

WHY DO I NEED A TRAVEL AGENT?



The rise of the internet has spurred many travelers to book their vacations on their own, but booking any kind of vacation or travel activity can be a complex operation and here's an important fact to chew on. No matter how many times you have booked your own travel, vacation or air fares, you don't have anywhere near the experience or expertise of a typical travel professional.

With their training — and being well-traveled themselves — good travel advisers can offer you options you might not have considered. Some travel advisers are generalists; others specialize in niches, such as cruises, or in multigenerational group travel or in particular geographic destinations. If you book a cruise through an agent, he or she is likely to be familiar with various lines, sailings, cabins and excursions. Some agents even have subspecialties, such as riverboat cruising. Sure, you might complete your travel plans all by yourself but are you 100% confident that everything has been appropriately addressed? No, I didn't think so.

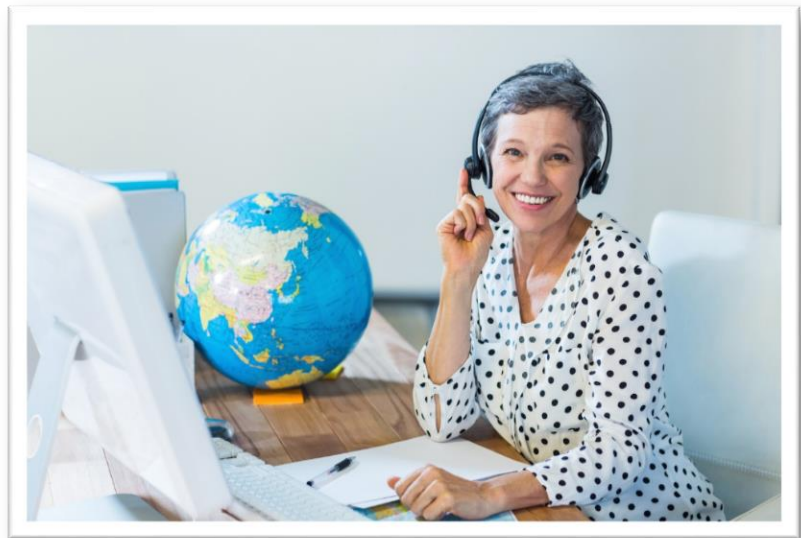
First, some trips are more complicated than others. For example, foreign travel is more complex than traveling to the next state. Or sometimes the stakes are too high to make a mistake when you are planning a big trip to celebrate a special birthday or anniversary or a trip that involves coordinating itineraries with friends or family members. Even on city tours or shore excursions, an agent may be able to point you to the most knowledgeable and English-proficient guides.

Budget and expenses are another big issue. Many travel agencies have banded together into large consortia, affording them unusual leverage to negotiate with travel suppliers on behalf of their clients. Even smaller agencies have the advantage of volume bookings and special pricing when it comes to air fares, cruise cabins and hotel rooms...pricing that you're not going to see as an individual customer.

Time is another factor. Researching and organizing a trip takes lots of time, patience and perseverance. When even some of the most common travel providers (airlines, for instance) present you with 15-20 minutes wait time just to get someone on the phone, it's easy for you to get frustrated. Your travel agent has special contact numbers and web sites that give them the edge in quickly booking seats, rooms or cruise cabins. Remember, time is money and it's doubtful you want to work through the maze of call centers, sales agents and complicated booking applications just to "do it yourself".

And, here's something else. Travelers realize that even after a trip is planned, things don't always turn out exactly as expected. A flight is cancelled, a piece of luggage gets lost, a passport is pilfered or a grandchild falls ill with a high fever on foreign soil. When "stuff happens," it is reassuring to have someone you can count on to resolve problems. You don't want to be the one hanging on your cell phone to rearrange a flight. Many travel advisers offer clients 24/7 backup by phone and email.

Even with all the reasons previously mentioned, maybe the most important is that travel agents can provide that special, customized personal service that really makes them invaluable. The really top-notch agents will go "above and beyond" when it comes to ensuring your vacation or travel activity is the very best it can be. In addition to meeting your basic requirements, they often manage to find some extra little perks that you didn't even expect.



Finally, travelers DO need to do some research on their own. The more knowledgeable they are about where they want to go and what they want to do will only improve their travel agent's ability to put together an outstanding trip. Selecting a travel professional also requires a little time and effort on the client's part. On-line reviews, travel trade organizations and travel blogs can contribute to the task but, most likely, the best way to find a good travel agent is through references from friends, neighbors and co-workers.

Yes, using a travel professional may cost a little money but, in the wise words of Warren Buffett, *"Price is what you pay, value is what you get."*