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TRAVEL

When does it pay to hire a travel agent?

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NEW YORK (MarketWatch) -- If you want to take a trip these days, you hardly need more than your computer and a credit card to make your arrangements. Travel Web sites such as Orbitz, Travelocity and CheapTickets.com give consumers the power and flexibility to create and purchase their own trips, snagging deals and discounts along the way.

So does it ever pay off to hire a travel agent anymore? "There are lots of occasions when it's smart to use a travel agent," says Nancy Dunnan, editor of TravelSmartNewsletter.com. In many circumstances, hiring a travel agent can save you both time and money -- not to mention hassle.

She adds that travel agents in business today must be capable, talented enough to compete with online business. "Since the arrival of so much available on the Internet, the travel agents who remain are for the most part really top notch. Those who were marginal or not so swift dropped by the wayside with the rise of research and booking on the Internet," Dunnan said.

You should consider using a travel agent in these seven situations:

1. **If you are pressed for a time.** Let a travel agent can do the research for you. Finding deals on the Internet can be time consuming, and a travel agent can do the legwork quickly and efficiently.
2. **Want to take a cruise?** "Travel agents who are cruise specialists can easily find excellent discounts and/or cabin upgrades," says Dunnan. The overwhelming number of cruises and destinations make it difficult for the first-time cruiser to select the right trip, and a travel agent can help with that too.
3. **Road warriors.** Frequent travelers can benefit from a travel agent, because the agent will work hard to keep your business. You can bet that agents will want to find you the lowest prices and upgrades so that you'll keep coming back.
4. **Anticipating trouble.** If you're traveling to areas prone to hurricanes during hurricane season, use an agent, who "will make certain that you are booked into resorts and hotels that will refund some or part of your costs should a hurricane hit the area. An agent can also help you move from one destination to another, get you back home and help you get a refund," says Dunnan. In fact, travel agents are always useful if you're traveling in an area that has been struck by disaster. "We had a number of subscribers tell us how their agent helped them deal with travel problems during the days and weeks after 9/11. More recently, praise for agents came in from readers traveling in Colorado and other states during the huge snowstorms.
5. **Planning a complicated itinerary?** Travel agents are invaluable. For example, a first-time trip to China, Tibet and Russia can be difficult to plan, and packaged tours aren't for everybody. An experienced agent can help you put it together, saving you both time and money.
6. **Special needs travel.** Elderly or ill travelers can benefit from the extra care travel agents can secure. A travel agent can negotiate access for medical equipment such as wheelchairs and oxygen and can also find you safe and easily accessible accommodations.
7. **Business interruptions.** And if your airline goes on strike or declares bankruptcy, a travel agent can help you quickly get an alternative flight. So carry your travel agent's contact information with you on the trip.

When choosing a travel agent, Dunnan recommends finding one who belongs to the American Society of Travel Agents. For more information visit the group's Web site at www.astanet.com.

<http://www.marketwatch.com/news/story/travel-seven-situations-hiring-travel/story.aspx?guid=%7BBAFE0622-E693-43FD-966C-4799C70832B1%7D>