

Travel briefs

Vietnamese airlines approved by FAA

The Federal Aviation Administration upgraded its safety rating for the air authority of Vietnam to “Category 1,” meaning Vietnamese carriers now can be granted approval to fly to the US and any of its territories. The upgrade also allows Vietnamese airlines to enter into codeshare agreements with US-based airlines.

No Venezuela on travel websites

The flight- and hotel-booking sites *Expedia.com* and *Orbitz.com* stopped offering air tickets and hotel rooms for Venezuela on their websites without announcement in early February.

At press time, American Airlines was the only US-based airline with flights to Venezuela (Caracas), along with only six other international airlines: Copa Airlines, Aruba Airlines, Caribbean Airlines, TAP Air Portugal, Iberia and Air France. Venezuelan airline Avior operates one route to the US, servicing Miami.

UK airline folds

United Kingdom-based budget airline flybmi filed for bankruptcy on Feb. 17, immediately canceling all of its future flights. The sudden bankruptcy caused a number of passengers to become stranded throughout Europe. At press time, flybmi had refused to offer any refunds on canceled flights.

TSA PreV™ expands

On Feb. 25, the Transportation Security Administration expanded its PreV™ (Pre-check) program to include nine more airlines, making a total of 65 airlines whose passengers qualify for PreV™. The new PreV™-approved airlines

are Air India, Asiana Airlines, China Airlines, Eastern Airlines, Elite Airways, EVA Airways, Japan Airlines, TAP Air Portugal and Volaris.

Travelers who have enrolled in PreV™ and are flying on an approved airline are eligible to join an expedited-security-check line, where they may leave their shoes and belts on and keep electronics inside of carry-ons. Visit www.tsa.gov/precheck.

Ryanair frequent-flyer benefits

Budget Irish airline Ryanair (www.ryanair.com) announced on Feb. 14 that it would implement a frequent-flyer program, Ryanair Choice, beginning “end of summer 2019.”

The program does not involve earning miles. Instead, for a flat rate of €199 (near \$227) per year, members will always get the cheapest seat rate, one bag checked for free (up to 22 pounds) and priority boarding. According to Ryanair, free seats will sometimes be available to Ryanair Choice members.

Da Vinci in Milan

Milan, Italy, is hosting a “Milan and Leonardo” program

in 2019 to commemorate the 500th anniversary of Leonardo da Vinci’s death. Visit www.visit-milano.net/en/appointments/leonardo-500 for a list of events.

One significant event is the “Leonardo e la Sala delle Asse tra Natura, Arte e Scienza” exhibit, **May 16-Aug. 18**, at Sforza Castle (*Piazza Castello, 20121 Milano; phone +39 02 8846 3703, www.milanocastello.it/en*), where visitors can witness the restoration of a vaulted ceiling painted in a nature motif by Leonardo in 1498.

Sforza Castle is open daily, 7 a.m.-7:30 p.m.; entry to the castle (and the Leonardo-painted room) is free. The castle museums are open 9 a.m.-4:30 p.m., Tues.-Sun.; entry to the museums costs €10.

VAT refund app

Using the app Refundit, free on Apple and Android, travelers can easily apply for and receive VAT refunds in **Belgium**, with other EU countries to be added soon.

To be refunded, a user first takes a photo of his receipt, then uses the app to upload the receipt along with a photo of his passport and boarding pass. A confirmation should arrive within minutes. There is no need to visit a Customs desk or fill out any forms at the airport.

Using Refundit incurs a 9% handling fee on all VAT refunds.

Istanbul layover tour

Travelers with a layover of more than six hours at Atatürk Airport (IST) can take a private guided tour of Istanbul’s Sultanahmet district, including Hagia Sophia, the Blue Mosque, the Grand Bazaar and more, in a Mercedes van.

The “Istanbul Layover Tour” must be booked in advance, costs \$275 for up to six people and includes transfers from and to the airport but not entry fees or food. Visit istanbultourstudio.com/tours/istanbul-layover-tour to book. A custom tour can be arranged.

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