

## TRAVEL AGENT

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### Don't underestimate value of a travel agent

A report by Ed Perkins in the Chicago Herald Tribune in the USA says that contrary to what you might have heard, travel agents aren't obsolete.

Sure, much of today's focus, including my own, is on the Internet, but many travelers still rely on agents. And for good reason. Although an agent charges a few dollars, professional assistance in travel is often well worth the cost.

A travel agent can save you time, provide valuable counsel and help you out when something goes wrong.

The No. 1 reason most consumers use travel agents is to take advantage of their specialized knowledge on:

**Destinations.** Good travel agents do know destinations -- and what they don't know first-hand they can find through databases designed for agency use.

**Local deals.** You can easily waste a lot of time with airlines that don't serve your home airport and tours that may be great from New York but are lousy from your area. A good travel agent bypasses that problem by keeping tabs on the travel suppliers that actually serve your area and offer attractive deals to its residents.

**Good deals.** Good agents know what's available through the same Internet sites you might visit on your own. In addition, agents can search their "GDS" computer reservation systems, not available to the public. And cruise lines and tour operators constantly bombard agents with e-mails and faxes about special promotions.

**Airline tricks.** Some international air ticketing rules are arcane, and a good travel agent knows cost-cutting tricks, including pricing a ticket in a foreign country rather than U.S. dollars, finding fares that allow free stopovers and such, that you could never find online.

They also can save you time and that's the main reason so many business travelers rely on agents to make their travel arrangements.

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 make repeated calls to a voice response system or stand in an endless airport line, instead, as soon as you encounter a problem, call your travel agent.

When people ask how to find a good agent, my answer is, "The same way you find a good accountant, stockbroker or auto mechanic -- word of mouth."

A travel agent is a professional, just as those others are professionals, and the best way to find one is through other satisfied clients.