



Highlights: Travel Agents

While it may seem that no one uses a travel agent anymore, the fact is that a knowledgeable travel agent can still provide a useful service for many consumers. There aren't as many agencies as there were before the Internet Age, but some of those still standing have survived because they offer superior service and expertise. *Chicago Consumers' CHECKBOOK* magazine and www.checkbook.org can help consumers find a skilled agent to help them with their travel needs. Highlights from CHECKBOOK's travel agents report include:

Why Use An Agent?

- Besides having someone else doing all the booking, you may benefit from an agent's firsthand experience at your destination or contacts with locals. It can be reassuring and time-saving to talk with a person you trust about activities, hotels, crowds, and other issues.
- A good agent may have awareness of—and access to—special money-saving deals and promotions.
- An agent can also alert you to current security warnings, travel documentation requirements, and other practical details.
- If you have problems with a hotel or other service at a distant destination, it might be helpful to have an agent pitch in on your behalf to help straighten the problem out.

How to Find the Right Agent:

- A good starting point is talking to family, friends, and co-workers. If possible, visit one or more travel agencies to meet with the agents and examine available resources.
- You'll want an agent who can answer questions about destinations you might consider. There is a good reason to do business with a substantial-size agency—a better chance of finding someone who has had recent experience at destinations you are interested in.
- You should expect prompt and reliable service. A good agent will be on top of every detail and frequently in contact until your plans are firmly set. Consider switching agents if response times are slow, proposed flights fail to meet specified travel constraints, descriptions of destinations don't match your experience, or other details are missed. And use an agency that lets you pay by credit card. Then if you have a problem, you can protest the charge with your credit card company.
- One indicator that an agent has a solid base of knowledge about the industry is qualification as a Certified Travel Consultant (CTC). To be a CTC, an agent must have five years' experience in the industry, complete a CTC educational program, pass an exam, and meet continuing education requirements.
- You'll want an agent who works hard to get you a good price—searching for consolidator airfares, for example, and pushing hotels for special promotions. Your agent should not be biased; in this

connection, keep in mind that agencies may get higher—or more reliably paid—commissions from some hotels or other travel suppliers than from others.

- Ask in advance what the fees are.

Building a Relationship with an Agent:

- Even if you know exactly what hotel, cruise, or other service you want, if that service provider pays commissions, you will give your agent some income by allowing the agent to book on your behalf.
- Even if you plan to rely heavily on one agent, consider using a different agent to help you with trips that require special expertise—say, a trip to China if you don't have a lot of experience there.
- If you plan to rely heavily on one agent, let the agent know that you sometimes will check other options so the agent does not become complacent.
- If you learn about a low-priced supplier with which neither you nor your agent is familiar, check it out carefully. It may be a scam or have significant strings attached.

The media may cite selected examples of top-rated travel agents, as shown in Chicago Consumers' CHECKBOOK, and CHECKBOOK's editors are available for interviews. Please call Jamie Lettis at 202-454-3006 to schedule.

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