completing the first step

**Overall average**

2.9 (out of 5)

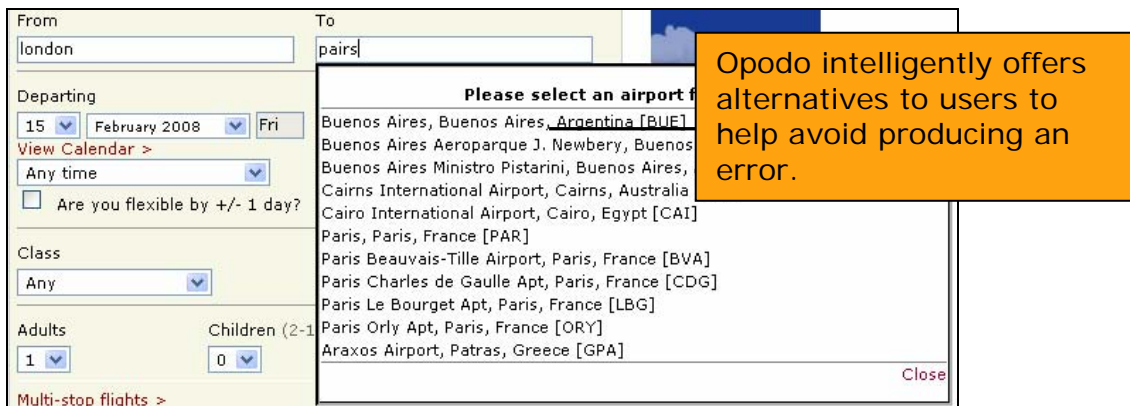
**Travel agent average**

2.6 (out of 5)

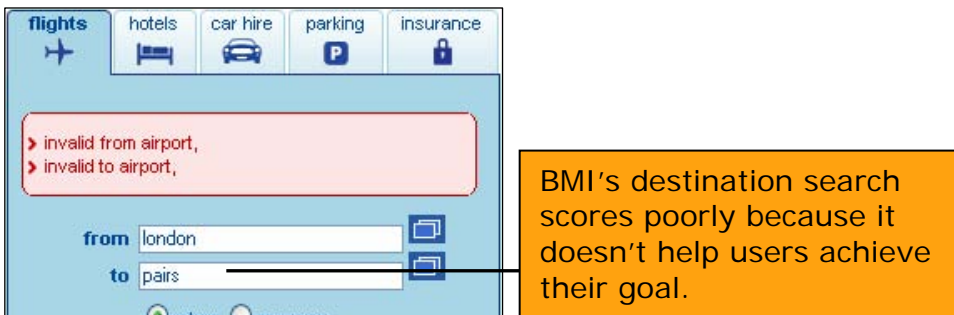
**Carrier average**

3.1 (out of 5)

People are liable to make errors when completing the first step of the flight search. For example many sites require people to type in their flight destination and spelling some place names correctly can be a real struggle. People often don't know or care exactly which airport they fly to or from, so long as they arrive near their destination. Despite this, many websites force people to specify an airport, rather than allowing them the flexibility of just naming a city.



The screenshot shows a flight search form with 'From' set to 'london' and 'To' set to 'pairs'. A dropdown menu is open, displaying a list of airports. An orange callout box points to the dropdown with the text: "Opodo intelligently offers alternatives to users to help avoid producing an error."



The screenshot shows a flight search form with 'from' set to 'london' and 'to' set to 'pairs'. A red error message box is displayed above the form, stating: "invalid from airport, invalid to airport,". An orange callout box points to the error message with the text: "BMI's destination search scores poorly because it doesn't help users achieve their goal."

The websites scored poorly with regards to this guideline – many sites didn't offer the choice of 'All London airports', failed to recognise 'Pairs' as 'Paris', or allowed people to specify a return date that was before the outward date. Only 4 out of the 20 travel sites scored 4 or 5 out of 5.

Category: Search results and flight summary

## 5. Provide a clear results page

**Overall average**

3.4 (out of 5)

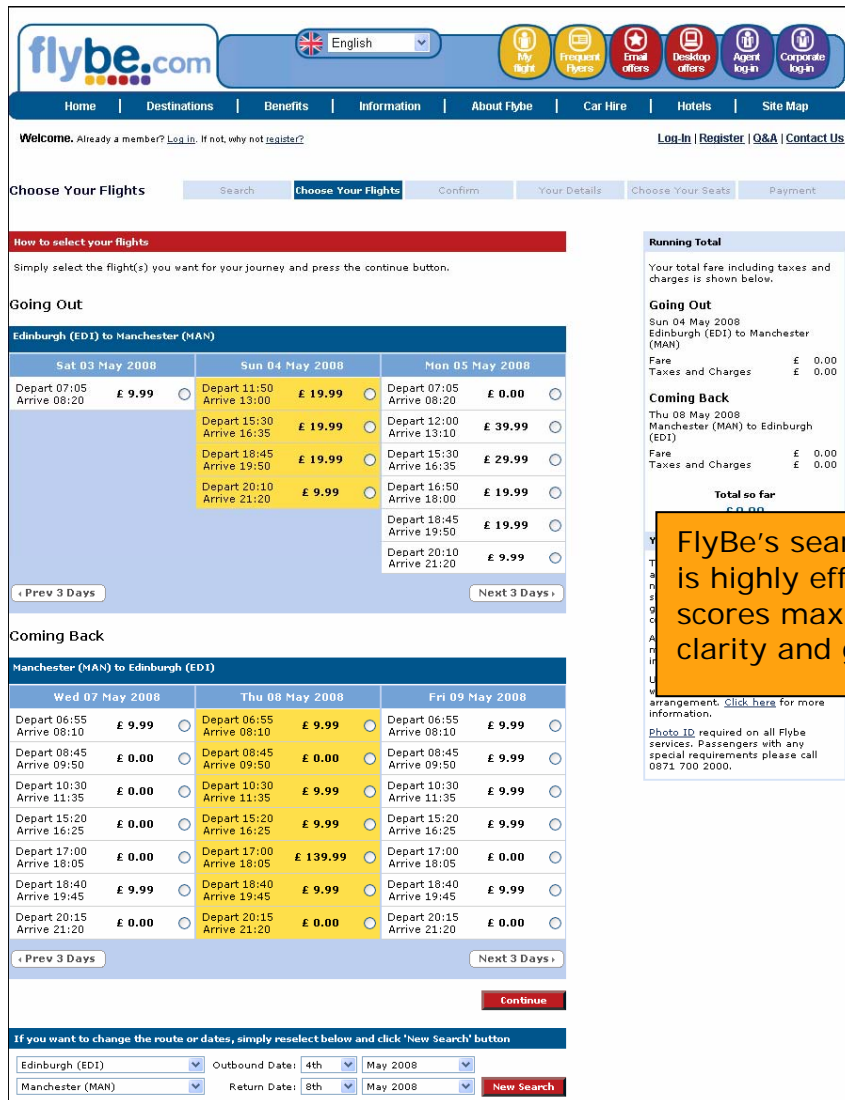
**Travel agent average**

3.4 (out of 5)

**Carrier average**

3.4 (out of 5)

Often, search results pages contain a large amount of information – it's essential that the information is presented to users in a clear and easily digestible manner. If users struggle to understand the results, they might not proceed further.



The screenshot shows the Flybe.com website interface. At the top, there's a navigation bar with the Flybe logo, a language dropdown set to 'English', and several utility icons like 'My flight', 'Frequent flyers', 'Email offers', 'Desktop offers', 'Agent log-in', and 'Corporate log-in'. Below this is a main navigation menu with links for Home, Destinations, Benefits, Information, About Flybe, Car Hire, Hotels, and Site Map. A welcome message and links for 'Log-in', 'Register', 'Q&A', and 'Contact Us' are also present.

The main content area is titled 'Choose Your Flights' and includes a progress bar with steps: Search, Choose Your Flights (active), Confirm, Your Details, Choose Your Seats, and Payment. A red banner provides instructions on how to select flights. The 'Going Out' section shows flight options from Edinburgh (EDI) to Manchester (MAN) for three dates: Sat 03 May 2008, Sun 04 May 2008, and Mon 05 May 2008. Each date has a table of flight times and prices, with radio buttons for selection. The 'Coming Back' section shows options from Manchester (MAN) to Edinburgh (EDI) for Wed 07 May 2008, Thu 08 May 2008, and Fri 09 May 2008, also with flight time and price tables.

On the right side, a 'Running Total' box shows the total fare including taxes and charges for the selected flights, with a 'Total so far' of £0.00. Below this, there's a 'Photo ID' requirement notice.

At the bottom, there's a search filter section with dropdown menus for 'Edinburgh (EDI)' and 'Manchester (MAN)', and date pickers for 'Outbound Date' (4th May 2008) and 'Return Date' (8th May 2008), along with a 'New Search' button.

FlyBe's search results page is highly effective and scores maximum marks for clarity and good structure.

The sites performed fairly well for this guideline. 11 of the 20 sites scored 4 or 5 out of 5. Sites were marked down for cluttering the screen with unneeded information, or missing key information from the page (such as the dates).

Category: Search results and flight summary

## 6. Allow manipulation of the results

**Overall average**

2.9 (out of 5)

**Travel agent average**

2.0 (out of 5)

**Carrier average**

3.8 (out of 5)

If users are provided with a long list of results then it's crucial they're able to manipulate the list. This will help them find the exact flight they're after.

Sorting a long list allows users to bring products with certain criteria to the top of the page. This is particularly useful for users who aren't exactly sure what they want. Users can usually sort by price to bring the cheapest flights to the top.

Filtering on the other hand lets users reduce the number of items in the list by filtering out products that don't conform to a certain criteria. This is often more useful for users who know a bit about the product(s) as filter criteria are usually product-specific.

Results filter	Departing	Arriving	Duration	Availability
<b>Outbound Departure times</b> <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Before 8 am <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Morning (8am - 12pm) <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Afternoon (12pm - 6pm) <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Evening (6pm - 12am)	08:00	08:25	01:25, Non-stop	good
<b>Inbound Departure times</b> <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Before 8 am <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Morning (8am - 12pm) <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Afternoon (12pm - 6pm) <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Evening (6pm - 12am)	09:00	09:25	01:25, Non-stop	good
<b>Departure airport</b> <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> London Heathrow Apt £ 115.30	10:00	10:15	01:15, Non-stop	good
<b>Arrival airport</b> <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Paris Charles de Gaulle Apt £ 115.30	12:00	12:15	01:15, Non-stop	good
<b>Airlines</b> <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Air France £ 115.30 <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> British Airways £ 136.30 <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> KLM - Royal Dutch Airlines £ 142.20 <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Qantas Airways £ 506.50 <input type="button" value="Show all"/>	13:00	13:15		
<b>Total price</b> Price per adult including taxes and booking fees: 126.30 GBP				
<b>Outbound:</b> Fri 29 February 08 Please select flight time				
	08:45	11:00	01:15, Non-stop	good
	09:15	11:25	01:10, Non-stop	good
<b>Inbound:</b> Fri 07 March 08				
	15:00		01:10, Non-stop	good

Opodo empowers their users with a powerful filtering tool on the left to allow them to refine their search results.

8 sites didn't need to offer the ability to manipulate the results because the number of flights offered was too small for such requirements. Of the others only 1 offered filtering as an option, with sorting being more common. The websites generally performed poorly for this guideline, with just 1 out of 12 scoring 4 or 5 out of 5.

Category: Search results and flight summary

## 7. Make pages “share friendly”

### Overall average

2.2 (out of 5)

### Travel agent average

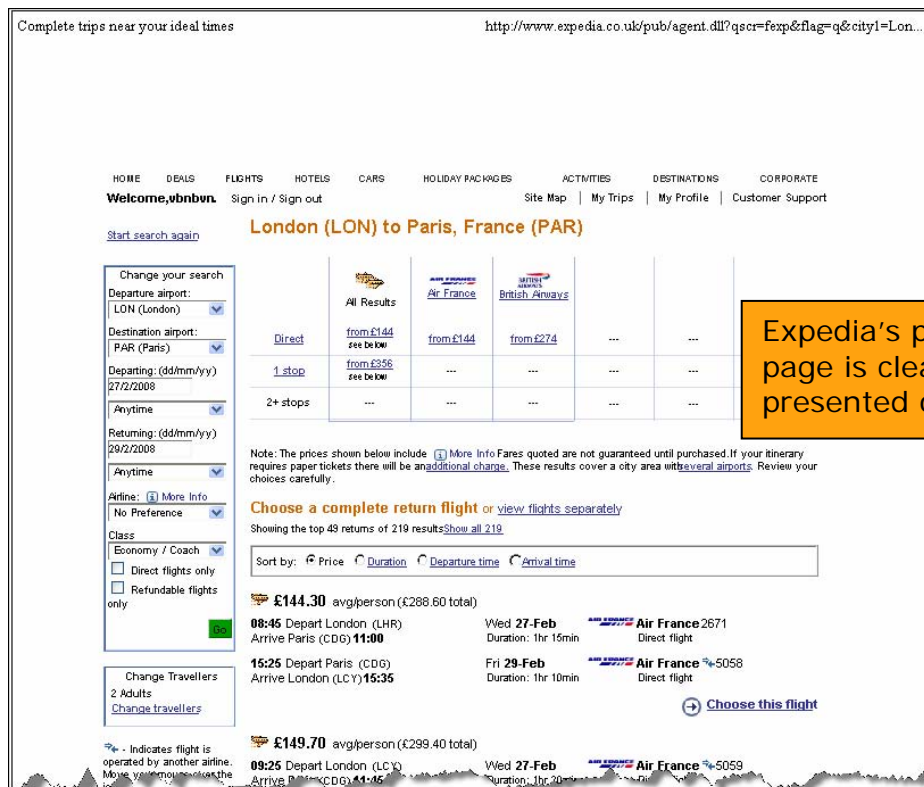
2.1 (out of 5)

### Carrier average

2.3 (out of 5)

Not every user that embarks on a booking process will want to book a flight there and then. Some may simply be checking out prices or investigating flight times. Agreeing on a flight is often a joint decision between friends and family so it's important that your site supports users by letting them print off pages. Ensure your web pages print in an easy-to-read format and without cutting off any important information.

Sites could even offer an 'email a friend' feature which would include a link to a 'refreshed' version of that same search at any time. Such a feature adds significant value to the user experience by offering a quick and easy method for users to actively seek out feedback from their 'friend', yet no site offered this.



Complete trips near your ideal times <http://www.expedia.co.uk/pub/agent.dll?qscr=fexp&flag=q&city1=Lon...>

HOME DEALS FLIGHTS HOTELS CARS HOLIDAY PACKAGES ACTIVITIES DESTINATIONS CORPORATE

Welcome, vbnbn. Sign in / Sign out Site Map | My Trips | My Profile | Customer Support

[Start search again](#) **London (LON) to Paris, France (PAR)**

Change your search  
 Departure airport: LON (London)  
 Destination airport: PAR (Paris)  
 Departing: 27/2/2008  
 Returning: 29/2/2008  
 Airline: No Preference  
 Class: Economy / Coach  
 Direct flights only  
 Refundable flights only

	All Results	Air France	British Airways
Direct	from £144 <small>see below</small>	from £144	from £274
1 stop	from £256 <small>see below</small>	...	...
2+ stops	...	...	...

Note: The prices shown below include [More Info](#) Fares quoted are not guaranteed until purchased. If your itinerary requires paper tickets there will be an additional charge. These results cover a city area with [several airports](#). Review your choices carefully.

Choose a complete return flight or [view flights separately](#)  
 Showing the top 49 returns of 219 results [Show all 219](#)

Sort by:  Price  Duration  Departure time  Arrival time

**£144.30** avg/person (£288.60 total)  
 08:45 Depart London (LHR) Wed 27-Feb Air France 2671  
 Arrive Paris (CDG) 11:00 Duration: 1hr 15min Direct flight

15:25 Depart Paris (CDG) Fri 29-Feb Air France 5058  
 Arrive London (LCY) 15:35 Duration: 1hr 10min Direct flight

**£149.70** avg/person (£299.40 total)  
 09:25 Depart London (LCY) Wed 27-Feb Air France 5059  
 Arrive Paris (CDG) 11:45 Duration: 1hr 20min Direct flight

[Choose this flight](#)

Expedia's print-friendly page is clear and well presented on paper.

The websites scored decidedly averagely for this guideline, with many sites not providing their users with even rudimentary sharing tools. With the growth and acceptance of Web 2.0 in recent years (in particular social media and user-generated content) it's surprising that our travel sites haven't embraced the spirit of this guideline more forcefully.

Category: Search results and flight summary

## 8. Support comparison shoppers

### Overall average

1.0 (out of 5)

### Travel agent average

0.8 (out of 5)

### Carrier average

1.2 (out of 5)

Most people will compare times and prices across several travel websites, making it unlikely that they'll book a flight on their first visit to any site.

This 'comparison shopping' behaviour is well understood in e-commerce. It's well known that travel sites experience the highest level of comparison shopping among the leading e-commerce sectors – one in every 4 visits to travel websites coming from another site in the same category.

Given how users naturally behave, it's disappointing that so few of the sites we evaluated provide users with features designed to support this form of user behaviour.

Sites should ensure searches are saved across sessions – allowing users to visit another site and return without the need to re-enter their search criteria again.

Kelkoo supports comparison shopping with a variety of features that persist between sessions.

Travel websites don't generally offer persistent features for results pages either.

Some sites offer features for saving individual flights. Unfortunately users are typically more committed to making a booking at that stage in their journey rather than continue 'comparison shopping'.

Category: Search results and flight summary

## 9. Display the full price (or an estimate) as early as possible

**Overall average**  
3.3 (out of 5)

**Travel agent average**  
4.3 (out of 5)

**Carrier average**  
2.2 (out of 5)

Users often get frustrated with extra taxes and charges part-way through a booking process. This is obviously true for any e-commerce checkout process. If users have previously been affected by extra charges then they're likely to be particularly wary of such methods. The pricing of flights should be absolutely clear.

It's essential that you're as up-front as possible and display prices in full (including all extra costs) as early in the booking process as possible.

Users can only make a decision on various options once they feel they've got all the pricing information available – if they're then presented with further charges they'll be forced to re-consider their options.

This guideline is particularly true for business travellers who may often need to research the full ticket price before getting permission to make the purchase.

**Total price: 308.90 GBP**  
Average price per person: **154.45 GBP**  
All prices include taxes

Thomas Cook clearly displays the total price. Their approach to taxes is also clearly explained.

2. Click on a plane or accompanying box to select the flight in your search.  
3. Once a flight is selected the flight price including taxes, fees & charges is displayed in the right hand fare box.

**Going Out From London (Stansted) - Cork**

« Previous Day Next Day »

**Select A Flight**

	<input type="radio"/>	Adult	89.99 GBP	Thu, 28 Feb 08	06:20 Depart	07:45 Arrive	<b>Going Out</b> Reg Fare Depart: London (Stansted) 06:20 Arrive: Cork 07:45 2 x Adult 179.98 GBP <b>Fare: 179.98 GBP</b> <b>Taxes / Fees: 48.16 GBP</b> <b>Total Price: 228.14 GBP</b>
	<input type="radio"/>	Adult	89.99 GBP	Thu, 28 Feb 08	16:25 Depart	17:55 Arrive	

**Coming Back From Cork - London (Stansted)**

« Previous Day Next Day »

**Select A Flight**

	<input type="radio"/>	Adult	29.99 GBP	Sun, 2 Mar 08	08:10 Depart	09:25 Arrive	<b>Coming Back</b> Reg Fare Depart: Cork 18:20 Arrive: London (Stansted) 19:40 2 x Adult 59.98 GBP <b>Fare: 59.98 GBP</b> <b>Taxes / Fees: 35.12 GBP</b> <b>Total Price: 95.10 GBP</b>
	<input checked="" type="radio"/>	Adult	29.99 GBP	Sun, 2 Mar 08	18:20 Depart	19:40 Arrive	
	<input type="radio"/>	Adult	29.99 GBP	Sun, 2 Mar 08	21:30 Depart	22:50 Arrive	
	<input type="radio"/>	Adult	29.99 GBP	Sun, 2 Mar 08	22:50 Depart	00:00 Arrive	

Ryanair uses various prices placed around the page, making it difficult to establish exactly how much the flights will cost.

The difference in score between travel agents and carriers is highly significant and should come as no surprise to many readers. The transparency of pricing is a long-standing concern of the Office of Fair Trading (OFT). All the travel agent sites scored either 4 or 5 out of 5 whereas the carriers were let down by 6 sites scoring 2 or below for this important guideline.

Category: Search results and flight summary

## 10. Make it easy to refine the search or look for another flight

**Overall average**

2.9 (out of 5)

**Travel agent average**

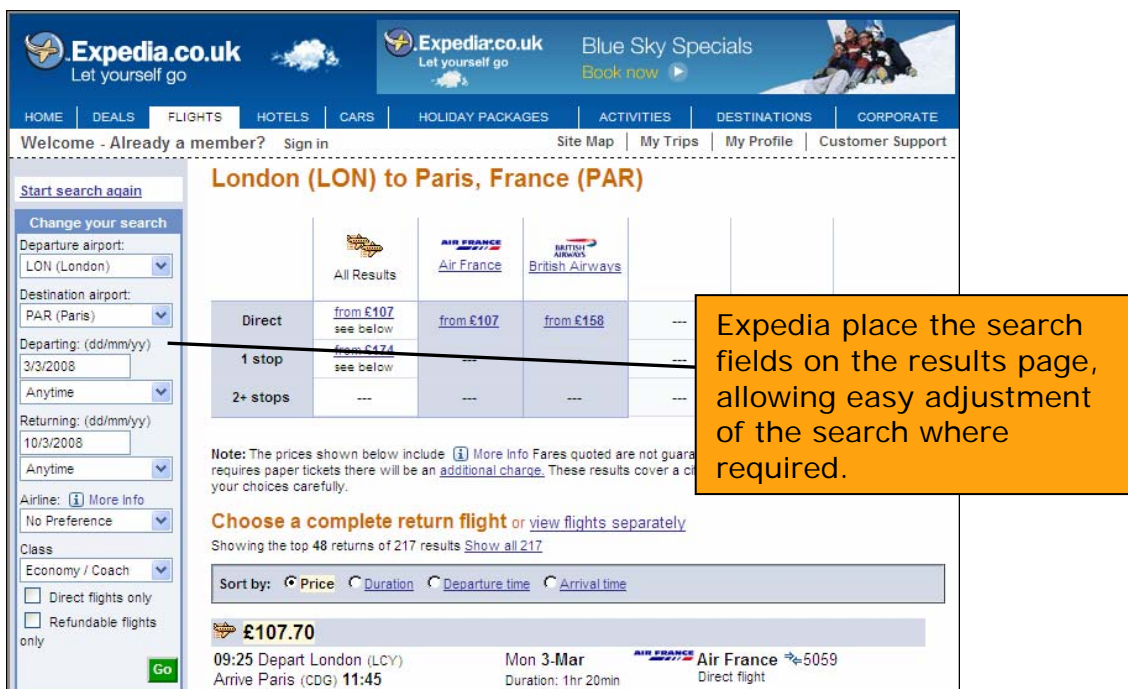
4.2 (out of 5)

**Carrier average**

1.6 (out of 5)

A booking process shouldn't assume that users will be happy with the results of their search. It's crucial that if users aren't happy, the booking process helps them keep looking for an appropriate flight - make it difficult for them to perform a subsequent search and they're unlikely to hang around for too long.

The easiest way to do this is to allow users to start a new search directly from the results page. All the previously entered search criteria (such as dates, airports and the number of people) should be maintained.



The screenshot shows the Expedia.co.uk website with search results for a flight from London (LON) to Paris (PAR). The search criteria are: Departure airport: LON (London), Destination airport: PAR (Paris), Departing: 3/3/2008, Returning: 10/3/2008, Airline: No Preference, Class: Economy / Coach. The results table shows options for Direct, 1 stop, and 2+ stops flights, with prices starting from £107. A callout box points to the search filters on the left, stating: "Expedia place the search fields on the results page, allowing easy adjustment of the search where required."

With the exception of BMI, all the travel sites provided some facility to address this guideline. However, there was another marked difference between travel agents and carriers. The carrier travel sites lost marks for losing users' previously entered search criteria and providing only limited re-search options.

Category: Search results and flight summary

## 11. Provide information on each airport

**Overall average**

0.5 (out of 5)

**Travel agent average**

0.0 (out of 5)

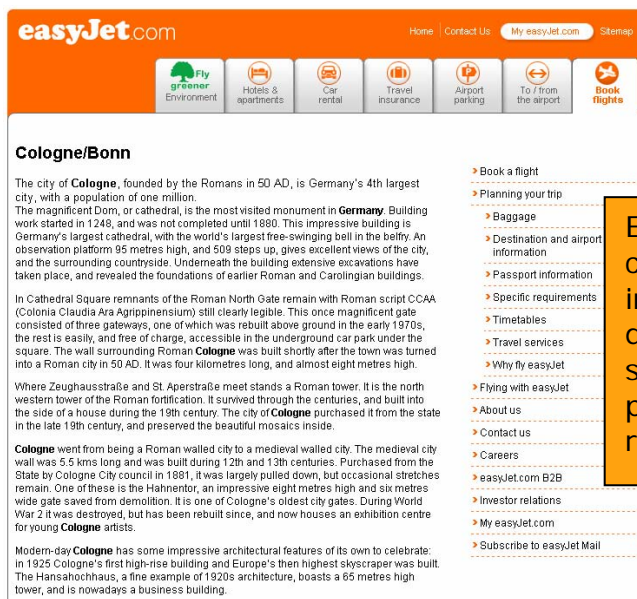
**Carrier average**

0.9 (out of 5)

People are less likely to book a flight to, or from, a specific airport if they aren't certain:

- ❑ Where it is
- ❑ How to get there
- ❑ What the transport links (public and otherwise) are
- ❑ How long it takes to get there from the original location/final destination

This issue has become more of an issue recently since airlines are now flying to many new and unfamiliar airports. Despite this, many websites fail to provide information on where airports are or how to get there.



EasyJet provides comprehensive airport information, but it's difficult to find during the search and booking process when users will really need it.

With 15 out of 20 travel sites scoring 0 out of 5 on this guideline, there's clearly a significant problem here. This is unfortunate because users are likely to go elsewhere if they don't know where they're going or how to get to and from the airport.

Category: Search results and flight summary

## 12. Use a clear flight confirmation page

**Overall average**

4.2 (out of 5)

**Travel agent average**

4.3 (out of 5)

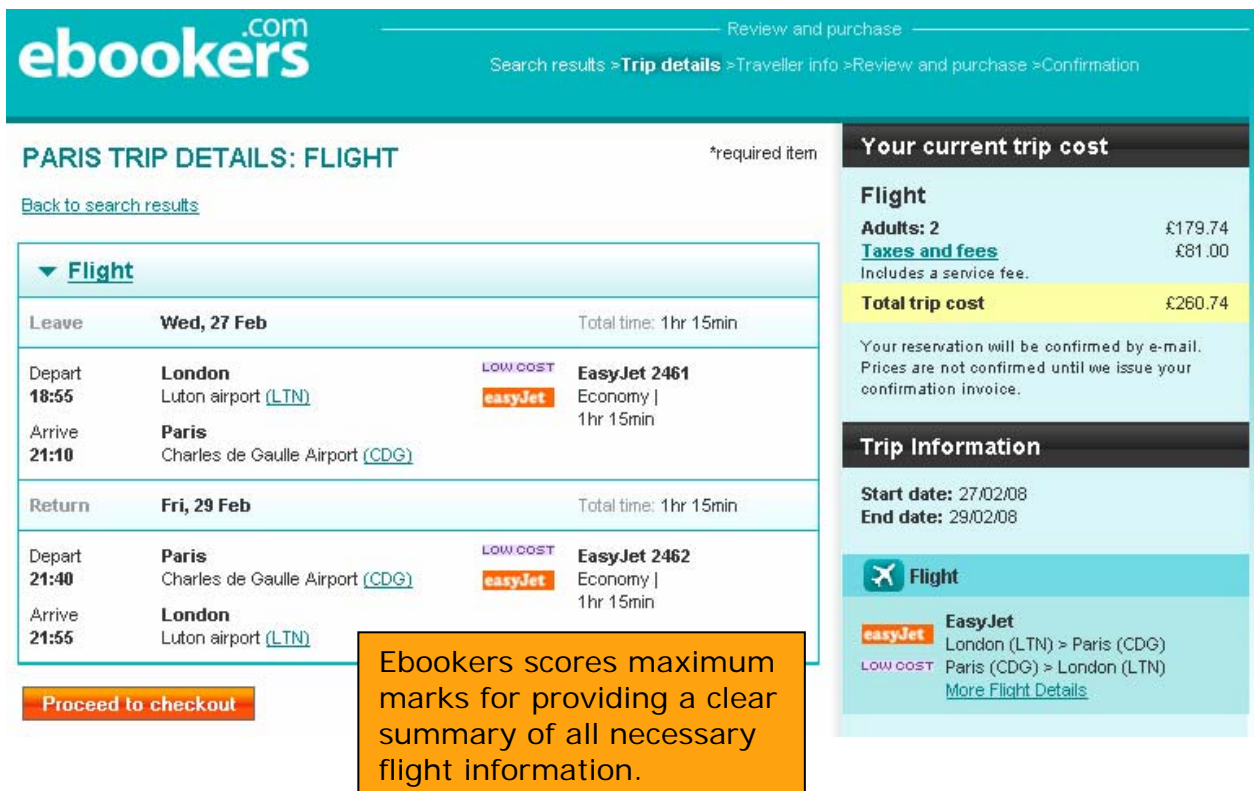
**Carrier average**

4.0 (out of 5)

After selecting flights from the search result page it's crucial that a summary page is provided. This is so users can review the flight details they've selected before proceeding with the booking. This confirmation page needs various pieces of information presented clearly to help them reach their final decision:

- ▣ Full price, clearly displayed above the page fold
- ▣ Clear 'to' and 'from' locations with the airports' names in full
- ▣ Any additional prices for extras not included in the price quoted
- ▣ Relevant flight information, times of departure and arrival and items included

A clear next step should also be included, to ensure users know exactly what to do to continue their booking.



**ebookers.com** — Review and purchase —  
 Search results > Trip details > Traveller info > Review and purchase > Confirmation

**PARIS TRIP DETAILS: FLIGHT** \*required item

[Back to search results](#)

Flight	
Leave	Wed, 27 Feb <span style="float: right;">Total time: 1hr 15min</span>
Depart 18:55	London Luton airport (LTN) <span style="float: right;">LOW COST easyJet</span> <b>EasyJet 2461</b> Economy   1hr 15min
Arrive 21:10	Paris Charles de Gaulle Airport (CDG)
Return	Fri, 29 Feb <span style="float: right;">Total time: 1hr 15min</span>
Depart 21:40	Paris Charles de Gaulle Airport (CDG) <span style="float: right;">LOW COST easyJet</span> <b>EasyJet 2462</b> Economy   1hr 15min
Arrive 21:55	London Luton airport (LTN)

[Proceed to checkout](#)

Ebookers scores maximum marks for providing a clear summary of all necessary flight information.

**Your current trip cost**

**Flight**

Adults: 2 £179.74

Taxes and fees £81.00  
Includes a service fee.

**Total trip cost** £260.74

Your reservation will be confirmed by e-mail. Prices are not confirmed until we issue your confirmation invoice.

**Trip Information**

Start date: 27/02/08  
End date: 29/02/08

**Flight**

easyJet **EasyJet**  
London (LTN) > Paris (CDG)  
LOW COST Paris (CDG) > London (LTN)  
[More Flight Details](#)

17 out of 20 travel sites scored 4 or 5 out of 5 on this guideline, which is an excellent result.

Category: Booking pages

### 13. Provide a contact number through the booking process

**Overall average**

1.9 (out of 5)

**Travel agent average**

3.0 (out of 5)

**Carrier average**

0.8 (out of 5)

Some users are unwilling to research and book flights completely online whilst others will simply research the best deals and then get straight on the phone to book.

As such, it's essential that a phone number is clearly visible both before and during the search and booking process. Users should feel reassured they can pick up the phone at any point, especially if they get stuck.



Flight Centre scores highly for putting their contact number(s) into the header, providing both a number and opening times.

11 out of the 20 travel sites scored 0 or 1 out of 5 on this guideline, which is a significant user experience risk. Those users that aren't 'e-confident' may struggle to complete your booking process and may decide to dropout if they can't pick the up phone and speak to you.

It's also important to consider that a phone number on your site will reassure your users that you're a bona fide enterprise.

One possible reason for the difference in scoring between travel agents and carriers could be due to their diverse commercial models and associated method of servicing their customers.

Category: Booking pages

## 14. Use appropriate up-selling

### Overall average

3.6 (out of 5)

### Travel agent average

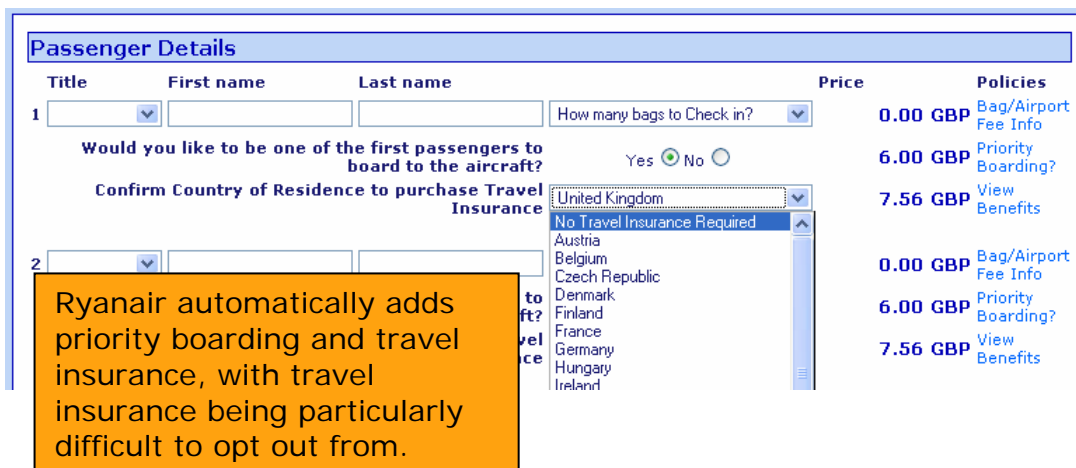
4.1 (out of 5)

### Carrier average

3.0 (out of 5)

It's well known that there's limited profit margin in selling flights, which is why so many travel sites are keen to cross- and up-sell other products to users. However, many sites approach up-selling in a clumsy manner, potentially increasing the chances of drop-offs.

All extras offered should be 'opt-in' – users shouldn't be automatically signed up to any of the extras offered.



**Passenger Details**

Title	First name	Last name	How many bags to Check in?	Price	Policies
1				0.00 GBP	Bag/Airport Fee Info
Would you like to be one of the first passengers to board to the aircraft? Yes <input checked="" type="radio"/> No <input type="radio"/>				6.00 GBP	Priority Boarding?
Confirm Country of Residence to purchase Travel Insurance United Kingdom No Travel Insurance Required Austria Belgium Czech Republic Denmark Finland France Germany Hungary Ireland				7.56 GBP	View Benefits
2				0.00 GBP	Bag/Airport Fee Info
				6.00 GBP	Priority Boarding?
				7.56 GBP	View Benefits

Ryanair automatically adds priority boarding and travel insurance, with travel insurance being particularly difficult to opt out from.

It's a positive sign that so many sites have scored so highly for this guideline. With 14 out of 20 of the sites scoring 4 or 5 out of 5, it's clear that most travel sites understand the importance of transparent pricing.

Unfortunately, several sites automatically included travel insurance into their booking package – Ryanair make it particularly difficult for users to unselect their insurance. Others automatically add charges for meals, carbon offsetting and seat options.

Category: Booking pages

## 15. Display a clear progress bar

### Overall average

2.2 (out of 5)

### Travel agent average

2.1 (out of 5)

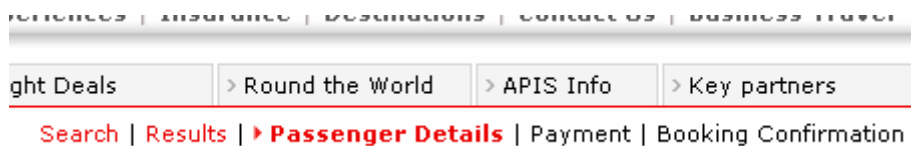
### Carrier average

2.3 (out of 5)

During the booking process, users must be clearly informed of where they are and how much further they have to go. This is usually achieved with a progress bar.

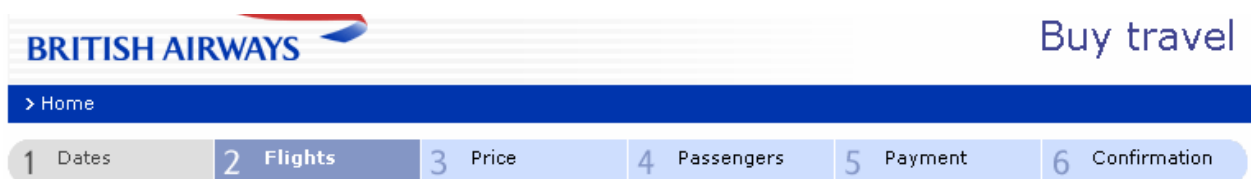
The progress bar should:

- Be very easy to spot
- Use easy-to-understand language
- Highlight users' current location
- Have the appearance of a process flow



Flight Centre's progress bar (above) is too closely grouped with the 'search' and 'results' links. This makes it hard for users to follow.

BA (below) scores highest for their progress bar which is clear, easy to understand and has a strong sense of flow.



18 out of the 20 travel sites provide a progress bar, but with an average score of just 2.2 out of 5 overall there's clearly room for improvement. Most of the progress bars went against one or more of the above criteria thereby reducing their effectiveness.

Category: Booking pages

## 16. Ensure your flight cancellation/change rules are clear and findable

### Overall average

2.5 (out of 5)

### Travel agent average

2.3 (out of 5)

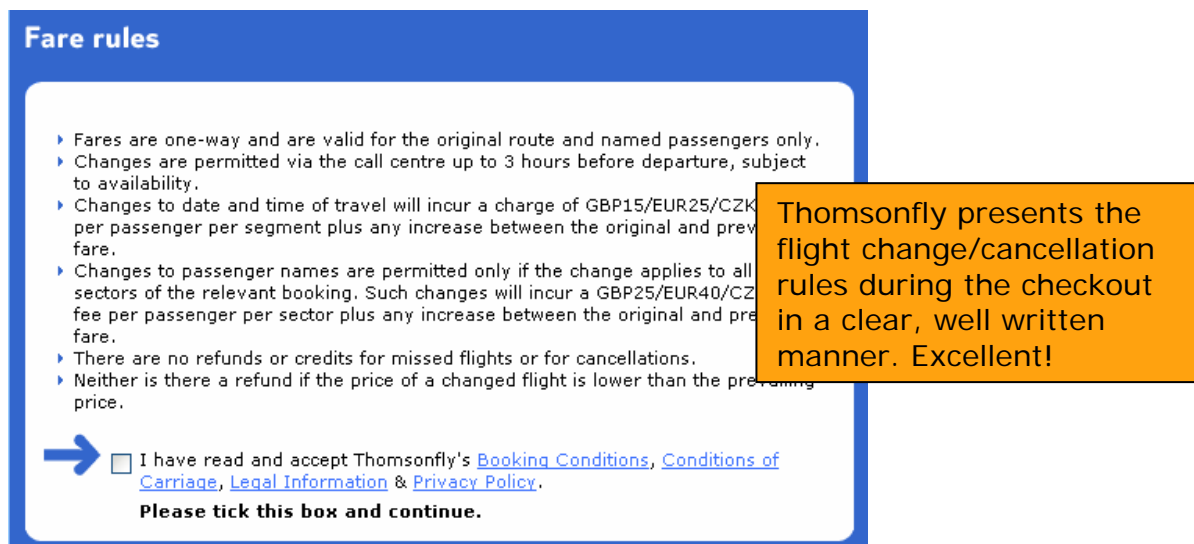
### Carrier average

2.7 (out of 5)

The nature of travel means people often want to know the rules and conditions surrounding changes to/cancelling their flights – even if this is just for peace of mind.

Many sites made this information very hard to find – burying it in the site terms and conditions. A summary of the rules should be displayed directly on the page during the booking process – this transparency is good, showing users there's nothing to hide and ensuring users are aware of any restrictions early on.

Several of the sites use complex legalise within their refund rules meaning many users will be left none-the-wiser after reading the information (if they bother to read it at all). The rules should be explained in plain English, using no more than three or four sentences in bullet points to explain the basics. Links to further explanations should also be included where required.



**Fare rules**

- ▶ Fares are one-way and are valid for the original route and named passengers only.
- ▶ Changes are permitted via the call centre up to 3 hours before departure, subject to availability.
- ▶ Changes to date and time of travel will incur a charge of GBP15/EUR25/CZK per passenger per segment plus any increase between the original and previous fare.
- ▶ Changes to passenger names are permitted only if the change applies to all sectors of the relevant booking. Such changes will incur a GBP25/EUR40/CZK fee per passenger per sector plus any increase between the original and previous fare.
- ▶ There are no refunds or credits for missed flights or for cancellations.
- ▶ Neither is there a refund if the price of a changed flight is lower than the previous price.

I have read and accept Thomsonfly's [Booking Conditions](#), [Conditions of Carriage](#), [Legal Information](#) & [Privacy Policy](#).

**Please tick this box and continue.**

Whilst all 20 travel sites provided their terms and conditions of booking on the site, only 3 out of the 20 scored 4 or 5 out of 5 for this guideline. With an overall average of 2.5 out of 5, it's clear that the travel sites need to consider the reasons for this lack of upfront transparency with their users.

Category: Errors and error handling

## 17. Provide a clear error summary

### Overall average

2.3 (out of 5)

### Travel agent average

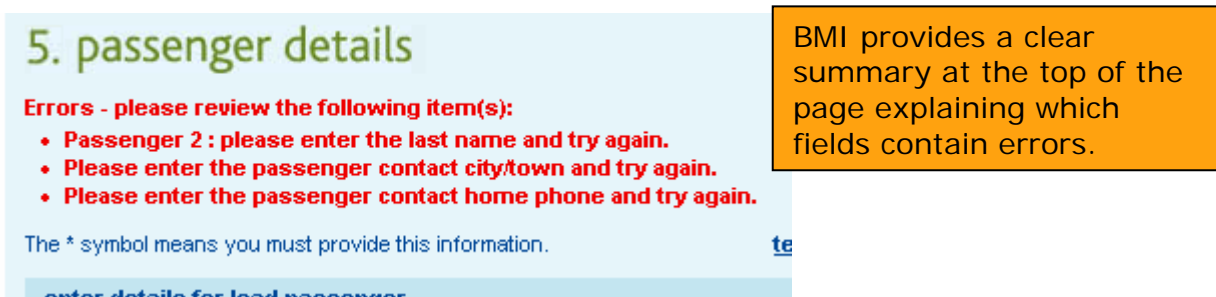
2.1 (out of 5)

### Carrier average

2.5 (out of 5)

Users will make errors when filling out forms – it's as simple as that. Error handling is an essential yet often overlooked part of any online form process. If users have made an error on a form they need to be informed immediately that there's a problem. This should be in the form of a written description at the top of the page.

How ever the error summary is provided, the most important thing is it's the very first thing users see after submitting a form.



The screenshot shows a light blue header with the text "5. passenger details" in green. Below it, a red error message reads: "Errors - please review the following item(s):" followed by three bullet points: "Passenger 2 : please enter the last name and try again.", "Please enter the passenger contact city/town and try again.", and "Please enter the passenger contact home phone and try again." Below the error message, a blue note says "The \* symbol means you must provide this information." To the right of the screenshot, an orange box contains the text: "BMI provides a clear summary at the top of the page explaining which fields contain errors."

With only 5 out of the 20 travel sites scoring top marks, it's clear that many need to address this well-established usability guideline. It's essential that users aren't required to hunt around to uncover and correct the errors.

Category: Errors and error handling

**18. Ensure all errors are clearly highlighted next to the individual form fields****Overall average**

2.1 (out of 5)

**Travel agent average**

2.8 (out of 5)

**Carrier average**

1.4 (out of 5)

In addition to instantly informing users that errors have been made and what the errors are, a helpful message should be provided next to each erroneous item. If the error occurs in a form item below the fold then when users scroll down they'll be unable to see the error summary at the top of the page. Likewise, if the error summary is provided as an alert then there's no reminder as to what the error was when the alert is closed.

**your name:****✘ Please specify the last name of this traveller.**

* Title	* First/given name	Initial	* Last name/surname
Mr. <input type="button" value="v"/>	<input type="text" value="John"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>

\* Your e-mail address

The Ebookers' booking process conveniently highlights each field containing errors clearly to direct the user's effort in recovery.

It's very disappointing that 11 out of the 20 sites scored 0 out of 5 for this critical guideline. The use of red text to emphasise the fields that need correcting is a well-established design solution for transaction-based sites.

The discrepancy between travel agents and carrier sites is particularly marked for this guideline with 7 out of 10 carriers scoring 0 marks.

Category: Errors and error handling

## 19. Provide explicit instructions on how to correct errors

### Overall average

0.5 (out of 5)

### Travel agent average

0.8 (out of 5)

### Carrier average

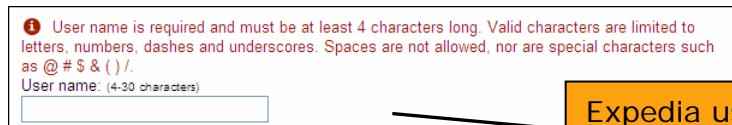
0.2 (out of 5)

No matter how much travel sites try to prevent it, users will make mistakes during the booking process. If users can't immediately work out the error and how to fix it, they may be unwilling (or even unable) to continue with the booking process.

By providing them with highly visible and informative error messages, users can correct mistakes and continue on through the booking process. If users find it difficult (or even impossible) to correct their mistakes they'll likely go to a website that helps them all the way.

Instructions on fixing errors should:

- Be explicit in explaining what's wrong and what needs fixing
- Not assign any blame to users
- Avoid using words like 'error' or 'mistake'
- Steer clear of long words and/or jargon



Expedia uses simple, plain language to provide clear recovery instructions.



Thomsonfly, however, uses a pop-up window – once users click 'OK' the instructions disappear.

Again, the sites scored particularly badly against this guideline with only 5 out of the 20 sites scoring anything at all.

This result is disappointing because this guideline is 'bread and butter' usability. If users aren't able to recover and progress through their task there's a good chance they'll give up and go elsewhere.

Category: Errors and error handling

## 20. Ensure the system is able to cope with common errors

### Overall average

4.3 (out of 5)

### Travel agent average

4.5 (out of 5)

### Carrier average

4.0 (out of 5)

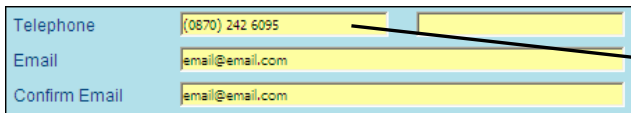
Although users will typically make errors when going through the booking process, some of these errors can be avoided through the clever use of technology. For example, a phone number can be submitted in a number of ways, all of which should be allowed:

- ☐ (0870) 242 6095
- ☐ 0870-242-6095
- ☐ 0870 242 6095

The booking process should allow all these combinations, stripping out any brackets, hyphens or spaces. Other items that can be entered in a number of different ways include (spaces vs. no spaces, slashes vs. no slashes etc.):

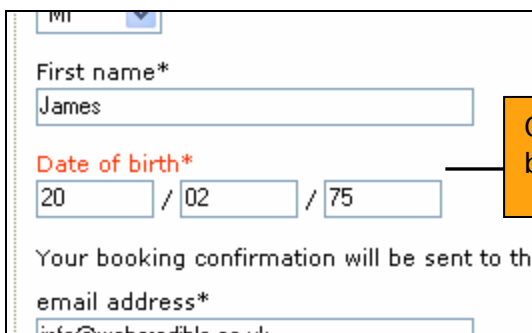
- ☐ Credit card numbers
- ☐ Date of birth
- ☐ Postcode

A website can be proactive in explicitly stating the required format but should still allow different formats to be submitted.



Telephone	(0870) 242 6095
Email	email@email.com
Confirm Email	email@email.com

XL's booking engine is agile enough to cope with spaces and brackets in the telephone number.



First name*	James
Date of birth*	20 / 02 / 75
Your booking confirmation will be sent to the email address*	
info@webcredible.co.uk	

Opodo don't accept a date of birth entered using 2 digits.

The travel sites scored well against this guideline with only 3 sites out of the 20 scoring below 2 out of 5. Both the travel agents and carriers performed equally well.

## Conclusion

Overall, the UK travel sites featured in this report aren't doing enough to maximise their share of the potential revenue in this highly contested marketplace. With an average usability score of only 51.5% they'll doubtlessly be losing site visitors due to mistakes that could quite easily be avoided.

Usability is essential so that site visitors can find the flights they're looking for quickly and intuitively. An increase in usability can lead to an increase in conversions of up to 100%<sup>3</sup>. With such a massive choice of options available online, users don't have to work very hard to find alternatives and leave your website for a competitor.

The usability guidelines presented in this report represent just the start to achieving excellent usability and an outstanding user experience. The use of usability guidelines is essential, but they should always be used in conjunction with usability testing on a regular basis. Usability testing involves analysing typical site visitors complete typical tasks on your website (see [www.webcredible.co.uk/testing](http://www.webcredible.co.uk/testing) for more).

For more information on other general usability guidelines that should be conformed to, visit [www.webcredible.co.uk/articles](http://www.webcredible.co.uk/articles) or book a place on a Webcredible usability course at [www.webcredible.co.uk/training](http://www.webcredible.co.uk/training).

## References

1. Carl H. Marcussen, 'Trends in European Internet Distribution – of Travel and Tourism Services' January 2008 ([www.crt.dk/uk/staff/chm/trends.htm](http://www.crt.dk/uk/staff/chm/trends.htm))
2. YouGov Plc, 'Logan Tod warns competition for online travel sites is set to heat up' August 2007 (<http://tinyurl.com/2cmp4m>)
3. Return on Investment for Usability ([www.useit.com/alertbox/20030107.html](http://www.useit.com/alertbox/20030107.html))

## Appendix: Full results

The full list of websites audited, and the score they achieved for each guideline is as follows:

Website	Guideline number																				TOTAL
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20	
Opodo <a href="http://www.opodo.co.uk">www.opodo.co.uk</a>	5	5	4	5	5	4	2	0	5	5	0	5	2	4	2	2	5	5	0	2	67
British Airways <a href="http://www.britishairways.com">www.britishairways.com</a>	5	5	4	4	3	3	3	0	4	4	0	5	0	4	4	2	5	5	0	5	65
Travelbag <a href="http://www.travelbag.co.uk">www.travelbag.co.uk</a>	4	0	2	4	3	1	2	2	5	5	0	4	4	5	5	3	2	5	1	5	62
STA travel <a href="http://www.statravel.co.uk">www.statravel.co.uk</a>	5	0	2	1	5	2	3	0	4	5	0	5	4	5	4	3	5	0	0	5	58
Lastminute <a href="http://www.lastminute.com">www.lastminute.com</a>	4	4	5	3	4	2	1	2	4	5	0	5	1	2	1	2	1	3	2	5	56
Virgin Atlantic <a href="http://www.virgin-atlantic.com">www.virgin-atlantic.com</a>	4	2	3	4	3	0	3	2	4	1	2	5	0	5	4	4	0	4	1	4	55
Ebookers <a href="http://www.ebookers.com">www.ebookers.com</a>	3	3	3	3	2	3	2	0	4	1	0	5	5	4	2	3	1	5	0	5	54
Expedia <a href="http://www.expedia.co.uk">www.expedia.co.uk</a>	4	3	2	2	4	3	3	0	4	5	0	4	0	2	0	3	1	5	5	3	53
Travelocity <a href="http://www.travelocity.co.uk">www.travelocity.co.uk</a>	5	5	4	1	4	1	1	2	4	5	0	4	4	5	2	1	0	0	0	5	53
BMI <a href="http://www.flybmi.com">www.flybmi.com</a>	4	1	4	1	4	5	3	2	4	0	0	5	0	5	2	3	5	0	0	5	53
Flight centre <a href="http://www.flightcentre.co.uk">www.flightcentre.co.uk</a>	3	3	3	1	3	2	3	2	4	5	0	3	5	5	2	2	1	0	0	5	52



User experience research & design

Website	Guideline number																				TOTAL
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20	
Thomas Cook <a href="http://www.thomascook.com">www.thomascook.com</a>	3	1	2	2	4	2	3	0	5	5	0	4	0	5	0	3	0	5	0	5	49
First Choice <a href="http://www.firstchoice.co.uk">www.firstchoice.co.uk</a>	0	1	4	2	3	5	3	2	3	1	0	4	3	4	2	2	0	5	0	4	48
Airline network <a href="http://www.airline-network.co.uk">www.airline-network.co.uk</a>	5	2	3	4	0	0	1	0	4	1	0	4	5	4	3	1	5	0	0	5	47
Easyjet <a href="http://www.easyjet.com">www.easyjet.com</a>	5	1	4	5	4	5	0	0	1	3	3	4	0	2	1	2	3	0	1	2	46
FlyBE <a href="http://www.flybe.com">www.flybe.com</a>	4	2	0	3	5	5	3	0	1	3	0	4	0	4	3	1	3	0	0	5	46
Thomsonfly <a href="http://www.thomsonfly.com">www.thomsonfly.com</a>	4	1	3	3	1	5	1	2	2	1	2	3	0	0	3	5	3	0	0	5	44
XL.com <a href="http://www.xl.com">www.xl.com</a>	5	1	4	3	4	0	2	2	2	1	0	4	5	2	2	2	0	0	0	5	44
Ryanair <a href="http://www.ryanair.com/site/EN">www.ryanair.com/site/EN</a>	4	0	3	3	4	5	3	2	0	1	1	4	0	0	1	1	3	0	0	5	40
Monarch <a href="http://www.flymonarch.com">www.flymonarch.com</a>	2	2	3	3	3	5	2	0	1	1	1	2	0	4	1	5	3	0	0	0	38
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>78</b>	<b>42</b>	<b>62</b>	<b>57</b>	<b>68</b>	<b>58</b>	<b>44</b>	<b>20</b>	<b>65</b>	<b>58</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>83</b>	<b>38</b>	<b>71</b>	<b>44</b>	<b>50</b>	<b>46</b>	<b>42</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>85</b>	
<b>Average score</b>	<b>3.9</b>	<b>2.1</b>	<b>3.1</b>	<b>2.9</b>	<b>3.4</b>	<b>2.9</b>	<b>2.2</b>	<b>1.0</b>	<b>3.3</b>	<b>2.9</b>	<b>0.5</b>	<b>4.2</b>	<b>1.9</b>	<b>3.6</b>	<b>2.2</b>	<b>2.5</b>	<b>2.3</b>	<b>2.1</b>	<b>0.5</b>	<b>4.3</b>	<b>51.5</b>



User experience research & design

## About Webcredible

Webcredible is a usability and accessibility consultancy providing a range of services:

### Website consultancy

- ▣ Usability testing
- ▣ Accessibility audits

### Training & mentoring

- ▣ Usability & writing for the web
- ▣ Accessibility & advanced CSS
- ▣ Ongoing support for usability & accessibility

### User research

- ▣ Interviews & focus groups
- ▣ Persona creation

### Website development

- ▣ Wireframe & site map design
- ▣ Accessible CSS web page design
- ▣ Accessible content management system

Webcredible is widely regarded as one of the most innovative and respected usability and accessibility consultancies in the UK. Our 100+ research articles have been re-published on 100s of websites and we receive almost 200,000 visitors to our website each month.

We are:

- ▣ **Focused on client needs** – Our aims are to increase conversion rates for companies and ensure public sector organisations most effectively disseminate information.
- ▣ **Passionate** – The team here at Webcredible loves what they do and we only recruit staff passionate about usability and accessibility.
- ▣ **Approachable** – We're friendly and jargon-free. Consultants, despite being highly educated and experienced, only communicate in a user-friendly manner.

Travel clients include Airmiles, Cheapflights, First Choice, Thetrainline, Thomson and VisitBritain.

For more information please:

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- ▣ Visit [www.webcredible.co.uk](http://www.webcredible.co.uk)