

You aren't a travel agent

Lisa Kadane, Calgary Herald

So, you think you're a travel agent? You've got a computer, high-speed Internet and a burgeoning library of websites that promise the best deals on airfares and accommodations, from Farecompare.com to Hotels.ca. Plus, you googled "African safari" and found a slick site selling off Big 5 tours for next to nothing. Now, all you need is seven hours on a Saturday to research and book your trip.

If that sounds about as much fun as a day spent pulling weeds, you're not alone. Some trips are easy to book on the web -- a round-trip flight from Calgary to Vancouver to visit a friend, for example. Others are more complicated affairs -- Galapagos Islands, anyone? -- that illustrate the need for travel counsellors in an electronic age.

"The myth is that everything is cheaper on the Internet," says Steve Gillick, president and COO of the Canadian Institute of Travel Counsellors.

Travel agents are there to help you when things don't go quite as planned.

In reality, Gillick says travellers often don't understand the time it takes to DIY their trip, nor do they realize the invaluable insider information to be garnered from travel agents. Forget to factor in crucial details, from visas to travel insurance, and being your own agent could become one big mistake.

The Herald talked to travel counsellors across the country and rounded up four scenarios where it pays to use an expert.

The destination wedding

When Tina Cormier began planning her wedding in the Dominican Republic, she contacted a travel counsellor after several unsuccessful attempts to liaise directly with her resort of choice.

The agent handled the air and hotel bookings for the bride, groom and 18 guests. She also secured a group discount and dealt directly with the resort's wedding planner.

"It was like having a wedding co-ordinator," says Cormier, whose nuptials took place last December in a gazebo overlooking Punta Cana Beach. "I didn't have to do anything but send off an e-mail."

The complicated trip

"Anyone can buy a truck and pretend to run an African safari," says Rick Yearwood, manager of Trek Escapes in Calgary.

"We don't recommend people book anything like that over the Internet."

By using a travel agency to book such a "trip of a lifetime," Yearwood says clients can rest assured they'll be going with a reputable company. They'll also be given visa requirement and destination information, insurance recommendations, packing lists and referrals to local travel clinics for immunization advice -- the kind of details not usually provided. What's more, because of special airfare deals agencies may have with airlines or suppliers, travel counsellors are often able to secure better-priced flights with more convenient routings than those available online, he says.

Calgarian Craig Evans booked a six-day safari in Kenya through a travel agency based in Nairobi and has no regrets. "We had greater confidence in knowing who we were dealing with because we'd been referred to them." He says the agency looked after little details, such as securing an experienced English-speaking guide and a four-wheel-drive vehicle -- extras Evans would never have asked about since it was his first safari.

"Something as simple as that we didn't think about, but the travel agency did."

The special-needs traveller

If you're in a wheelchair, how do you know the hotel and all its facilities will be wheelchair-accessible? If you're visually impaired, how do you make arrangements to travel with a seeing-eye dog?

"Every traveller who has a special need . . . that need is on an individual basis," says Gillick of the CITC.

Because there's no one-size-fits-all holiday for such travellers, they're better off booking trips through a travel counsellor, Gillick says -- even if their need is something as apparently straightforward as a food allergy.

In the case of a seafood allergy, for example, an agent will inform the airline and even go so far as to research and recommend restaurants in the destination city.

"That personal attention is something you can't get over the Internet."

The time-is-money traveller

When confronted with the online ocean of airline, hotel and destination websites, trying to be your own travel agent can be frustrating and overwhelming. After a day of research, many would-be DIY holidaymakers end up at one of Carlson Wagonlit Travel's Calgary offices, says regional director of operations Sheldon Taraschuk.

Instead of spending head-spinning hours sifting through accommodation recommendations on Tripadvisor.com, they invest a half-hour chatting with a travel counsellor. The expert then does all the research and booking for them.

Even co-ordinating a trip to London and Paris -- seemingly a no-brainer -- can be time-consuming, involving many steps between making air reservations, booking rooms at several different hotels and securing train passes.

Such expert help might cost anywhere from \$40 to \$100 (many agencies charge service fees), but Taraschuk says most clients don't mind paying. They realize organizing the trip independently would ultimately cost more in the form of squandered lunch hours, evenings or weekends. Besides, they might get the fee back as a free room upgrade.

And there still has been no mention of the instability and third party insecurity of Internet bookings, International Law differences via Web based contracts when booking Travel, the stability and security of using a good Agency with Compensation Fund, AFTA, IATA accreditations, ongoing staff training in all things commercial and legal and the totally priceless commodity of them using their experience, expertise and Industry contacts whenever they are required.

You cannot become a Doctor by reading a book or looking at the web. Nor can you become a Travel Agent in the same way !