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I travel to learn, eat, golf, and ski, but mostly for travel's sake

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Why You Need A Travel Agent, Part 1

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If you like to travel (who doesn't?) here's a great New Year's Resolution for 2012 – find a good travel agent and start using them regularly. This is a resolution you will find easy to keep, because once you try it you will enjoy better – and often cheaper – trips than ever before.

Just a couple of years ago, headlines were about the demise of the travel agent, about to go the way of the Dodo and the dinosaur. Guess what? Travel agents are not only still here, they are experiencing a rebound – despite (or because of?) the myriad travel tools available online.

So why should you use a travel agent?

There are many, many good reasons, which I will explain. But the bottom line is that they know more than you do, they are better connected than you, they have access to benefits you can't get otherwise, they can often beat any other prices available (even online, yes), and after you have planned everything, they provide a safety net during your trip that you simply won't get by booking yourself or buying insurance. Having a top travel agent can also make you an instant VIP – free room upgrades, hard to get restaurant reservations, cutting lines, access to otherwise closed stores and exhibits, private guides, and cheaper – often much cheaper – premium airfares. Here's the best part: even though most top agents charge fees, in almost every firsthand experience I or my friends, family, and acquaintances have had, travel agents have saved money, often a lot of money, thousands of dollars, and in every case, more than paid for themselves.

To be frank, not everyone taking a trip needs a travel agent. The benefits they offer increase as your travel becomes more luxurious, expensive, and specialized. Need a cheap flight to Florida to visit family and a night at a 3-star airport hotel en route? By all means let your fingers do the walking. Need a bargain-priced, all-inclusive ski vacation or Vegas weekend? You can easily find that online. Need a cheap cruise on a mass market ship? Yes, you can book that yourself. But [I've already written at length here at Forbes about why if you are taking any higher end cruise](#) you would be foolish – I mean making a really big mistake – not to use a top cruise agent. The same goes for plenty of other travel: If you are staying at 4 and 5-star hotels, flying in the premium cabin (or private aviation), planning complicated itineraries with multiple stops, planning complex airline routings, or taking any trip using guides/drivers or local experts, any trip that VIP access would make better, any trip to a destination where you do not already know all the best places to eat and best things to see and do, or any cultural travel, from safaris to ancient ruins, you need a travel agent. In fact, in any of these scenarios, if you don't use a travel agent you are and likely making a costly mistake, no matter how much you think you know. I travel for a living and write on travel for a living and I still use travel agents.

To be clear, I am talking about true experts, the really good travel agents who add value, not the ones running full page ads of deals in the Sunday papers. The best travel agents are essentially consultants, and many prefer "travel advisor," because it is their advice, expertise, and connections that are of great value, not the ability to print airline tickets for you. A few have become hyper-specialized, and in some cases, like booking a cruise, golf vacation, [space travel](#), or a very specialized theme trip like art, music or polar exploration, you will want to seek out a niche specialist. But for most travelers, it is better to find an excellent generalist travel advisor and stick with them, because a big part of the equation is that they get to know you and your wants, likes and dislikes, and make suggestions accordingly. You would not use a different financial advisor every time you opened a new

bank or brokerage account, so why keep switching travel agents? “Once we get to know each other, the time I save them is invaluable to them. If I can get the client to ‘let go/give in/trust in me!’ once, then they become clients for life,” said Leigh Sullivan, a highly acclaimed luxury travel expert with [Regency Travel](#) in Memphis, TN. If you choose right, you won’t lose any expertise in the process, because the best agencies have multiple agents with overlapping spheres of specialization who collaborate, so while your agent who is an expert on Asia may not specialize in safaris when the time comes for you to book one, there’s a good chance one of their colleagues at a nearby desk does.



"How will I find a great and expert guide to the wonders of Ancient Rome?" A good travel agent already knows one.

Among the many major advantages high-powered agents bring to the table is personal connections and clout. “Connections” means knowing GMs and execs at top hotels (and airlines, chefs, cruise lines, adventure travel outfitters, etc.) personally. It is very rare for luxury hotels or the most desirable restaurants to truly be sold out: they usually have rooms/tables available in case Tom Cruise or another VIP makes a last minute visit. This is especially important if you are trying to visit a destination at a very peak time: the Superbowl, New Orleans at Mardi Gras, Cannes during the film festival, Park City over President’s Day weekend. Who do you think will be able to get the coveted and hidden room inventory, you calling an 800 reservation center, or your

travel agent calling the GM who he or she has known for 20 years – and sends a lot of business to? It’s not just these scenarios, it is everyday room upgrades, special amenities, bottles of champagne on arrival, the GM greeting you personally, all these extras come from the travel agents calling on your behalf – at no extra cost to you. The clout part comes from volume. For example, even the top luxury hotels are notorious for refusing to guarantee connecting rooms in advance for families booking multiple rooms. This is one of the most frustrating recurring problems I hear in the industry, and a reason why some people rent houses and apartments over multiple hotel rooms. When your travel agent books hundreds of room nights with a high profile luxury hotel each year, the hotel will move heaven and earth to give that agent’s client – you – guaranteed connecting rooms.

If you do not believe that top agents’ personal clout can take you further than the internet or any prestigious credit card or “conciierge service,” here’s a true story. I was going to a hard to reach island in the Caribbean for a story, and when a travel agent who does a lot of volume with a particular airline suggested flights I winced. She asked me why, and I explained that I was elite on two other major carriers, and prefer to fly them because of the miles, points and status, and to this airline I was a nobody, so the miles would not help me. “No problem,” she said, “I’ll call my guy at the airline’s sales department and he’ll make you Gold.” And he did. This is one of the largest airlines in the world, and Gold is the second tier of their elite program, not entry level, reserved for those who fly 50,000 miles per year – the equivalent of about 8 transcontinental round trips and over 100 hours of flying time – or one phone call, depending who you know.

Another big selling point of the best agents is their expertise. A friend was taking his children to Italy for the first time, on a biking and walking trip in the Dolomites, and decided to add Rome because he wanted them to see the historic sites. He called me and asked for help, so I told him to call Anne Scully, President of [McCabe World Travel](#) in Virginia, a true industry superstar who is perennially ranked one of the 5 or 10 best travel agents in the nation by anyone who ranks these things. She arranged a van and driver to take his family from their bike tour drop-off point to Rome, helped him pick a well-located luxury hotel that suited his needs, and set up private tours of ancient Rome and the Vatican with two different specialized expert guides. Alternatively, he could have booked guides, hotel and a driver for the long trip for his family blindly on the internet. But this way, he was getting a very known quantity. And free upgraded hotel amenities.

I’d like to take a moment to talk about internet travel resources. I have nothing against booking travel online and do it all the time. I use Kayak, Travelocity, Vayama and many specialized foreign sites. I read reviews and ratings in Travelocity and TripAdvisor. But here’s the problem – these skew very much towards the lower and middle end of the market, because it’s a numbers game and the luxury segment is very small. So when they are giving the airport Radisson a four and half star rating, on that relative scale, how can Hong Kong hotels such as

the Landmark Mandarin Oriental and Peninsula be differentiated in a way meaningful to you? They can't be. That's a difference your travel agent will be able to explain to you that you cannot possibly garner online. When many of the best and most specialized tour guides cannot even be booked online, how can you rely on online ratings for them? You cannot. I just read a survey that said searching for "Villas In Italy" yielded 7.3 million results in Bing and over 9 million for Google. Good luck with that research project. All this is in addition to the fact that such ratings can and have been manipulated, and that you have no idea who the baseline raters are. Now on the other hand, let's say you have a friend whose taste and judgment you know well and trust and they tell you to stay at one hotel over another in a particular destination they are very familiar with for several specific reasons. You would probably believe them. Think of your expert travel agent as such a friend.

For leisure travel, most of the questions I get are of the following variety: where is the best place to go, best place to stay, best things to do, best places to eat? In almost every case, the answer is that there is no "best" place – but there is the best for you. That is why a relationship with a travel consultant who asks a lot of question – the good ones will – is all important. So is their firsthand experience, and because they have been checking these hotels in person, eating at these restaurants, and using these guides for years, they know the best ones for every need. All of these skills come together into a vacation you simply could not plan on your own, using your credit card's agent, or the internet. "I think one of the most surprising things to clients is the fact that we are able to secure with ease and in a very timely manner ALL the components of their trip: accommodations (with perks like upgrades/breakfast/credits), private transfers, dinner reservations, sightseeing with exclusive access (skip the line), theatre tickets, etc.," said Regency's Sullivan.

"We've had clients who return to a destination just because of the experience with the guide we got them the first time, said Anne Scully. "I'm like a custom tailor. I make bespoke trips to fit you personally, not the other way around. It's not just about knowing which are the best hotels – it's about knowing the GMs at the best hotels. It's unique access and giving my clients a rare experience. I had a college history professor who specializes in World War II visiting London, and I did not just have him tour Churchill's War Rooms, I had Churchill's granddaughter meet him for tea at his hotel and then take him on a tour – he got to sit in Churchill's chair. If I have a passionate shopper go to Paris, I don't tell them what stores to go to, I send them on a private tour behind the scenes at Louis Vuitton where they can see the things being made."

"A good travel agent is there 'pillow to pillow.' People think they can just book flights, hotels, or car rentals themselves, and sometimes they can, especially if nothing goes wrong. But when your flight is cancelled and you are standing in line waiting to be rebooked, believe me, you'll wish you had a travel agent. I'd already be working on it for you."

The advantages and extras these super agents offer are literally too numerous for me to list in detail, but [In Part 2](#), I will give specific, real life examples of the immense value a top travel agent can add in the realm of hotels, airfares, and more, both saving you money and greatly improving the quality of the travel experience. [In Part 3](#), I tell you how to find such an agent.