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Travel Wise: Selecting A Virtual Travel Specialist

By Ann LoCicero

Gone are the days of relying on your neighborhood travel agent or spending the first day of your vacation hunting for a local outfitter or guide. Reliable travel specialists are located in virtually every corner of the world and can now be accessed on the web.

Whether you are searching for a tour operator, travel agency or outfitter, the following tips will help you weed through the plethora of travel specialists hawking their wares online.

Websites

The design and content of a company's website speaks volumes about the way they do business.

- A travel specialist's website should provide information that is useful, informative and fun.
- The contact information, including a phone number and an email address, should be easy to locate.
- The site should also include all relevant information, such as the cost of an excursion, maps and directions.
- And, for those engaging an adventure specialist, a packing list, either directly in the content or in the form of an FAQ (frequently asked questions).

Visible track record

Great website but how do I know they can deliver? Assessing a travel specialists credentials is not as difficult as it sounds.

- Many industry associations and tourist boards list members and accredited agencies on their websites.
- Check references, read testimonials from previous clients, pose questions on a travel forum.

Knowledge and experience

Nothing can be a substitute for knowledge and experience.

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- Determine the agency or outfitter's knowledge of your travel destination as well as the type of adventure you wish to experience.
- Find out how long they have been in the business and whether they are accustomed to organizing tours for singles, families or seniors.

Location of the outfitter

If they are not located in the country you will be traveling to you may also wish to understand:

- Who will sort out any problems, accidents, or emergencies that may arise during your holiday? · When was the last time they biked down that country road? · Or how they will obtain a refund for the boat tour that was cancelled due to inclement weather.

Client service

If communicating with the specialist is a challenge there is a good chance your trip will turn out to be a disaster. Select a specialist that is committed to organizing quality trips and returning satisfied clients.

- How quickly does the agency or outfitter respond to your emails and telephone calls? · Are they eager to assist you with the planning of your vacation? · Do they go the extra mile to customize your itinerary? · Does the proposed itinerary reflect your interests?

Cost vs. Value

Get more than one proposal and compare.

- Find out what is and what is not included in the price. · Determine the location and quality of the accommodation. · How many meals are included and whether they are buffet or a la carte. · Is the trip fully guided or will you be touring on your own? · In addition you will want to know what, if any, sightseeing is included and whether you will have any free time.

Conditions

Make sure to read the fine print before you commit. The terms and conditions should clearly spell out your responsibilities as well as those of the specialist.

- What is the company's policy on reservations, deposits and cancellations? · Can a tour or excursion be cancelled for a lack of bookings? · Who is responsible for additional payments in the event of a currency fluctuation?

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an emergent website for families intent on making the most of their leisure time together.

Benefits And Disadvantages Of Online Travel Agencies

By Frank Johnson

Once upon a time...

Before the dawn of the information super highway, brick-and-mortar travel agencies were the key to booking travel arrangements and finding deals on airfare. These agencies helped travelers plan trips and book flights, hotel and car rental reservations, and other travel necessities. But as the Internet started to dominate all areas of commerce, travelers began to turn to online travel agencies instead of the brick-and-mortars. These "virtual" agencies offered all the travel planning options and discounts conventional travel agencies offered without requiring travelers to leave their home. No longer did travelers need to make appointments and meet face-to-face with a travel agent just to make travel arrangements. There was now a convenient online solution to booking travel arrangements and finding discounts on airfare.

Reality Check

Online travel agencies haven't completely decimated the conventional brick-and-mortar shops. Traditional travel agencies still do a great deal of business with travelers and are one viable solution to booking travel arrangements. However, as busy as our lives can be, online travel agencies do offer a quick and convenient solution to finding airline tickets without taking you away from home, or even work – and the brick-and-mortar shops realize this. Some conventional agencies are also hitting the web and establishing travel websites to cater to those individuals looking to quickly search for and book flights. So even though online travel agencies haven't completely decimated the conventional travel agency industry, they have established a viable and convenient alternative to booking vacations, business trips, and other travel plans.

Life Still Exists in the Brick-and-Mortars

Conventional travel agencies still command a large portion of the travel booking industry. Their face-to-face service is what keeps them in business and, depending on the needs of the traveler, a more realistic solution to booking travel arrangements. When you book your travel plans through a brick-and-mortar travel agency, you're working with real people and if you're a frequent traveler, it's nice to have a "favored agent" to turn to for travel information and advice. With an online travel agency, you're simply interacting with a virtual interface that allows you to search for and book your own travel plans without ever speaking with a live person. Many people prefer face-to-face interaction and would never even dream about using a travel website to book their travel plans. There is still something to be said about personal service and the conventional travel agencies are capitalizing on it by offering

personalized services and conveniences to travelers.

So Where do We Go from Here?

As you can see, there are benefits and disadvantage to both conventional and online travel agencies. Each one offers its own experience and features that make it unique from the other and in favor with different people. When it comes to selecting the best option for you, you merely need to ask yourself "What am I looking for in a travel agency?" The best way to answer this question is to check out a few online travel agencies, compare them to some brick-and-mortars, and see which ones have the

savings, products, and services you desire.

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