

## Pandemic highlights value of travel agents

Kerri Westenberg, Star Tribune

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Planning a trip overseas these days requires more than the usual hunt for cheap flights and a sweet hotel. **Travelers need to know when they can reasonably go, which countries are ready to accept them, what will be open, what entry requirements their destination may demand and, if they care about such things, which hotels have implemented extra germ-busting protocols.**

That research could take more time to undertake than flying to Amsterdam. To help navigate the tricky world of changing rules and newly unfurled welcome mats, **more would-be travelers are turning to travel agents**, aka "travel advisers."

A study by Sandals Resorts and the American Society of Travel Advisors released May 5 found that 44% of travelers who rarely or sometimes used a travel agent before the pandemic are likely to turn to one in a post-pandemic future. That's higher than the 27% of travelers who always or often used such a professional before COVID-19 altered the travel landscape.

**"The pandemic has revitalized interest in travel agents,"** said Scott Mayerowitz, executive editorial director at travel website [The Points Guy](#).

Minneapolis-based [Knowmad Adventures](#), South America destination specialists, endured nearly a year of collapsed sales. But once people saw a vaccine on the horizon, business began a steady rise. "Since December, we have seen a ton of momentum," said owner Jordan Harvey.

**"We have a number of new clients that are booking with us and part of the reason is that it is so complex today to know where you can travel to, and it changes by the day,"** said Robert Herman, owner of [Riverdale Travel](#) in Coon Rapids.

Harvey has heard from people who had booked trips themselves before the pandemic hit, merging reservations from a variety of platforms. "But the folks who did that ended up with cancellations and postponements and going through that process was tough. I have had clients say it was a disaster."

Riverdale Travel agents worked the phones for months last spring; **one was on hold for six hours before talking to a vendor** about a cancellation.

Mayerowitz says that kind of service is one reason for the renewed interest in travel agents. People stuck canceling their own trips **had frustrating experiences**. "It was a major challenge for many folks. Those who used travel agents had an easier time," he said. **"It opened people's eyes up to how powerful a travel agent could be."**

Travelers are also rethinking what is important, Mayerowitz said. The months at home fueled a fresh appreciation for travel. **He believes people are seeking out travel agents now to ensure that a vacation runs smoothly and has special touches.**

In a world of travel aggregator sites and online travel agencies like Kayak and Expedia, people had gotten used to shopping for deals and booking themselves.

**"We forgot the value of a travel agent,"** Mayerowitz said. "They've often been on the ground. They've walked through the hotels and around the neighborhoods. **They know which places have good amenities for kids and which places just say they do.**" Many also have special relationships that can lead to discounts that more than offset any small fee they may charge.

**They also have firsthand knowledge of the new rigors travel can bring.**

**Travel agents understand such fundamentals as how much time fliers need in a specific airport to make a connecting flight. They can also nab upgrades or other perks.**

**No computer search can provide those insider perks and information,** Mayerowitz said.