

Globe-trotting chef has smart travel recipes

by Chris Barnett

Marc Vogel has carved out a nice life for himself. The native San Franciscan is a private chef, but he's not chained to the kitchen of, say, a movie star or a land baron who demands truffles and eggs at 4 in the morning. He's a traveling *toque blanche* who cooks by invitation only for royalty, presidents of foreign countries, corporate chieftains and owner chefs at marquee restaurants worldwide.

On the road seven to eight months a year, this private chef doesn't travel by private jet. Chef Marc is a working guy like the rest of us. And while he has cooked for upward of 70 presidents and heads of state and has been a guest chef at affairs and galas from China to the Ivory Coast, from Peru to the Philippines, from Saudi Arabia to South Korea, he books his own flights and hotels and slogs his way solo through airports without an entourage to pave his way.

Yet Vogel is not a saucepan-tossing prima donna and Lord of the Stoves who suffers the indignities of travel today by cloistering himself in first class or five-star hotels. Instead, he's a genial sort who easily chats up TSA staffers and airline check-in agents, who doesn't make waves during a business trip. He's no pushover, either, and is brutally - and refreshingly - candid in spelling out his personal recipes for traveling intelligently to any destination, and for making his journey as pleasant and hassle-free as possible.

From his San Francisco base, Vogel flies frequently to London, both as a final destination or a transit point to the Mideast and Africa.

"I'm a Virgin fan," he says unabashedly. "Richard Branson is great, Virgin has the best entertainment system - it would take four weeks to see all their first-run movies - but I usually fly Premium Economy rather than Upper Class."

Amazingly, the hefty chef doesn't mind flying straight economy on a Virgin 747.

"My first preference is to get four (seats) in the back on the 4:30 p.m. flight from SFO to London and get some precious sleep."

He's not married to Virgin, though, and books British Airways when it's more convenient and lower priced. The first American chef invited to cook at Restaurant Le Gavroche next to the U.S. Embassy and a member of the International Food and Wine Society's St. James Branch in London, he also flies Southwest and JetBlue.

"I can fly Southwest out of Oakland at 7:45 a.m., change planes in Kansas City and get to Orlando quicker than flying out of SFO and I save \$300 to \$400 round trip."

It's clear that the chef (he has his own Web site at www.chefmarc.com) is no fan of United Airlines, the dominant airline at San Francisco International. "I have United (frequent flyer) miles but I still wouldn't book it. They've lost their flying spirit and it shows. With the large U.S. airlines, we've created dinosaurs so God bless Southwest and Jet Blue and their young and hungry staffs."

As someone whose lifelong business is making people happy, he finds America West's service today "deplorable" and claims Alaskan Airlines in-flight care and feeding of passengers has gotten worse. Yet he's not down on all legacy carriers. Vogel thinks Continental's flights to South America are "better than American and comparable to LAN Chile." Across the Pacific, he regards Singapore Airlines as the top carrier, but spends more of his money on Cathay Pacific because he more often cooks in the former Crown Colony. Plus, it has gateways to China.

Vogel has also flown China Southern Airlines several times and opines that "while it is coming along, there's still too much of that old Communist philosophy. Air China operates very Spartan 747s, but a first-class seat is half the price of other trans-Pacific airlines."

In Europe, he'll book tickets on bare-bones Ryanair but not its chief rival, EasyJet. However, he books Hertz cars in Europe through EasyJet's Web site and has nailed rates as low as \$88 a week for an automobile in Sicily.

"I'm constantly scouring for the best price," he explains. "Check all the airline Web sites - plus cheaptickets.com, fatwallet.com that gives you all the airline discount codes, lastminutetravel.com - and then keep searching."

Sometimes, he has to pony up. It cost him \$700 to fly from SFO to Chicago on American, then switch to American Eagle for the final leg into Toledo - and that was on cheaptickets.com. He saved money staying at the Embassy Suites in Finley, Ohio.

Vogel doesn't believe in brand loyalty at the expense of hard-dollar outlays. In fact, he stays with friends in New York rather than pay insane hotel rates, and it's more enjoyable and homey. Same for London, "where a cheap hotel room is nearly \$400."

In fact, he'll haggle. "If a hotel is quoting 150 euros, I say, 'I'll give you 100 euros for that room, otherwise I'll go next door,'" he says, smiling. "If the town is not sold out, nine out of 10 times, they'll take the 100 euros."

Chef Marc is frugal but not miserly. He's also thoughtful and generous to airline and hotel staff. He will take chili and lime cashews from Trader Joe's for the flight attendants on Southwest and small and large (5-pound) boxes of Joseph Schmidt chocolates for gate agents and airline crews on international trips.

"The difference to being upgraded or sitting in the back of the plane is just one computer keystroke," he says. "And what does it cost me? A box of good chocolates."

Bribe? "No, I never ask for anything and never, never ask for an upgrade," Vogel insists. "There's always a manager out front walking around and I give him the chocolates and say, 'Just give this to your staff. You guys have always taken care of me.'"

So where does Vogel eat when he's on the road and not staying with friends? Sipping on a Grey Goose martini at the bar of the Elite Cafe in San Francisco, Vogel reels off his "musts."

NEW YORK

- Sparks Steak House, 210 E. 43rd St. near Sixth Avenue. Order the filet mignon butterflied. "Ask for Walter."

- Restaurant Picholine on West 64th Street, half-block off Central Park West. Tourist-free. "Anything with truffles, especially the potatoes. Best Mediterranean restaurant in Manhattan."

- Les Halles Brasserie, 15 St. Johns off Broadway in Lower Manhattan. Coq au Vin is the house triumph. "Another New York hole-in-the-wall restaurant but great."

- Angelo's at 146 Mulberry St. "Best capellini pasta."

LONDON

- PJs on 52 Fulham Rd. "Great food and people bar. See Kevin."

- Aubergine in London on Park Walk off Fulham Road. "Chef Billy Drabble is the most underrated chef in London."

Other choices? In Paris, it's Le Comptoir and Astrance ("Chef Pascal Barbot is excellent") and Gaja ("Pierre Gagnaire's low-cost restaurant"). In San Francisco, he likes Myth and Umbria and in Los Angeles, Valentino.

Though his palate is refined and the restaurants are eclectic, Vogel is a certified bargain hunter who searches for value for his money. He's also amassed time- and money-saving tricks of the traveling trade.

In London, he uses two car services - Just Airports and Olympic Cars - that charge 21 to 26 pounds (about \$40 to \$48) for a one-way trip to Heathrow.

"They have everything from private town cars to Jaguars," he says. "If you're caught in a (traditional London) black cab in bad traffic, it can run you 55 to 65 pounds to Heathrow."

Chef Marc is not averse to public transportation - just cautious.

"Europe's biggest group of thieves and pickpockets work in Paris and Madrid," he warns. Gare du Nord, first Metro station after Charles de Gaulle Airport, is extremely treacherous.

"Guys dressed in business attire work in pairs. One speaks to you in English and you turn to pay attention and his counterpart grabs your briefcase."

He's speaking from personal experience; his briefcase containing his laptop computer, money and credit cards was snatched. Adds Vogel: "In France, police will not chase someone who just robbed you."

Other tips? In foreign countries where English isn't a second or even a third language, Vogel takes a handful of hotel business cards for cab drivers "or in case you get stuck somewhere."

He also takes bottles of fine California wines with him, along with the aforementioned chocolate, as gifts for people who treat him extra well or who can open a door. "I've often said, 'You can slide a lot further on chocolate than you can on asphalt.'"

But Vogel, who says he logs 200,000 miles a year, has one mantra and has nothing to do with the kitchen: "Be nice to airline people," he says finishing his dry martini. "The biggest jerk in the world is someone who yells at an airline ticket or gate agent. They can't yell back but they can make your life miserable."

Chris Barnett writes on business travel strategies that save time, money and hassles.