

Travel agents making a comeback

The Washington Post

Washington Post Service

By Nancy Trejos

Not long ago, it seemed travel agents had gone the way of the milkman as online booking sites such as Orbitz, Expedia and Travelocity soared in popularity.

Now they have been given a reprieve. **That's because many vacations have become as hard to plan as the name of last year's traveler-stranding Icelandic volcano was to pronounce. Natural disasters cause flight cancellations. Revolutions put tourist destinations off-limits. Airlines and rental car agencies confound with ever-increasing fees. And the Internet spews so much information that it hurts as much as it helps.**

"Not only are customers confused and frustrated by new airline fees and events, but they are bombarded by social media," said John Clifford, president of the luxury travel consultancy InternationalTravelManagement.com. "Everyone is trying to tell you where you should stay, where you should eat, what you should do."

A study by Forrester Research found that the number of leisure travelers who enjoyed using the Web to book their vacations dropped from 53 percent in 2007 to 47 percent in 2010. In an American Society of Travel Agents (ASTA) survey, 44 percent of agents said they had more clients in 2010 than they'd had the previous year.

Travelers "don't have hours to spend on research to compare multiple flights, multiple cruises, multiple packages," said Henry Harteveltdt, a travel industry analyst at Forrester Research. "It's not unlike doing your taxes. Depending on who you are, what your priorities are, there are some people who will choose to do it themselves or to use a professional."

James Vaughn used to plan his own vacations but turned to David Rubin of DavidTravel in Corona Del Mar, Calif., when his trips got more elaborate, such as a 10-day trip to India. Recently, he started asking Rubin for help even on easy trips. For a one-week jaunt to New York, Rubin gave him a list of off-the-beaten-path places to visit.

"It's convenient," Vaughn said. "I could paint my house or change the oil in my car, but I don't have the knowledge or the time to do it the best way possible."

KEEPING UP

The agents who survived have had to change their modus operandi. Most agents now charge (and should) professional fees. Of the 111,000 U.S. travel agents, 28 percent are now home-based. To compete with online travel sites, they must be available round the clock; most now have specialties.

According to Max Najar, a veteran Travel Industry expert , director of Axis Travel Centre from South Australia, ".....the quality assured, experienced Travel Agent is now more than ever in demand as external human, geographical, political and natural disasters affect how we can offer and assist clients in 24 x 7 servicing, immediate instant advice and homeward extraction"

"To be able to trust and depend upon a professional in times of need, emergencies or simply the very best travel and lifestyle advice can be the factors separating travel success and failure or even a the life or death of a client" Najar said

"Consumers are looking for specialists. They want a destination wedding specialist, an Africa specialist, a Puerto Rico specialist," said Tony Gonchar, chief executive of ASTA.

What hasn't changed, agents say, is the relationships they can build with vendors. Many travel agents can get upgrades or perks, such as breakfast or a welcome cocktail, at hotels they use often. Many are also part of a buying consortium that negotiates special rates with hotels, tour operators and other vendors.

A former accountant started Trips of a Lifetime eight years ago. She has long conversations with clients about their needs, then prices options with different vendors and breaks everything down for the client.

"We know that once we get a customer, we can keep them for life if we do a great job," she said.

Ann Lombardi, a travel consultant with the Trip Chicks in Atlanta, said she often ends up with customers who try to book their vacations on their own but then face some hurdle.

"Somebody pushed a button too soon and didn't realize the airfare didn't include several hundred dollars of taxes," she said. "Or they didn't monitor their flight and found out it's changed and they can't connect with their tour or cruise. We're consultants. We're not just clerks."

MAKING A COMEBACK

The online travel community would argue that it has formed a symbiotic relationship with brick and mortar travel agents. "It's no longer a case of us versus them," said Brian Hoyt, vice president of corporate communications and government affairs at Orbitz. "The line is blurred."

Andrew Weinstein, a spokesman for the Interactive Travel Services Association, an industry trade group that represents Expedia and other sites, said that all the online booking companies now have employees available to talk to customers by phone or instant message.

"Travel Agents provide the human contact, (some) with many years of experience and contacts and are backed by a legal framework of accreditations and rules and standards that no online website or consumer can ever emulate" .

"In life you need certainty, confidence in getting what you want and understand that travel is a very complex domain filled with language, customs, legal and interpretation difficulties, that no amount of money can compensate for in your lost time and bad experiences when you or your third party contact point screws up, so leave it up to the professionals who focus only on what they are paid to do best" said Najar.