

The pros and cons of booking with a travel agent

By Ed Perkins, May 29 2009

With all the hype about buying travel on the Internet, you shouldn't ignore the value of using a travel agent. They're still around, and for good reason: the professional assistance and savvy they provide often outweigh their modest charges.

Pros:

For the most part, a travel agent can't always get you any better deals than you can find for yourself through diligent online searching. Nevertheless, a travel agent can make your life a lot easier:

- **Destination Knowledge:** The number one reason most consumers use a travel agent is to take advantage of specialized knowledge. Good travel agents know the main destinations, and what they don't know first-hand they can find through databases designed for agency use.
- **Hometown Knowledge:** A good travel keeps tabs on the airlines and tour operators that actually serve your home area and offer attractive deals to its residents.
- **Time Saving:** If you value your time, an agent is indispensable. A five-minute call to a travel agent allows you to avoid many hours of tedious search through online sites.
- **Good Deals:** Good agents know what's available online as well as deals they can get through their GDS computer reservation systems that may not be available to the public. Also, cruise lines and tour operators constantly notify agents about special promotions that aren't always available online.
- **Airline Ticket Tricks:** Online booking is easy for buying a conventional one-way, round-trip, or multi-stop air ticket. But on more complicated international tickets, agents know some cost-cutting tricks that you could never find online.
- **Assistance in a Pinch:** When something goes wrong—either before you leave or when you're already on your trip—a travel agent is your best source of help. You don't get caught in a serious problem very often, but when you do, you really want an agent on your case.
- **Not Online:** If you're a senior who isn't online, or anyone not comfortable doing business online, a travel agent is your only hope of navigating today's complicated travel marketplace. Phones no longer cut it.
- **Small Business:** Agents with business travel departments can provide many of the services that big travel management agencies provide for Fortune 500 companies—discounts, consolidated billing, detailed expense reporting, and enforcement of your business's travel rules.

Cons:

Certainly, travel agents aren't for everyone. Lots of you probably enjoy the thrill of the hunt for travel deals—that feeling of accomplishment when you score a really good deal for yourself or run into unexpected information that adds to your upcoming trip.

Also, if you use an agent, you have to be careful to avoid two problems that occasionally arise:

- **Laziness:** Some lazy agents try to sell you what's easiest to sell rather than what's really best for you—a package tour rather than independent travel, for instance, or a rail pass instead of individual rail tickets.
- **Preferential Treatment:** Some agents try to steer you to their preferred suppliers—airlines, hotel chains, and cruise lines that give them extra bonuses or override commissions—rather than the supplier that's best for you.

Over the years, I've not encountered any such problem agencies, but I'm sure there are some.