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For Deals and Service, Reconsider a Travel Agent

by [Ed Perkins](#) - September 26, 2008



"While most travelers were trying to get through to their airlines, I was sitting at my computer rescheduling and rerouting our clients." That's what a travel agent I know told me last week about coping with the disruptions of Hurricane Ike. And it raises again the issue of why—despite the Internet—so many travelers continue to rely on travel agents. Maybe you should think about doing the same.

Last year, I did a [column](#) about travel agents, explaining why many travelers are better off using an agent than trying to make arrangements by phone. At the time, I placed "assistance in a pinch" fifth in my list of reasons. Now, I see two reasons for placing it at or near the top:

The massive disruptions of two recent hurricanes highlight the way natural events—weather, earthquake, fires, whatever—can impact travel plans and how extensive the disruptions can be.

- Upcoming and inevitable airline schedule cutbacks are going to require that lots of you make drastic alterations to your itineraries and trips.

When something goes wrong—either before you leave or when you're already on your trip—a travel agent is your best source of help. Whether it's an airline snafu or a natural disaster, you often have to rebook flights, accommodations, and other travel arrangements. When you have advance notice, as in the case of a permanent schedule change, you could probably do your own rescheduling. But chances are an agent could do a quicker and better job than you could.

Agent support is even more important in a last-minute problem. Those are the times when you'll probably find it almost impossible to reach an overloaded reservation phone line or work your way through a long line at an understaffed airport counter. Instead, a quick call will get an agent working on your case immediately. These days, most good travel agencies either have their own 24/7 staffing or a cooperative arrangement with another agency that provides backup for them.

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Beyond assistance in a pinch, my earlier listing of travel agent advantages remains valid:

- Knowledge and counsel. The main reason so many leisure travelers use travel agents is to take advantage of their specialized knowledge of destinations, local deals, and such, plus their counsel when trying to select a destination or activity.
- Time saving. The main reason so many business travelers rely on agents to make their travel arrangements is to save time and hassle. If you've ever spent several hours online searching for a hotel deal or airfare, you'll know why.
- Good deals. Good agents know what's available through the same Internet sites you might visit on your own. In addition, agents can search their GDS computer reservation systems, not available to the public, for deals that might not be on the Internet.
- Airline tricks. Online booking is simple for buying straightforward one-way, round-trip, or even multi-stop air tickets. But some international air ticketing rules are arcane, and a good travel agent knows cost-cutting tricks that you could never find online.

If you decide to use a travel agent, my suggestion is that you use the agent for all your travel needs, not just when you think you might face a hurricane or blizzard. The more a travel agent knows about your personal preferences, the better job he/she can do for you. And although agents don't slack on any customer, I suspect that good, steady clients get more attention than the once-every-five-year types. If you like to check trip details out on the Internet, that's fine: Just tell the agent what you've found. And if you're wary of online researching and booking, an agent is about the only way you can come even close to finding the best deals.