

The Resurgence of the Travel Agent

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...Tracy Kaler



Waves of infections, changing protocols, and postponed flights are merely a handful of realities folks face while traveling during the pandemic. Even during “normal” times, travel isn’t always straightforward, and with a plethora of moving parts, every vacation brings risk. **But those risks have multiplied with Covid, and trip planning has become more complicated.**

Enter the travel agent—or, as they’re more often called these days, the travel advisor. They’re organizers, destination experts, and a 24-hour concierge who can tailor a trip, replan, reschedule, and even keep a momentous holiday from crumbling to pieces.

“Whether it’s a flight cancellation, problems at a hotel, or unexpected illness, a travel professional can quickly jump in and assess the situation and then navigate all the roadblocks to find a solution,” says David Harris, CEO of North America-headquartered Ensemble Travel Group, and, previously, a second-generation travel agency owner. **“That has never been more apparent than during the pandemic.”**

While travel portals such as Tripadvisor, Booking.com, and Expedia Group exist, websites and apps can’t replace an individual offering personalized advice or curating a bespoke experience. And jetsetters are in agreement. In 2021, in particular, travel agencies are in the middle of a boom.

“After enduring the most brutal year in the 20-plus since I started the business, I’ve seen a staggering rebound in the last six months,” says Casey Halloran, co-founder, and CEO of Costa Rican Luxury Vacations, a company designing high-end, custom trips to Costa Rica, Panama, and Nicaragua. “Now that traveling has new barriers, ever-changing rules, and mild anxiety attached, agents are able to add even more value to travelers.”

Halloran explains that specific to pandemic travel, **advisors assist with gathering the destination’s Covid statistics, info on entry and exit requirements and local regulations, not to mention protocols at hotels, advice on travel insurance, and contingency plans for worst-case scenarios.**

“As all these factors are in flux, it’s the job of a great agent to be constantly on top of it, filtering the noise and informing the customer,” he adds. A reputable travel agent should help their clients “understand risks, mitigating those as best we can, and helping them feel comfortable to responsibly travel again.”

An Expanding Role

Travel agents are far from new. U.K.-based Cox & Kings opened as the first travel agency in 1758, followed by the Abreu Agency in Porto, Portugal, in 1840. Meanwhile, London’s Thomas Cook showed on the scene a year later, and Brownell Travel launched in the U.S. in 1887. Pioneers aside, the travel advisor’s role has undeniably expanded over the past several decades.

“Twenty years ago, travel agents were ‘order takers’ who primarily booked what clients told them,” says Brian Tan, CEO and co-founder of Zicasso, a luxury travel company in Mountain View, Calif., that

matches travelers with top travel advisors. “Today, successful travel agents have deep knowledge of a destination and a Rolodex of local contacts and can customize travel experiences based on a client's special interests and needs. We call them ‘travel specialists.’”

In the age of a global health crisis, folks who have not worked with travel advisors before are turning to the pros for trip planning and custom itineraries. According to Tan, Zicasso has seen an increased demand in the wake of Covid for travel experts and the services they provide.

For travel abroad especially, advisors offer peace of mind and a deeper level of security.

“In the current travel environment, more than ever, travelers are concerned with their safety when traveling overseas,” says Andrew Williams, a Houston -based travel advisor with Ovation Travel Group, a Virtuoso member. **“Avoiding the spread of the pandemic, changing environmental hazards, escalations in crime, and other general tensions have added numerous complications to navigating the travel landscape. Now, travelers want to be more supported by someone they can trust in a world where things are more complex.”**

Beyond the additional security and convenience that comes with hiring a travel agent, there are other advantages, too. “We often have access to exclusive perks or experiences through our global networks of suppliers and friends,” Williams says.

Navigating a New Normal

With vaccinations underway, travel as an industry is on an upswing, which is another reason travel agents are in high demand. Margot Kong, a San Francisco-based luxury travel curator with Travel Experts, says she believes there’s been a surge recently because a lot of the world has not entirely reopened, or they’ve opened with restrictions.

“You now have a lot more people competing for fewer hotel rooms, fewer tour guides, and fewer airplane seats,” Kong says. As a result, vacation planning isn’t as straightforward as it once was, and organizing a holiday could take three times longer as folks scour the internet and comb through scores of flight, hotel, and tour options. Then there’s the possibility of trip disruptions, which are more common in this day and age.

“Having a travel advisor take on that burden is very appealing to a lot of people,” she adds. **“If things do go wrong and a country shuts down, a hotel closes, or a trip or cruise has to be canceled, the travel advisor is better equipped to help get that refund or future travel credit, advocating on the client’s behalf.”**

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