

Hidden costs

Many consumers have complained about the 'hidden costs' when making an online booking with some budget airlines. Do low-cost airlines mislead travellers on the cost of their flights?

1 Decide the **three** most important factors when choosing an airline to fly with. Compare your choice with a partner.

allocated seat number	free in-flight meal/drinks	friendly service	low fare
luggage allowance	online check-in	convenient airport	comfort reputation

2 Scan the article and match the headings (a–d) with the correct paragraphs (1–4).

(a) The airlines reply (b) New regulations (c) Online payment process (d) Consumer survey

Fare ... or not fair?

[1] In order to fly cheaply, many of us are willing to pay for in-flight meals; do without a specific seat number; even land at an airport far from our real destination. However, many passengers now object to what they see as 'hidden costs' when making an online booking. One passenger stated: 'At first, the advertised price seems low; when you add on all the extras, the price is not far off a full fare airline!' A new report by the consumer magazine, *Which*, claims that the worst offender of all is *Ryanair*.

[2] A number of ways to generate extra income are used throughout the online booking process. First, the customer reads an eye-catching fare: *Dublin from £1.00!* If you don't check in online, *Ryanair* charges you to use its check-in desk. The survey points out you can only avoid this fee if you don't check luggage into the hold. Every bag you check in adds more to the ticket price. Do you want insurance? If you don't uncheck the box, another fee is added. When it comes to actually paying, using a credit card adds an extra fee,

charged per traveller. Paying with a debit card also incurs an unavoidable additional payment. By the time you are ready to pay, the survey found that sometimes, as much as £28 has been added to the original ticket price.

[3] It is not so much the fee which customers object to, it's the stealthy way it is added. Budget airlines such as *Ryanair* and *easyJet* have responded to the criticism by stating that any extra charges are largely avoidable. No surprise there. An industry spokesperson points out that it is not illegal for airlines to add extra costs. The question arises: is it fair?

[4] The Office of Fair Trading believes the current adverts are misleading, and is forcing airlines to change the way flights are advertised. Airlines now have to include all fixed non-optional costs in the basic advertised price of the flight. This month, *Ryanair* is shutting down its website for three days in order to change its reservation system. All eyes will be on these modifications to see if they comply with the new rulings.

3 Read the whole article. Describe the online payment process. What is the airline's response to the criticism?

4 Find words in the article from the definitions below.

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| (a) to make or create money | (paragraph 2) |
| (b) plastic card used for paying for things; moves money from your account immediately | (paragraph 2) |
| (c) in a quiet and secret way, so that nobody realizes what you are doing | (paragraph 3) |
| (d) making someone believe something that is incorrect or not true | (paragraph 4) |
| (e) obey a rule or law | (paragraph 4) |

Definitions from or based on the *Macmillan English Dictionary 2nd Edition* (Text © Bloomsbury 2007)

5 Discuss the following questions in small groups. Be ready to report your ideas to the class.

- Do you think the budget airlines payment system is fair or unfair? What examples have you experienced?
- Have you seen a 'misleading advertisement'? If so, explain why it was misleading.
- Have you come across any further examples of 'hidden costs' in other service industries? What were they?