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Up in the Air, Plugged In to the Landscape Below

Travelers who love the window seat have some fascinating new tools at their fingertips.

First up is the well-named WindowSeat, an app that shows the current location of your flight and offers brief write-ups about the scenery, sights and cities scrolling past the wing. The advantage of WindowSeat is that it doesn't require an in-flight Internet connection: it's designed to work even when your phone is sedated in airplane mode.

To do this, WindowSeat downloads your aircraft's official flight plan just before you depart. That plan contains the route your pilots expect to follow from origin to destination. Once you're airborne, just tell WindowSeat when you took off, and it will guesstimate your position on its map. Tap on a nearby dot and you'll get short, informative blurbs on geographic features, major conurbations and national parks and monuments. It's easy to adjust the elapsed time, or to fast-forward for a preview of what's coming next.



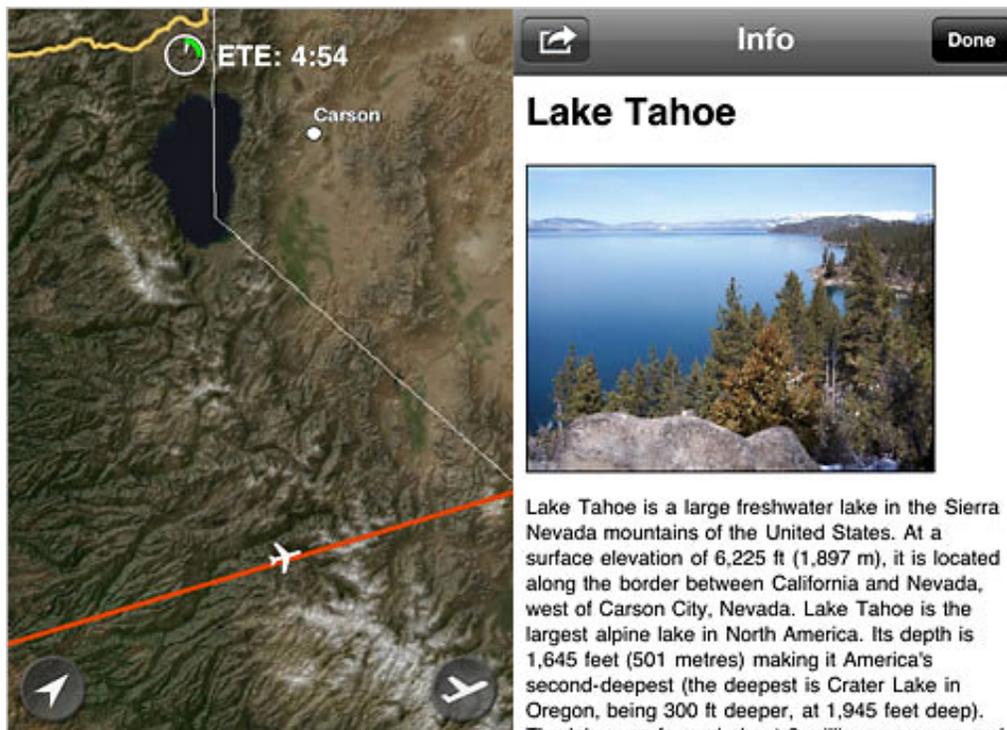
A screen shot of the WindowSeat app for the iPhone.

The flight plan download is a clever workaround, but it has limitations. Airplanes often proceed directly between distant waypoints rather than directly along their filed flight plan; and they may speed up or slow down, or turn to avoid bad weather. WindowSeat won't know about any of this. Nor is the rest of the app perfect; large areas of the United States don't have many dots to tap, and some highlighted geographic features — caves, for example — won't be visible to even the most eagle-eyed passengers.

Still, at only \$2.99 it's no pricier than a bottle of water at most airports. There's also a free Lite version, which covers departures only from New York, San Francisco, Los Angeles, Atlanta and Austin.

These days of course, more and more flights offer Internet access. If you're surfing the friendly skies, then navigate to MondoWindow, a Web site that offers window seat aficionados one of the sky's richest Internet experiences.

Enter your flight number and MondoWindow downloads a moving map of the landscape you're flying over. While many airlines have moving maps on their in-flight entertainment, MondoWindow is truly interactive. You can click on thousands of geo-tagged links and photographs as they go past, and pan left, right or straight down. You're essentially moving at 500 m.p.h. over a landscape populated by Wikipedia entries (there are photos from Flickr too).



MondoWindow is still in beta, doesn't seem to offer every flight, and isn't without the occasional (Web site) crash. Like WindowSeat, MondoWindow works only in the United States, and would benefit from some basic geographic labels in addition to tags. But MondoWindow is a great way for travelers to reconnect with the world they're flying over. And unlike your plane's actual windows, this site works fine at night, and in clouds, and even from the dismal confines of a (gasp) middle seat.