

Google vs the travel agent

Organising your next travel adventure? It might pay to make a travel agency your first port of call.

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There are two international airports close to Milan. Three if you count Caravaggio, 45km north-east of the city, but the two that I now know about are Malpensa and Linate. I was pretty confident I'd found a flight that would get me from Milan to Madrid at a rock-bottom price. What I hadn't factored in was that my inbound flight arrived at Milan's Malpensa while the connecting flight departed from Linate Airport. Malpensa to Linate is 67km and you do not want to be sitting between the two in a taxi snarled in morning rush-hour traffic with the clock ticking down on your flight. I made it – just – but the taxi ride cost more than twice as much as my bargain-price Linate-Madrid airfare. All down to me, since I was the one who had made all the flight bookings.

Venture forth on the internet with travel plans in your head and mouse in hand and it's easy to convince yourself that you are your very own travel agent, and the internet fosters that delusion. You can search for the cheapest airline ticket on Expedia or Hipmunk, check hotel reviews on TripAdvisor, book a room on Priceline, locate your hotel on Google Maps and find a guide for a musical promenade through Vienna or a trek in the Himalayas. Whatever your passion – antique markets in France or the bird life of Ecuador's Choco forest region – head online and you'll find a tour that's right up your alley.

However, while the internet is a razor-sharp information tool, it's not necessarily the best place to put wheels on your travel plans. Travel is complicated. Even experts can make mistakes. At the *Australian Geographic* Gala Awards last year, the public relations manager of World Expeditions – a woman well versed in the ways of the world – was telling me about her plans for a roving four-month holiday in Europe in 2016. "Sounds fabulous, but you might run into problems with your Schengen visa," I suggested. Australian passport holders can travel freely in Europe's Schengen Area, but only for 90 days in

any six-month period. Caught up in the enthusiasm and the nitty-gritty of planning a big itinerary, it's easy to overlook items that might bring you undone. A decent travel agent would spot such a potential glitch straight off.

Travel agents can also save you money. On a family ski trip to New Zealand last year, most of the downhill part of the holiday – ski hire, lift tickets, daily ski shuttle – I booked online. "All done without standing around in chilly queues getting ski poles rammed into my calves," I congratulated myself. When I showed up at the Snow Centre office in Queenstown to exchange email vouchers for lift passes and ski

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gear tickets, the agent was not so impressed. "My, you've certainly paid for a top-end deal here," she said. "But we have gear packs and multi-day passes that will give you the same thing and it'll cost you a lot less. Why didn't you do this through a travel agent?"

If you have your heart set on a luxury tropical getaway, a travel agent might know about a newly minted five-star resort in the area with a special introductory rate. Ditto for cruises. The price of unsold cabins drops like an anchor as sailing time approaches, and a travel agent will know if there are any bargains or might suggest a slightly quieter time when cruise vessels struggle to fill berths.

When you're travelling economy class, a travel agent will often be able to book your preferred seat before such options open to DIY flyers. A travel agent also brings backup to your journey.

If you ski into a tree in Klosters, if your car-hire agency wants to charge a phenomenal sum for that scratch on the bumper, if a volcano erupts and grounds all flights, your travel agent probably has a better chance of sorting it out than you do.

So, when should you use Google to make your holiday bookings and when should you use a travel agent?

If your travel plans are fairly straightforward and involve a place that you know – an air ticket within your own country, a hire car for the weekend – the internet is the simple, fast and cheap option. Anything more complicated – an African safari or a week of sunshine and sloth in the Maldives, where you've never been before – there is no substitute for a travel agent.

Not just any travel agent, though, because nothing beats on-the-ground knowledge. When considering a trip to Ethiopia or a week in Venice, the crucial question to ask is "When were you last there?" If the answer is "never" or more than five years ago, the agent is probably relying on vague memories and the same information that you have at your fingertips via the internet.