

BOOKING A FLIGHT?

THE AUC GUIDE TO CUTTING THROUGH THE JUNGLE OF EUROPEAN AIRFARES



Introduction

The advent of no-frills airlines such as Ryanair and Easyjet has provided the air traveller with a range of new options. With their low fares and revolutionary way of selling tickets, they have opened up Europe to the air traveller.

But airlines are often aggressive in their marketing, such that UK air passengers are asked to cut through a “jungle” of airfares for flights to Europe. And often it is hard for them to see their way through this jungle and they are left facing questions such as;

- *Are no-frills airlines better value for money?*
- *Are no-frills carriers always cheaper?*
- *Does the success of Ryanair and Easyjet mean there is no longer a place for established full service carriers?*
- *Or do full service airlines still offer consumers a viable alternative?*

We hope to go some way to answering these questions in this report by comparing the service offered by no-frills carriers (such as Ryanair and Easyjet) to their full service counterparts (such as British Airways and BMI). We compared no-frills and full-service carriers on nine different routes, compiling 1500 fares from eight different airlines in the process. *The routes we chose and methods we used to record the fares are described on [Annex 1](#).*

Whilst the success of no-frills airlines appears to support the airlines' claims that consumers' choice of carrier is first and foremost, price led (and a comparison of *fares* takes up a good part of our report) we also compared the airline based on other criteria - *transfer cost / times, service quality and distribution.*

Fares

We found that no-frills carriers were often considerably cheaper than their full-service rivals. But not always. Indeed, the difference in fares was often minimal and, on occasion, full service airlines were actually cheaper than their no-frills rivals.

As a general rule, the difference in fares tends to get smaller the further in advance tickets are bought. Close to departure, airlines such as BA and BMI's fares were often considerably more than those of Easyjet and Ryanair, yet the further in advance of departure dates we looked, the difference in fares became less, sometimes even to the extent where the fares with full service airlines were, on occasions, actually cheaper than those of their no-frills rivals. Furthermore Ryanair and Easyjet tend not to offer fares for bookings as far ahead as 26 weeks hence whilst BA and BMI do – usually at even cheaper rates than those available 13 weeks prior to travel.

We found examples of this general rule in fares recorded on the following routes;



Glasgow to Paris

When we recorded fares during the week 19-25 May, we found that on the Glasgow airports to Paris airports route BA was on average often cheaper than Ryanair for four out of the six comparable advance booking periods. This is illustrated in Table 1.

Table 1: Fares recorded 19-25 May for flights between Glasgow and Paris

AVERAGE FARES FOR TRAVEL RECORDED ON		NEXT DAY	NEXT FRIDAY	1 WEEK LATER	4 WEEKS LATER	13 WEEKS LATER	26 WEEKS LATER	NEXT DAY
Duration of stay		one week	one week	one week	one week	one week	one week	one night
BA	Cheapest	263	133	107	76	69	66	334
BA	Most Expensive	334	341	264	119	127	189	406
RYANAIR	Cheapest	171	178	118	81	70	N/A	185
RYANAIR	Most Expensive	204	181	157	94	71	N/A	202

**London to Glasgow**

Similarly, between London and Glasgow, the most expensive average fare available recorded in the week 19-25 May (which is relevant if it happens to be the flight you want) for flights booked for four or more weeks in advance was with Ryanair rather than BA or Easyjet, as highlighted in table 2.

Table 2: Fares recorded 19-25 May for flights between London and Glasgow

AVERAGE FARES RECORDED FOR TRAVEL ON		NEXT DAY	NEXT FRIDAY	1 WEEK LATER	4 WEEKS LATER	13 WEEKS LATER	26 WEEKS LATER	NEXT DAY
Duration of stay		one week	one week	one week	one week	one week	one week	one night
RYANAIR	Cheapest	117	97	51	51	45	N/A	290
RYANAIR	Most Expensive	199	158	145	121	105	N/A	330
EASYJET	Cheapest	100	107	55	28	21	N/A	123
EASYJET	Most Expensive	162	151	95	63	48	N/A	173
BA	Cheapest	219	168	96	47	52	35	290
BA	Most Expensive	223	190	161	80	73	506	290



London to Frankfurt

Conversely, with late bookings made within a week of departure, Ryanair and Easyjet's average fares tended not to rise as steeply as BA's or BMI's. For example, during the week 28 April to 4 May on flights to Frankfurt, the average fare ranges were;

Ryanair **£35 - £234**

BA **£82 - £526**



London to Geneva

Similarly for flights to Geneva recorded in the week 19-25 May the findings were;

Easyjet **£46 - £121**

BA **£80 - £488**



London to Paris

On some occasions, we found that the fares with no-frills airlines hardly rose at all the closer it got to the date of departure; for Easyjet flights between London and Paris booked during the week 28 April to 5 May, the average price was the same for travel 13 weeks hence or the next day (table 3). Whereas BMI's cheapest average fare was nearly double for tickets bought for a flight the next day compared with for 13 weeks in the future.

Table 3: Average fares recorded 28 April to 5 May for flights between London and Paris

AVERAGE FARES FOR TRAVEL RECORDED ON		NEXT DAY	NEXT FRIDAY	1 WEEK LATER	4 WEEKS LATER	13 WEEKS LATER	26 WEEKS LATER	NEXT DAY
Duration of stay		one week	one week	one week	one week	one week	one week	one night
EASYJET	Cheapest	27	27	27	27	27	N/A	27
EASYJET	Most Expensive	82	65	54	38	43	N/A	97
BMI	Cheapest	125	73	78	64	64	49	128
BMI	Most Expensive	259	129	188	110	118	72	253



London to Venice

Even on a leisure route such as London to Venice (table 4) the cheapest average fare for flights booked during this week with Easyjet was only £2 more if booked the next day rather than 13 weeks in advance and only £15 more on Ryanair. BA, in comparison, was £102 more.

Table 4: Fares recorded 28 April to 5 May for flights between London and Venice

AVERAGE FARES RECORDED FOR TRAVEL ON		NEXT DAY	NEXT FRIDAY	1 WEEK LATER	4 WEEKS LATER	13 WEEKS LATER	26 WEEKS LATER	NEXT DAY
Duration of stay		one week	one week	one week	one week	one week	one week	one night
RYANAIR	Cheapest	56	49	31	33	41	N/A	81
RYANAIR	Most Expensive	160	115	58	58	88	N/A	257
EASYJET	Cheapest	82	71	58	53	80	N/A	97
EASYJET	Most Expensive	112	101	66	81	106	N/A	135
BA	Cheapest	194	195	136	89	92	89	206
BA	Most Expensive	245	219	239	203	135	100	305

Transfer times



No-frills airlines may be cheaper on most occasions but that does not necessarily mean they offer overall better value for money. These carriers often serve airports that are further from the city centre than those used by full-service airlines - thus requiring extra money (and time) to be spent on public transport or taxis getting to the city centre. Most full service airlines (and indeed some no-frills carriers) use airports close to the city centre.

We compared transfer costs and times on two different types of route;



Business route – London airports to Frankfurt airports



Leisure route – London airports to Venice airports



London to Frankfurt

For example, the cost-cutting London businessman with a meeting called at late notice in Frankfurt may think he can save money by purchasing a Ryanair flight. Indeed, during the week 28 April to 4 May, the average fare recorded during the week for flights departing the next day was £65 for Ryanair compared to £135 for BA. It appears an easy decision - but is this the whole story?

Each airline uses a different airport both in London and Frankfurt. For example BA flies from London Heathrow to Frankfurt Main, whilst Ryanair flies from London Stansted to Frankfurt Hahn. Customers of each airline are therefore faced with different transfer times and costs (see table 5 below) when travelling from city centre to city centre.

In this example, for our time-constrained businessman, the cheaper Ryanair flight might well turn out to be a false economy.

Table 5: Transfer costs and times for travel from central London to central Frankfurt (based on the average 13-week advance purchase fare recorded between 28 April to 4 May)

AIRLINE	TRANSFER FROM CENTRAL LONDON TO AIRPORT RETURN		TRANSFER FROM AIRPORT TO CENTRAL FRANKFURT RETURN		RETURN FLIGHT		TOTAL	
	COST	TIME	COST	TIME	COST	TIME	COST	TIME
BA	£8	2 hrs	£4	22 mins	£135	1 hr 35 mins	£147	3 hrs 57mins
RYANAIR	£23	1 hr 30 mins	£16	4 hrs	£86	1 hr 15 mins	£125	6 hrs 45 mins



London to Venice

It is not always the case, however, that a flight with a full-service airline will necessarily mean shorter transfers. BA flies to Venice from Gatwick, which is a similar distance from Central London as Stansted, from which both Easyjet and Ryanair fly. However BA flies to Venice Marco Polo (as does Easyjet), whilst Ryanair operate to Venice Treviso, which is considerably further from Venice city centre than Marco Polo.

Again, when transfer costs and times are entered into the equation (see table 6), passengers are faced with a situation where the cheapest fare may not necessarily be their best option. A couple may prefer the savings offered by Ryanair (even if it means a bit more time spent travelling) whilst a family might sacrifice the savings for the convenience of a short transfer from Marco Polo airport to Venice city centre, so may choose BA or Easyjet.

Table 6: Transfer costs and times for travel from London to Venice (based on the average 13-week advance purchase fare recorded between 28 April to 4 May)

AIRLINE	TRANSFER FROM CENTRAL LONDON TO AIRPORT RETURN		TRANSFER FROM AIRPORT TO CENTRAL VENICE RETURN		RETURN FLIGHT		TOTAL	
	COST	TIME	COST	TIME	COST	TIME	COST	TIME
BA	£22	1 hr	£3	1 hr	£92	2 hrs 20 mins	£117	4 hrs 20 mins
EASYJET	£23	1hr 30 mins	£3	1 hr	£80	2 hrs 20mins	£106	4 hrs 50 mins
RYANAIR	£23	1hr 30 mins	£8	2 hrs	£41	2 hrs	£72	5 hrs 50 mins

The tables above are based on travel from central London. Of course, choosing which airline to fly with will also depend to a large extent on where the passenger lives in the UK. But the same principle will apply – until transfer times and costings are taken into account, the full cost (in terms of time and money) of the journey cannot be measured.

For many passengers, where they live in the UK could be the deciding factor - passengers who live in Essex may always choose Ryanair and Easyjet because these airlines fly from Stansted, whereas those who live in West London or Surrey may be more likely to choose BA which flies from Heathrow and Gatwick. Then again Easyjet also flies from Gatwick, and its other major base, Luton, is only a mile and half from the M1 with its links to the North of England. In fact, Easyjet often flies to the same destination from three different London airports.

Service Quality



It is not just transfer cost and time which the businessman, couple, or family must take into account alongside prices when deciding which airline to fly with. They might also want to consider any difference in service quality provided by each airline both on board the aircraft and on the ground.

With a full service airline you are likely to receive free refreshments, whilst on a no-frills airlines, if you feel hungry you will have to pay extra even for a snack. And full service airlines usually provide a bit more comfort – maybe a couple of inches more legroom or better seats.

Furthermore, a full-service airline is likely to offer a more comprehensive back-up service should you need it when things go wrong. Passengers may be especially thankful for this if there is a delay or cancellation. British Airways and BMI have signed up to the European Civil Aviation Conference's voluntary [Passenger Service Commitment](#) – Ryanair and Easyjet have yet to do so.

Booking methods



How airlines distribute their product is yet another criteria which might influence consumers' decisions about which airline to use.

The way airline tickets are distributed has changed beyond recognition in the last five years. The no-frills product is based around online booking via websites, a relatively new way of distribution – one that is simple, quick and most importantly cheap. No-frills airlines rarely use travel agents (thus avoid paying out commission) and actively steer passengers towards on-line bookings and away from their call centres (with the employee costs that go with them). In addition, they do not use paper tickets (and free themselves from the administration costs of producing and accounting for them).

Such practices are fundamental to keeping fares low. Recently, full service airlines have attempted to catch up. BA now handles around half of its bookings over their ba.com website and widely offers e-tickets.

Many passengers do not have access to the internet and therefore cannot get hold of Ryanair, Easyjet and even BA's cheapest fares. These airlines do sell tickets by phone but fares are often more expensive if booked this way. And many passengers do not possess credit or debit cards, always a prerequisite for booking over the internet.

Those that do have access to the web and have a credit or debit card enjoy the ease with which tickets can be bought over the net – no need to go down the travel agent or queue on the phone. Passengers are presented with all the options they are likely require at the click of a button. Both no-frills and full-service airlines tend to show various options as regards price and flight times on one page. Indeed, Easyjet, for example, often has departures covering three different days in one window. Booking processes are, for the most part, quick and easy and in most cases, foolproof.

The internet is also an excellent tool for conveying information. Instead of relying on a travel agent to pass on important information, passengers can look at it themselves on the airline websites. Both Ryanair and Easyjet have prominent links to their terms and conditions on the home page; BA's and BMI's are further hidden! Ryanair even breaks down the taxes and charges component of the fare – thus the passengers can see exactly what they are paying.

Conclusion

It is not possible to conclude that one particular type of airline is better than the other – each have their advantages and disadvantages; and, besides, much will depend on the personal circumstances and preferences of the individual passenger. What can be said is that with the introduction of no-frills airlines, passengers now enjoy more choice than ever before, which must be a good thing.

But it also makes things more complicated by opening up numerous different options for air travellers. How can passengers make sure they make the right choice when booking their flights? For some passengers, particularly those living close to an airport, the choice may be easy – for others, however, there may be two or more reasonable options.

Our advice is to book as early as possible and shop around – with the advent of the internet, shopping around has never been easier or quicker! But we also recommend you look beyond the fare – find out which airport the airline flies to, what sort of service you are likely to get and how easy it is to book.

Follow this advice and you should be able to cut through the ever-growing jungle that is European airfares!

Annex 1

Compilation of fares

During the weeks 28 April to 4 May and 19 May to 25 May, the AUC recorded the fares available for different departure dates on the competing airlines on nine European routes. This resulted in 1500 fares being recorded.

The nine routes and airlines used were;

ROUTE	AIRLINES
London airports to Frankfurt airports	Lufthansa, British Airways, Ryanair
London airports to Paris airports	BMI, British Airways, Air France, British European, Easyjet
London airports to Glasgow airports	British Airways, Ryanair, Easyjet
London airports to Geneva	Easyjet, British Airways
London airports to Palma	Easyjet, BMI
London airports to Venice airports	Easyjet, Ryanair, British Airways
Bristol to Glasgow	Citiexpress, Easyjet
Glasgow airports to Paris airports	Ryanair, British Airways
East Midlands to Edinburgh	Easyjet, Bmibaby

On each day during a two-week period, we recorded the cheapest and most expensive one-week return flights available to be booked on each airline on each route for seven different departure dates (by one week return, we mean out and back on the same day of the week, a week apart). The departure dates used were for set time periods after the day the fares were recorded – one day later, the next Friday, one week later, 4 weeks later, 13 weeks later and 26 weeks later. The fares were recorded during the weeks 28 April - 5 May and 19 - 25 May.

For example on the 28th April we recorded fares for flights departing on 29 April (one day later), 2 May (next Friday), 5 May (one week later), 26 May (4 weeks later), 28 July (13 weeks later), 27 October (26 weeks later) for return flights of a week duration. And we also recorded flights departing on 29 April (one day) for a one-night duration.

On the 29th April we again recorded fares based on the same advance booking periods (i.e. 1 day, next Friday, 1, 4, 13, 26 weeks) and again this continued for every day of the week.

Using the same process, we also compiled fares during the week 19 to 25 May.

Once all the fares had been compiled, we then calculated the average fare for each airline, route and for each of the seven departure periods compiled during the course of each of the weeks 28 April to 5 May and 19 to 25 May. **It is these average fares that we used to make our comparisons.**