

Are Travel Agents Back?

By MICHELLE HIGGINS



Clockwise from left, travel agents Katie Brower, Ryan McGredy, Emily Meredith Prentiss, Julia P. Douglas, Jason Coleman and Beth Jenkins.

THE complimentary wine and fruit platter was sent up to Jessica Griffin and her family moments after they strolled into their roomy suite. They were accompanied by a bellhop who placed their bags near a tidy crib made up with luxurious, high thread-count sheets for Ms. Griffin's 1-year-old daughter.

The V.I.P. treatment at the Cheeca Lodge and Spa in the Florida Keys last month hadn't come with an extra cost. In fact, Ms. Griffin said, she paid about \$100 a night less than the standard rate for her room. And the deal wasn't the result of hours of tedious online research either. She had finagled her savings the old-fashioned way: through a travel agent.

"I needed recommendations and someone to steer me in the right direction," said Ms. Griffin, who opted to work with an agent after years of making her own reservations because she needed a getaway suitable for a toddler and had little interest in scrolling through endless and conflicting user hotel reviews online. "There are so many," she said. And with every site displaying beautiful pictures and tantalizing offers, "it can be overwhelming."

“I wanted somebody from a reputable agency who could say yes, you’ll enjoy this stay,” she said.

According to those in the travel agent industry, clients like Ms. Griffin are not alone, and are in fact helping to stanch the bloodletting the industry has experienced since the onset of D.I.Y. booking more than a decade ago. Nearly one in three leisure agencies is hiring, according to PhoCusWright, a travel research firm. And in 2011 travel agencies experienced a second consecutive year of growth; their bookings account for a third of the \$284 billion United States travel market.

This comes after years during which all signs seemed to be suggesting that travel agents would soon go the way of telex operators. And it’s true that the numbers are stark: During the industry’s peak years of the mid-1990s, there were about 34,000 retail locations booking trips. Today, there are 14,000 to 15,000, according to PhoCusWright. In 2009 alone, in the throes of the recession, bookings through traditional agencies plummeted by 23 percent.

But now, some green shoots. An improving economy and the corporate travel that goes with it seem to be converging with a population for whom booking travel online has become increasingly onerous and time-consuming. Just how time-consuming? Steve Peterson, the global travel and transportation leader for the I.B.M. Institute for Business Value, set out to answer that very question. In a survey of more than 2,000 travelers worldwide, 20 percent said it took them more than five hours to search and book travel online. Nearly half said it required more than two hours.

No one expects agency business to rebound to pre-Internet levels, but recent signs — like the fact that leisure travelers accounted for a 10 percent bump in sales in 2010 (a bit less in 2011) — suggest that agents can still play a relevant role. And though no one has been keeping track of the reasons travelers are turning to actual human beings, Mr. Peterson suspected it might have something to do with the drawbacks of the Web. “It’s come to a point that it’s too much information to be confident that they have the ability to book the lowest fare,” or uncover the best place to stay, he said of the respondents. “Consumers are hungry for that one-and-done shopping experience.”

As it turns out, after years of losing ground to online sites, a new breed of tech savvy, specialized and collaborative agent has emerged.

“This whole idea that I go to a travel adviser to tell me what to do — those days are long gone,” said Matthew Upchurch, the chief executive of Virtuoso, a network of more than

330 upscale agencies. A contemporary travel agent expects customers to have done their homework, he said: “You’ve done a lot of research, now how do we work together?”

Agents today also know they must set themselves apart from the Web by offering special experiences that consumers can’t easily get on their own, like after-hours tours of the Sistine Chapel, tee times on P.G.A. golf courses normally closed to the public or the ability to pull some strings to get clients into that sold-out hotel or on the next flight out when bad weather strikes.

Such services often come with fees that range widely from \$25 to book an airline ticket to \$12,000 annual retainers. But even for budget travelers, the overall experience can offer better value, as my colleague Seth Kugel found in a recent [test of agents versus online search engines](#). Agents won “nearly every time,” he wrote, “on both price (the objective part of the test) and service (what you might call the essay question). In other words, the agents suggested alternate routes, gave advice on visas and just generally acted, well, more human than their computer counterparts.”

Comfortable with technology and accustomed to information on demand, new agents respond to clients around the clock through text, e-mail, cellphone and Twitter. And when they are not inspecting new hotels or touring the latest cruise ship, they are often blogging about recent trips or posting their photos to Facebook. Having grown up booking their own travel online, they understand the skepticism new clients may have about whether an agent can do any better and look for opportunities to wow them. Here are a handful of young, up-and-coming agents who have been identified as rising stars by trade publications, peer reviews and the agent community at large for their travel know-how, customer service and budding expertise.

LETTING SOMEBODY ELSE DO THE WORK

How to Find an Agent

Word of mouth is often best. If that fails, a number of online matchmaking services connect vacationers with experts in the place they are going or in the kind of trip they want. At [Tripology.com](#), travelers describe their interests through online forms and then receive e-mail alerts with up to three itinerary proposals from competing agents.

Additionally, agency groups such as [Travel Leaders](#) and [Travel Savers](#) offer online databases to help you find an agent. And [AmexTravelResources.com](#) allows users to search by destination and interest for American Express agents with corresponding expertise.

Travel magazines are another place to look. Travel + Leisure and Condé Nast Traveler each identify top travel agents annually in print and online.

What to Look For

In short: someone who has been where you want to go. Agents flash various credentials around — C.T.C. (certified travel counselor), L.C.S. (luxury cruise specialist), C.L.S. (certified lifestyle specialist) — but, as Tony Gonchar, chief executive of the American Society of Travel Agents, put it, “The three-letter acronym has less influence over the reason why you’d go to one professional over another than their reputation and experience.”

It also doesn’t hurt if the agent is a member of a major travel consortium, which often has access to special negotiated rates from partner hotels, airlines or cruises. (Virtuoso, for example, offers guaranteed amenities ranging from free cocktails upon arrival to spa services at more than 900 luxury hotels.)

Keep in mind that the relationship between agents and hotels, cruise lines and other travel suppliers is a two-way street. The suppliers benefit from agent referrals and often pass those benefits on to customers. But the agents can benefit, too, with kickbacks or discounts. Nevertheless, good agents won’t risk a client’s experience on one hotel or cruise line just because of some kickback. Feel free to ask whether and how your agent is benefiting from your itinerary.

Also, don’t be shy about asking for references from past clients.

What Should You Pay?

Fees vary widely based on everything from the agent’s experience to the complexity of the trip. But how much travelers pay should generally correspond to the services provided — say, \$100 or so to plan a basic weeklong vacation to \$500 or more for a major multi-week group trip with detailed custom itineraries, not including the actual cost of the trip.

There are exceptions to this rule. Bill Fischer, the New York travel agent with a famously unlisted phone number, charges a \$100,000 membership fee for his services and a \$25,000 annual retainer. Jacyn Sienna India, 30, commands a \$12,000 annual retainer for her personalized travel services, planning every detail of her clients’ trips down to creating a custom soundtrack for their flight.

