

• The truth about travel agents

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- *The myth persists that these much-maligned professionals are expensive. What piffle.*

There's been a defined swing towards the local and the known this year, from where we shop to the research we do on food sources. Neighbourhood and community are the cosy buzzwords. **And there are rumblings about a concurrent movement away from the faceless mega-platforms such as Uber and Airbnb as consumers think more carefully about choices and their consequences.**

I remember when 24-hour medical centres were all the rage and seemed very modern and even clandestine, particularly if there was a white grand piano in the "vestibule" and tanned desk staff wore attire that looked more party-ready than professional. **Then many of these facilities disappeared in a glittery whoosh and the unwell returned to the family doctor.** I now feel that way about anonymous travel providers, whose bargains are a mouse-click away and everything seems too good to be true, **until it isn't.**

Like many Australians, I've booked cheapie deals online and, while I've never had a full-blown disaster, I have been temporarily stranded without recourse, sobbing to my travel insurer.

The situation in 2020 has been complex when we've needed to change or cancel holiday plans. A reader contacted me a few months ago to say he'd held on the line for more than five hours (handing the receiver to his wife during "comfort breaks") to apply for a refund from an airline. When the call finally connected, **he was cut off.**

I had cancelled international return flights with the same airline and it took three days. But **I did none of the work as I'd used a travel agent for my holiday plans and he sorted my refund. I suggested to the reader that it might be a good strategy to use an agent in future.** "Too bloody expensive!" he retorted. Really?

The Australian Federation of Travel Agents confirms 70 per cent of all overseas travel booked by Australians is still via an agency. **But the myth persists that it costs more, which is piffle. They know the best deals and can save you money and time. So good luck flying into the great unknown with nothing but an 1800 number on your itinerary.**

Find a local agent, form a friendship, call them at 2am, if you have to, when your flight from Denpasar has been cancelled or you're in hospital in Honolulu with coral cuts and can't find a copy of the medical insurance policy they arranged for you.

It's happened to me and while no consultant has been thrilled to hear from me in such circumstances, they've come through, I've got home pronto. **It's not blinking rocket science, 21st-century travellers.**



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