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By James Gilden

Researching and making hotel and plane reservations online is old hat for many travelers these days. But what about using the Internet to research and book restaurant reservations?

I was driving my partner to the airport in Los Angeles from our home in Ventura, Calif., and we wanted to stop on our way through Malibu for dinner. I have driven by the Chart House restaurant on the Malibu coast many times over the years and had thought it would be nice to have a meal there but the occasion never came. It sits right on the beach with what I imagined would be fantastic views, and I had eaten at other Chart House restaurants and had good meals.

So I Googled "Malibu Chart House" to get the phone number for a reservation and found a button for online reservations. I figured it would be an e-mail link, but it was actually a direct online connection to the restaurant's reservations system using a Web site called OpenTable.com. I attempted to make a reservation at 7 p.m., but OpenTable said that hour was booked and offered me alternate times.

I clicked on 7:15 p.m. and was sent to a page where I could log in as a returning user or create a new account. Registration was easy and fast and required only my name, phone number and e-mail address. There was even a place where I could write special requests. I found it better than calling and being put on hold. And it was free.

OpenTable has been around since 1999, and this month accepted its 50 millionth reservation. More than 2 million people per month use the service to make reservations at more than 8,000 restaurants around the corner or around the world. It is the only online service of its type that directly connects to a restaurant's reservations system, which is also supplied by OpenTable. It makes money by selling and licensing its reservations system to restaurants and charging a small fee to the restaurant for each reservation made using the Web site.

"OpenTable has replaced their pen-and-paper reservation book," said Ann Shepherd, vice president of marketing for OpenTable.

For travelers, OpenTable means you can make a reservation in another time zone any time of the day or night without the hassle of long-distance phone calls. In a recent survey of users, one-third of respondents said they had used the site for making an out-of-town reservation, Shepherd said. Another one-third of users make reservations between the hours of 10 p.m. and 10 a.m., times when restaurants generally are not open.

I took a quick look at restaurants in London that offer the service and found 189 listed for the city and nearly 300 for the whole of the United Kingdom. One of the most popular is a steak house in central London just off Piccadilly Circus called the Gaucho Grill. It also happens to be one of my favorites, and I have been turned away on several occasions because I did not have a reservation.

On a Friday afternoon from my desk in California I could have reserved a table for 9:15 p.m. in London—15 minutes later, but eight time zones away. While obviously not possible from where I was, had I been in London I could have used my laptop before venturing out of my hotel and saved the frustration of being turned away. It's possible, too, that the hotel concierge would have used the service, a growing trend, according to Shepherd, because of the convenience of making and confirming reservations when restaurants are closed.

"Oftentimes hotel guests will come down to the lobby at 8 in the morning on their way out the door and ask for dinner reservations," she said. Now the concierge can go online and have the reservation confirmed in minutes rather than have to wait for a return call later in the day.

It is also possible on OpenTable.com to search for participating restaurants in a city with availability at a given time—Chicago at 8 p.m., for example.

Back in Malibu, we showed up at the appointed time and our reservation was properly in the system. We had a lovely table

looking out over the ocean. Unfortunately, that was the beginning and the end of our good experience at the Malibu Chart House. The service was dreadful, slow and spotty, and the prime rib was the wrong, more expensive cut for one of us and the fattest, most gristly, worst piece of beef I'd ever tasted in a restaurant. We complained to our waiter—when we finally could flag him down—and they combed one of our meals.

Had I the foresight, I could have saved some grief by checking online reviews of the place.

Web sites like Yelp.com and Chowhound.com offer reviews written by average people who have visited restaurants, so-called "user reviews," like those of hotels on Web sites such as TripAdvisor.com. Though the user-generated content travel Web sites have a place for restaurant reviews, it doesn't seem to have caught on like hotel reviews. TopTable (www.toptable.co.uk) is a UK-based, user-generated content Web site that also features restaurant coupons. It's the only site I found that has a separate listing for rating the toilets.

"The general travel-focused sites tend not to have that many there," said Henry Harteveldt, a travel industry analyst for Cambridge, Mass.-based Forrester Research.

My first clue about the Malibu Chart House would have been that there were no reviews for it on Yelp.com, one of the most popular of such sites. A Google search for "Malibu Chart House reviews" revealed eight reviews at CitySearch .com, three of which slammed the place for poor service and lousy food. But how to account for the other five, which were largely glowing?

"Take everything with a grain of salt," says Harteveldt, claiming no pun intended for a story about restaurants.

I have always been a big fan of user-generated content, though some might say that it threatens my livelihood. Zagat has made a business out of condensing user-generated content in its guides.

My rule of thumb is throw out the best review and worst and try to get an average of what the others are saying.

Generally, if more than one person complains about the same thing, it's probably something to be concerned about.

Other travel writers don't have the same affection for Web sites with user-generated content. In a recent column, travel writing stalwart Arthur Frommer slams them.

"In the massively popular Yelp, the overwhelming number of user comments are so juvenile and over the top that I can't imagine any mature person giving them a moment's attention," wrote Frommer. "As for restaurants, Yelp presents the usual conflicting opinions, leaving the distinct impression that the favorable comments are from totally inexperienced persons without palates."

As with any opinion, probably best taken with a grain of salt.