From Dollars to Euros

by Robert H. Bestor

Perhaps the question most asked about European travel is “What’s the best way to change dollars into foreign currency?” The answer is simple; take your ATM debit card to Europe and withdraw the cash you need from bank ATMs. Be sure you have a four-digit PIN, and you might also want to talk to your bank about raising the daily maximum amount that can be withdrawn. To pay for larger purchases, such as hotel bills, use a credit card, preferably one that doesn’t charge a foreign transaction fee (Capitol One and a few others).

Not convinced? You’ve got company. Some folks actually sing the praises of exchanging large amounts of dollars for euros here in North America, then carrying them to Europe. Still others rely on traveler’s checks or debit cards pre-loaded with euros.

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Barging the Canal du Midi—Sailing in the South of France

by Nancy Bestor

To start, I don’t think of myself as a “boat” person. I’m not a sailor. I don’t know which side of a boat is “aft” or which side is “port”. I had never been on a sailboat until I was almost 40. I don’t even own a cute striped sailor top, or Sperry Top sider shoes. Thus it may come as a great surprise to you, as it was to me, that I absolutely loved our family’s summer vacation cruising the Canal du Midi on a self-guided barge in the South of France.

We rented a 50-foot long penichette from Locaboat (www.locaboat.com) for one week with another family of four. While not cheap (about $4400 total before gas and bike rentals for the week), we justified it as such: the boat was our lodging, there were four bedrooms on board that very comfortably slept all eight of us; it was also our restaurant as we cooked most meals in the small yet nicely appointed kitchen; and of course it was our transportation, as we traveled 118 kilometers in seven days, navigating 65 locks.

My list of worries before the trip was short but significant:

1. How nasty would the pump toilets be on board?
2. How hard would it be for us novices to navigate our 50 foot long boat through narrow locks?
3. Eight people on a boat for a week. Would we still be friends when it was all over?
4. 5. and 6. Repeat worry number three.

Turns out I had no reason to fear. The pump toilets are fairly similar to flush...
Barging the Canal du Midi...

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toilets, you just have to pump water in when you are finished to flush the waste out. And after a small mishap at the first lock (my apologies, beautiful pink sun umbrella, for forgetting to take you down when we slipped narrowly under the bridge), we became piloting pros, even when it came sharing the tight spaces of the locks with as many as three other large boats. Finally, although the interior spaces of the boat were a bit cramped, there were plenty of different lounging spots on the exterior decks to escape to and read a book, lounge in the sun, play cards or just sip a glass of wine. And yes, we all still liked each other when we split up after our week together.

The Canal du Midi is postcard beautiful, and as we slowly glided (never faster than five miles an hour) through sunflower fields and vineyards, drinking red wine on the sun deck, I couldn’t help but think that all vacations should be this relaxing. If anyone wanted a break from being on the boat, we’d simply pull over to the bank and let them out to walk or ride a bike along the path that runs the length of the Canal. One morning Bob and I rode into a small village boulangerie for fresh croissants and baguettes. And other than using my arm muscles to work the ropes when we were in the locks, that was the extent of our strenuous exercise for the week.

We certainly ate and drank our share (perhaps more than our share?) of bread, cheese and wine during the week. It was fun walking or biking to the local groceries and markets to choose the day’s pairing of regional wines and cheeses.

Our average daily baguette consumption was four. You know life is good when your biggest concern is when and where you can get more fresh bread.

I’m certain we would all agree that the highlight of our week on the Canal was Bastille Day, July 14. Unbeknownst to us when we booked our trip, our itinerary put us in Carcassonne on Bastille Day, France’s answer to the United States’ 4th of July. The fortified city of Carcassonne, complete with castle, towers, drawbridge and more, celebrates Bastille Day with a 30-minute fireworks show better than any I have every seen or could imagine. Now our hometown of Ashland, Oregon celebrates Independence Day in grand style, with a small town parade, a concert in the park and a fun fireworks show, but the Carcassonne fireworks show is something entirely different. Part of the show simulated the walled city under siege, as it “caught fire”, then the “fire” was slowly put out by “water”. In the finale alone, Carcassonne lights off more explosives than the whole of our small town fireworks extravaganza. It was hugely impressive, and all the more fun because we watched it from the deck of our own boat, sipping wine on the Canal du Midi.

Barge Rental Details

• We rented bikes for every member of our group. About $50 per bike for the week, and worth every penny.

• Barges can tie up anywhere along the canal for the night. See a lovely tree shaded spot? Tired of driving? Pull over to the side, hammer in your stakes, and enjoy a lovely and quiet evening with a splendid view.

• Locks are open from 9 am to 7 pm, and closed for a one-hour mid-day lunch break. Each had an operator working the lock system, but you are expected to navigate your own boat, and tie it to the cleats on the sides of the lock on your own. (In many cases, as my teenage daughters can attest to, the operator was a handsome young shirtless French man. I did not notice. That’s my story and I’m sticking to it.)

• Many lock stations sold provisions, including wine, fresh eggs, produce, ice cream, water and more. It was never a problem to acquire groceries. We were always within a short walk or bike ride from a market.

• A barge cruise is not for anyone who likes to get anywhere in a hurry. As mentioned before, boats travel

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““The only time to eat diet food is while you’re waiting for the steak to cook.”
— Julia Child
From Dollars to Euros...

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Bill Clinton won an election by adhering to the phrase, “it’s the economy, stupid.” When it comes to changing money, it’s the exchange rate, stupid.

Recently a man headed to Europe for the first time asked me what I thought about purchasing one of those cards pre-loaded with foreign currency. He wanted 2,000 euros. The balance on the card would diminish as the card was used. Sounds safe and easy and, in fact, is. But there’s just the tiniest catch; it would cost him about $400. Here’s how. To get a card pre-loaded with 2,000 euros, he said, would cost “about $3,000.” I noted that the exchange rate that day was one euro to $1.30 and the company that wanted to sell him the pre-loaded card was charging $1.50 for each euro. With an ATM debit card he could get close to the 1.3 exchange rate. Thus the difference in cost between using his ATM card and buying the pre-loaded card was $400. There might, of course, be some ATM transaction fees, but far less than $400.

Traveler’s checks? Remember those bygone days when we used to buy them in foreign denominations; deutschmarks, pounds, francs (both Swiss and French), and lira. No changing dollars in Europe. They worked well, were accepted by most businesses, though the rate of exchange our U.S. banks, Thomas Cook and American Express gave us was well above the inter-bank rate we now get with ATM and credit cards. But that was then, this is now. Try to cash a traveler’s check in Europe and you may get a shrug and a shake of the head, even in a bank…provided one’s open when you need money. So, other than the lousy exchange rate and the difficulty in cashing them, traveler’s checks are perfect.

A woman who regularly posts on a popular travel website I follow claims buying a few thousand euros before leaving for Europe is the way to go. No worries about finding ATMs or banks, and every business accepts them. Last winter she wrote that she had purchased 3,000 euros to use for spending money during six weeks in a Venice apartment this summer. She viewed the dollar as weakening and expected to make money on the deal. On January 15, 2010, the inter-bank exchange rate was 1.45. She probably paid 1.55. Thus her 3,000 euros, if purchased that day, cost $4,650. But last spring the dollar did something a lot of people didn’t expect. It got stronger. In the summer of 2010, the exchange rate ranged from 1.19 to 1.31. Let’s figure an average of 1.25. Using that number, had our Venice-bound traveler used an ATM to obtain money as needed, her 3,000 euros would have cost her about $3,750, a difference of $900. Of course currencies fluctuate constantly and given other circumstances she might have made money. But, just as it isn’t smart to “time” the stock market, it’s not prudent to try to guess the future value of currencies. Buying euros a few at a time is akin to dollar-cost-averaging when investing in stocks or mutual funds. That way the averages work in your favor. You might not make as much but you also don’t lose as much if things don’t go your way. It’s the same with foreign currency. Buying a little bit at a time is prudent. Of course the elephant in the room in this discussion is the incredible naivete of traveling in airports and foreign countries while carrying large amounts of currency…of any denomination.

And, you should never, ever swap money at a currency exchange booth in an airport, rail station, or on the street.

You should never, ever swap money at a currency exchange booth in an airport, rail station, or on the street.

For bigger purchases abroad, hotel bills, restaurant meals, etc. (not rental cars; pay prep those before leaving for Europe), I like my credit card. Yes, it costs me three-percent (two-percent with Amex) in foreign transaction fees, but I get frequent flyer miles, a record of my transactions, the best possible exchange rate, and I usually don’t have to pay for several weeks. If I had a Capital One card there would be no foreign transaction fees. Don’t take a Discover card to Europe, it won’t be accepted.

One note about credit card use in Europe: many automated machines that dispense such items as rail and parking tickets require a credit card with an embedded chip. Generally speaking, European credit cards have the chips and North American cards do not. These are called “chip and PIN” cards. In some cases you’ll be OK if you can enter your PIN, so be sure you know your credit card’s PIN. At a rail station you can usually buy from a real person at a ticket window, but in other circumstances you may be out of luck; your card may not work at automated gas stations, toll-road collection stations, and unattended parking garages.

Some travelers are also encountering the “chip and PIN” problem in restaurants and hotels. If that happens, insist that your card number be entered manually.

There is yet another way to lose more money than necessary on currency exchange. Here’s how it works: You’re using a credit card to check out of your hotel, pay your restaurant bill, settle your rental car or buy something in a store. You are asked if you’d like to pay in dollars instead of euros. Sounds good, doesn’t it? This way there’s no waiting for the credit card statement to know the exact dollar amount. Unfortunately, there a big downside. This is called Direct Currency Conversion (DCC) and will add an additional three to five percent to your transaction, a cost that may not be itemized on your credit card statement but instead buried in a poor exchange rate. Often you won’t even be asked which currency you prefer, the charge slip in dollars will simply be put before you for signature. DCC is one of the true scams of overseas travel. Though some may find it convenient to know the exact amount in dollars that will appear on next month’s credit card statement, is it worth $15 to $25 on a $500 hotel bill? I don’t think so. This is a phony, non-service designed to milk extra revenue from unsuspecting travelers. The proceeds are shared by the merchant and the companies that sell them DCC. Don’t fall for it, insist on paying for everything in Europe in local currency.

—Robert H. Bestor is the father of Travel Essentials’ co-owner Bob Bestor. For 24 years, he has been the publisher of Gemütlichkeit (www.gemut.com), the travel newsletter for Germany, Austria and Switzerland.

“We don’t go anywhere. Going somewhere is for squares. We just go.” —MARLON BRANDO, THE WILD ONE
Great Travel Products for the Holidays...

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Eagle Creek Pack-It Set

Give the gift of organization with Pack-It Sets from Eagle Creek. The Ultimate Packing Solution Set ($29.99) is great for dressier clothes and includes a Pack-It Folder 15, a Pack-It Cube and a Small Pack-It Cosmo Pouch. The

Organized Traveler Cube Set ($19.99) offers excellent organization of all of your small stuff with a Pack-It Cube, a Pack-It Half Cube and a Pack-It Quarter Cube.

Briggs & Riley Rolling Cabin Bag

The Transcend Rolling Cabin Bag from Briggs & Riley is a spacious, versatile rolling tote designed to fit under plane seats. Offering plenty of room for all your on-board needs, the Cabin Bag ($229) is big enough to house a 15” laptop and easily attaches to larger wheeled bags. Exterior pockets provide handy organization while a TSA-friendly removable liquids pouch ensures that you’ll breeze through security.

Global Puzzle

We love the Global Puzzle. It’s a fun and interesting way to learn world geography. This 600-piece puzzle ($19.99) is made entirely from recycled materials and measures 3 x 1.5 feet when completed. 193 countries, all 50 U.S. States and 13 Provinces of Canada are included along with capitol cities, populations and sizes.

Go Girl!

For women on the go who need to go, GoGirl is the answer. Yes ladies, men have stood up since the dawn of time and now it’s your turn. This feminine urination device ($9.95) is neat, discreet and hygenic. The GoGirl is reusable and comes in a handy canister that fits easily in a purse, daypack or pocket. Don’t you think it’s time for ladies to take a stand?

Silk Sleep Sacks

Dreamsacks Silk Sleep Sacks (starting at $65) are soft and comfortable silk travel sheets that are great for traveling, camping or use at home. Worried about dirty or rough linens? Pack your own clean silk sheets and sleep in luxurious comfort wherever you go. Dreamsacks also work great as a super-soft sleeping-bag liner.

Packable Daypack

The Ultra-Sil Keychain Daypack ($29.95) is the ultimate packable daypack. It’s waterproof, weighs a measly 2.4 ounces, packs up small enough to fit in the palm of your hand and opens up to a roomy 18” x 10” x 5” of handy carrying space. Its amazingly strong Ultra-Sil fabric is waterproof, reinforced in all the right places and guaranteed to handle the

“When setting out on a photographic holiday, always provide yourself with two cameras, one to leave in the train going and the other to leave in the cab coming back.” — W.C. SELLAR & R.J. YEATMAN
Great Travel Products for the Holidays...

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heaviest of loads without a problem.

Go-Toob Leak Proof Travel Bottle
Huzzah! Finally a leak-proof, travel-size squeeze bottle. GoToobs (starting at $6.50) are easy-to-use, easy-to-clean, leak-proof, and available in three carry-on approved sizes and five colors. Every GoToob is made from high-quality food-grade silicone and includes a labeling collar to identify the contents of your bottles. Perfect for lotions, creams, soaps, shampoos, conditioners, even mayo, mustard and more!

Travel Compression Socks
More and more, doctors recommend that travelers on long flights wear compression socks to avoid leg pain, swelling and blood clots caused by poor circulation. TravelSox Compression Socks ($29.95) combat all of these health issues with finesse. Their magic lies in their ability to apply graduated pressure over the entire ankle and lower leg thereby gently forcing your blood to re-circulate. Best of all, TravelSox accomplish this while looking like a stylish dress sock.

Magnetic Chess
If you’re looking for a game of chess on the road, this handy little Magnetic Chess Set ($11.95) could be just the ticket. Its simple design zips open to reveal a chessboard and some basic instruction for beginners. The pieces feature magnetic bottoms with printed tops to indicate rank. The magnetic design makes it easy to save an interrupted game and there are even a few extra blank pieces in case you misplace one on the road.

Hitch Shoulder Bag/Laptop Bag
The Hitch from Eagle Creek ($95) is a sleek and organized laptop bag in disguise. Its stylish yet unassuming looks conceal high tech features like a padded 15” computer compartment, protective neoprene and fleece lined electronics pockets and a tamper resistant zipper on its organization panel. It offers two carrying modes, backpack or shoulder bag and pockets for just about everything from books and maps to keys and pens to iPhones and iPads.

Briggs & Riley Transcend Wide-Body
We’ve talked about it before, and we’ll talk about it again. The Briggs & Riley Transcend 20-inch Wide Body (or TD-520XW) is our favorite carry-on size bag. This smart newly redesigned bag has the same capacity as a maximum carry-on size bag (the standard 22-inch), but is two inches shorter so it can fit “wheels in” into an airplane’s overhead compartment. Weighing nine and a half pounds, the Transcend Wide Body is also more likely to comply with international carry-on restrictions. It measures 20 x 15.5 x 7.5 inches, sells for $299, and is available in two colors, rainforest and sunset. It is backed by the Briggs & Riley “no matter what” warranty. If anything goes wrong with your Briggs & Riley bag, Briggs will repair or replace it, free of charge, no matter what. Shop before December 31, 2010 for a $50 instant rebate!

“Travel makes one modest, you see what a tiny place you occupy in the world.” — GUSTAVE FLAUBERT
Spinning Our Wheels at the Tour de France
by Nancy Bestor

When Bob and I realized we'd be less than 100 miles from Stage 14 of the 2010 Tour de France, we knew we just had to detour to spend a day at the world's biggest bike race. I had watched portions of the Tour on television before, and knew people stood on the roadside cheering as bikers pedaled by, some waving flags of their home country, others running alongside their favorite cyclist like a crazy person for as long as they could. What I didn't know was what a fun and exciting spectacle the Tour de France really is, even in the long hours before the first riders appear.

We booked a hotel in Andorra, less than an hour's drive from Ax-les-Thermes and the mountain finish of the 14th stage, as hotels in the small towns nearer to the day's finish were completely booked. Other than experiencing the duty-free like atmosphere of the capital city of Andorra la Vella (see related story in box on page 7), our stay in Andorra and drive to the stage was uneventful. We arrived in Ax-les-Thermes at about 10:30 am, and even though the riders would not be coming through until nearly 5pm, the small town was already hopping. We found a parking spot and joined the hordes of people and their coolers, chairs, umbrellas, and such, and began hiking up the climb towards the finish line.

The route was closed to non-official tour vehicles from early in the morning, and fans were either walking, hiking or biking up to find a choice spot to watch the racers ride by. This was the final climb of a 184.5-kilometer stage, and at an average gradient of 8.3%, it was the steepest climb of the 2010 Tour. It was tough just walking, let alone riding! Much to the utter delight of our teenage daughters, we really wanted to get a fair way up the mountain before choosing our spot. We hiked up and up for about an hour and a half, stopping many times in the shade to rest, as the temperature was already quite warm. It was an amazing atmosphere with bike fans and partiers from seemingly every European country represented. Many had obviously arrived the night before to set up their cars, tents, campers, RV's, barbecues, picnic tables, and more. While the lower slopes of the climb were the most crowded, further up it was only slightly less populated. I expected booths selling food, drinks, and Tour souvenirs to be lining the route, but other than a t-shirt station at the bottom of the climb, there was nothing for sale. Fortunately, we had packed a hearty picnic with plenty of drinks for our long afternoon in the sun.

With a fair amount of pressure (complaining if you will) from the girls, we finally stopped in the middle of a long, steep straightaway, a little less than five kilometers to the finish line. We spread our extra large microfiber towels that double as blankets, and sat down to enjoy the parade of walkers and bikers heading up the steep climb. I couldn't help but think how much pressure I would have to not get off my bike and walk in front of all these racing fans, as the road was so steep!

The long wait until the racers came by (almost five hours) went by surprisingly fast. Whether it was large European men in full biking gear who didn't look like they could ride any distance, let alone up an 8.3% incline, going by with relative ease, or costumed boys in lederhosen (and little else!), there was always something entertaining to watch.

About 90 minutes before the racers were due, the Tour Caravan began.

Unbeknownst to me, at every stage of the Tour, before the first cyclist arrives, a parade of advertising floats entertains onlookers. The elaborate floats are sponsored by various companies, and most throw out free goodies. We were lucky enough to score laundry detergent (I know, great score right?), candy, keychains, drinks, hats, t-shirts and biking shirts, nuts, bottle openers, bags, and more. It was great fun to dance and wave to the caravan in the hope of being...
Spinning Our Wheels at the Tour de France

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thrown some swag. Much to the chagrin of my 13-year-old daughter, the more you danced, the more you got, so as usual, I embarrassed her but got a lot of stuff!

Once the caravan had gone by, and the excitement had built up, the real event began. We first heard helicopters getting closer, their cameras following the racers up the beginning of the mountain. Then we heard the cheers and shouts of encouragement from the crowds below. It honestly gave me goosebumps. Looking down the steep straightaway, we saw the motorcyclists turn the corner and behind them, the first cyclist. He powered by, and was soon followed by another.

About a minute later came a small group with Andy Schleck right on Alberto Contador’s back wheel. They were so close I could touch them (Bob held me back). People were yelling and screaming, taking photos and running next to the riders. It was crazy, fun and a huge energy rush. I couldn’t help but cheer for every rider that went by, being so impressed by their athleticism and concentration as they powered up the incline. I’m sure Lance Armstrong heard me call his name as he went by, and I know he wanted to look and thank me for coming, but he was just a little busy at that very moment. I’m sure he remembers me though.

After all the riders passed by, we began our walk back down, along with the thousands of others who had joined us on the mountainside. The road is now open to cars, but most people who were as high as us (or higher) were on bike or on foot. As hundreds and hundreds of bikers flew past us down the hill, we were quite surprised to see Tour racers start going by as well. Apparently, some of the big racers like Alberto Contador, Andy Schleck and Lance Armstrong come down in cars or helicopters, but the majority of racers hustle down the hill they just rode up, riding at amazingly high speeds right next to hordes of amateur bikers!

We were all a little let down that our fun day was over, and if we had the time, agreed that we would have liked to become Tour de France groupies, and head to the next day’s stage and do it all over again. Alas though, all good things must come to an end. Au-revoir, Tour de France. Until we meet again.

—Nancy (Travel Essentials’ co-owner) keeps waiting for Team Radio Shack to call and thank her for being such a big fan. Any day now they’ll call. Any Day. Now.

Want Cigarettes & Jewelry? Then Head to Andorra!

I realized fairly quickly when I started looking for a hotel near Stage 14 of the Tour de France that February was quite late for booking a “Tour” hotel. All of the small hotels I emailed said they were fully booked for July, and had been fully booked for some time. Bob, however, discovered a slew of available rooms outside of Andorra La Vella, the capital of Andorra, just 50 miles from Ax-les-Thermes, at quite amazing deals too. We booked a two bedroom “apartment” hotel with a full kitchen and washer/dryer for about $55 per night. Nervous that this deal was too good to be true, we drove to our hotel with some trepidation.

Driving over the border from France into Andorra, we quickly discovered the “allure” of Andorra. The first thing we saw was a row of huge liquor stores. This was immediately followed by a row of gas stations. Then blocks of retail stores, and more retail stores, and more retail stores. Turns out Andorra is not only income tax free, but also duty-free. Thus the duty-free, airport-like shopping atmosphere. The downtown streets were packed with people, all with bags of merchandise. Hard to believe the European economy is struggling after looking at all the money being spent in Andorra La Vella.

Our hotel turned out to be as good as promised, but finding groceries in this super-rich, “shopper’s paradise” was no easy task. You could buy as much jewelry, name brand clothing, cigarettes, and high priced automobiles as you wanted, but buying groceries was more tricky. We did finally find a grocery store, and it did stock groceries, behind aisles of Costco sized cigarette boxes, perfume and makeup. Too bad we’re not smokers.

We were all a little let down that our fun day was over, and if we had the time, agreed that we would have liked to become Tour de France groupies, and head to the next day’s stage and do it all over again. Alas though, all good things must come to an end. Au-revoir, Tour de France. Until we meet again.

—Nancy Bestor co-owns Travel Essentials with her husband, Bob. Both agree they would happily take a barge vacation again, Nancy will just be better accessorized.

“One certainty when you travel is the moment you arrive in a foreign country, the American dollar will fall like a stone.” —ERMA BOMBECK

Barging...

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no faster than five miles an hour. At times there can be a significant wait to take your turn through a lock. But this gives you more time to explore the surrounding area, as well as visit with other boaters.

• I recommend having at least four adults willing and able to navigate the barge. This way if two people want to ride bikes or walk along the canal there are at least two others available to drive the locks.

• There is little skill required to drive a barge. When we first arrived, Locaboat gave us a brief tutorial, from a gentleman who spoke little English, and that was really all the direction we needed.

—Nancy Bestor co-owns Travel Essentials with her husband, Bob. Both agree they would happily take a barge vacation again, Nancy will just be better accessorized.
News, Tips and Advice for the Traveler

- I've always questioned the recommended “arrive two hours early for an international flight” guideline from various airlines, especially since I travel out of the Medford, Oregon airport, a small airport by most standards. On a recent international flight, my family arrived at the United counter one hour ahead of our scheduled departure time. We had checked in online from home the night before, but since we were checking our bags, we still had to wait in line. We got to the front of the line with 45 minutes to go, and were told that we might not make our flight, because we had not arrived two hours before our scheduled flight time. The United attendant then proceeded to take other customers (who were behind us in line!) before continuing to check us in. We did finally get checked in by the surly attendant, and made our flight with time to spare, but needless to say, we were not happy United customers. Maybe I should write a song about it, and post it on youtube.......  
- USA Today recently reported that more airlines are reducing business and first class seats to make room for more seats for the everyman. In 2009, “premium” traffic on international flights dropped 16%, according to the International Air Transport Association. I've been fortunate enough to fly both business and first class in my lifetime, but it’s not worth it if you have to pay for it! For the full story, go to www.usatoday.com/travel/flights/2010-10-18-firstclass18_ST-N.htm.
- Jared Blank, of www.onlinetravelreview.com, expressed surprise with two words bleeped out of television programming on a recent American Airlines flight. From an episode of The Office, the word “porn” was censored, and from 30 Rock, “circumcision.” In his October 18th blog, Mr. Blank wonders if those traveling to a Bris should fly another airline.  
- It's not easy to redeem frequent flier miles. I recently tried to book tickets for next summer (10 months away!) from Medford to Rome, Italy, and only one return date was available in August. I try to be extremely flexible when I want to use miles, and often am willing to fly into or out of a variety of cities to use my award travel, but apparently, Rome 2011 is a hot ticket, at least on frequent flier miles. I’ve never been tempted to use my miles for things other than travel, such as free magazine subscriptions, but a recent New York Times article reports that American Airlines will soon let members of its frequent flier program use their miles to book car rentals and hotel rooms. And Delta soon plans to allow members to use miles for Gap and Land's End gift cards. Read more at travel.nytimes.com/2010/10/31/travel/31prac-miles.html?ref=travel/.

Magazine subscriptions instead of flights? No thank you. But car rentals or hotel bookings? Maybe.