

Ten ways to make the most of your travel agent

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Travel agents aren't what they were twenty years ago. Back then, a travel agency was literally the only place where one could effectively comparison shop for airfares. Now, with the advent of online booking, and commission-less airfares, one might think travel agents are part of a dying profession. It's actually quite the opposite. The profession has shrunk by massive amounts from its zenith, but an interesting benefit has come about from the contraction: the agents who have weathered the storm are the top-flight ones who are at the pinnacle of the profession.

Twenty years ago, it was money on a loop. Agents sold tickets, earned commissions, dabbled in cruises, car rentals, hotels, and the like. But everyone knew the big money was in plane tickets, and making money to a travel agency basically meant nothing more than getting people in the front door. Agents and airlines enjoyed quid pro quo arrangements. Top sellers for each airline enjoyed a litany of upgrades, lounge access passes, free flights, and airline-sponsored familiarization trips. There was a time when it was the travel agents who held the airline revenue purse strings.

Enter the internet. With most bookings now migrated to the web, and airfares now as easy to buy as a gallon of milk, airlines got wise and reduced agency commissions to zero. Deprived of their main source of revenue, modern travel agents are forced to charge service fees to issue air tickets, car rentals, hotels, and cruises. The fee-based compensation for system arguably works in favor of the consumer. With the passenger, rather than the airline, paying for the agents services, consumers can be assured their travel agent will work as an advocate for them, rather than the airline with the most attractive compensation structure.

I was a travel agent for several years, and I had my share of nightmare clients and absolute gems. My clients have included Alaska Governors Frank Murkowski and Sarah Palin, and everyone from next-flight-out business travelers to bereavement fares to Round-The-World promotional tickets to African safaris and everything in between. So, I share a few tips on how to work well with a travel agent; the good ones are worth their weight in gold.

1. *Leave comparison shopping to the internet.* If you're looking for a quick and dirty roundtrip domestic airfare, take what you see online at face value. In most cases, an agent won't be able to dig up any significant savings, and if they do, it'll usually disappear when they add their service fee.

2. *Speaking of service fees, ask about them up front.* Ask if they're included with the quotes you receive, and don't complain about the fee. Without them, your agent is working for free. If your trip is long, complex, and detailed, many agents will ask for their fee up front, to avoid doing the research, only to have you book the itinerary directly with the suppliers they recommend. However, if the fee seems excessive, ask the agent for clarification. Fees for multiple bookings should be reduced. For example, I normally charged a flat fee for domestic airfare, but if I was doing it as part of a larger booking with another, higher fee attached, I'd waive it, such as interisland airfare as part of an island-hopping Hawai'i tour package.

3. *Ask about consolidator fares.* Any international agent worth their salt will have relationships with several consolidators, which buy seats in bulk from airlines and resell them at often deep discounts. These consolidators often work only through travel agents. If an agent does offer you a consolidator fare, ask for a copy of the consolidators rules and restrictions for the fare; they're often much more strict than those

imposed by the carriers on non-consolidated fares. Many times the change fees are higher, or they can't be changed at all.

4. *Don't hold an itinerary with multiple agents for the same carrier.* Yes, the agent will find out (Most airlines send agents a message through the reservations system when their reservation has been duplicated by another agent), and yes, it will damage your relationship. If you're not sure you've gotten the best service or fare from your agent, be sure to call them and cancel before rebooking elsewhere. It will save confusion for the agent, the airline, and yourself.

5. *Doctors charge for a second opinion; so do travel agents.* I've spoken with passengers who have booked cruises with other agencies or directly with the cruise line, and then called for my opinion on whether or not the cruise line insurance was a good value. I told them I'd be happy to tell them, but they'd have to pay my equivalent service fee for a cruise booking.

6. *"Extras" are precisely what they sound like.* Travel agents will add them to existing bookings, but don't visit a travel agent for an English-speaking guide in Vietnam or a private guided tour of the Vatican if you've booked the majority of your vacation yourself. Travel agents tie up loose ends on their own packages, not yours.

7. *Trust them.* Travel agents aren't perfect, but they do make a living off being an expert in their field. I once had a family that absolutely refused to believe a small hotel in Italy didn't offer rooms for four people because I wanted them to book two rooms for a larger commission (hotel commissions are generally small potatoes, the majority of agents won't chase hotels that don't pay promised commission, which happens relatively often). Hotels in Europe are, in general, much stricter about the number of guests to a room (as well as charging for extra guests) than American hotels. I finally gave up and booked it as a double, and sure enough, when they got to the hotel they found they couldn't fit four people and luggage in the room and still get the door closed.

8. *Never say money isn't an object, because it is.* The worst thing you can do to a travel agent is to not set a budget. Unless you're independently wealthy, don't assume you can afford whatever your agent offers – the sky really is the limit when it comes to travel expenses. Give a dollar amount, how negotiable it is, and for what reasons (Would you shorten your vacation for a more luxurious experience within budget, or do you want the full two weeks? Would you consider another more affordable destination, or will you wiggle with your budget a bit to stick with the original plan?) I once had a young man buying a honeymoon and he'd decided on Fiji. Fiji is an elite, expensive destination (privacy always comes at a premium). He explained cost was no object, but seemed disappointed when my first price quote was in the neighborhood of \$25,000. He finally discovered Fiji was out of his league, pricewise, and eventually settled for a \$8500 Tahiti package. It would have saved us both a bit of time and awkward price haggling if he'd set a budget up front.

9. *Don't be afraid to contact the suppliers directly, but only for clarification.* Sometimes you just have to hear it from the horse's mouth. So if you want direct information from a cruise line on how thin their cabin walls are or whether they use hypoallergenic bath soap, it's sometimes best to get that directly from the source rather than bogging your agent down with minutiae. Another honeymooner on a Tahiti vacation really wanted to swim with dolphins, and while Tahiti is a sale I've always made well, it's a conceptual effort; I've never been there. Your agent can't be everywhere you want to go either. To keep working with an agent who knows your preferences, but take advantage of a suppliers insider perspective, work with both in tandem; just make sure your agents walks home with the business at the end of the day.

10. *Manage your relationship well.* Travel agents cultivate relationships with airlines and other suppliers based on volume and traveler profiles. Listen to an agent's suggestions – they'll usually offer a supplier they have a good relationship with first. That way, if anything goes wrong while you're still new to their agency, they'll be assured they can most likely get an easy fix. With new customers, agents take a "This client is important to me, and I'm important to you" approach to negotiating with suppliers. With more mature agent/client relationships, the approach is more of a "This customer is important to you". The more an agent is able to cultivate your relationship with their suppliers, the less they'll have to use their own to call in waivers and favors if things go awry, and with the state of the industry, suppliers give travel agents less and less wiggle room with waivers, so they're apt to use them more sparingly.

Bottom Line: A good travel agent works as an extension of the travel supplier, filtering multiple suppliers and offers based on your working relationship and their understanding of your needs. To the travel supplier, they are an advocate for you, the consumer.

For more info: The American Society of Travel Agents runs a useful [website](#).