



Special agents

When it comes to booking travel, aren't we flying solo now? Not necessarily, writes **Rob Ingram**. A new breed of travel agent has evolved, offering specialist know-how and access all areas.

The travel agent, I'm reliably informed, has gone the way of the Tasmanian tiger. A threatened species since booking travel online turned the romantic adventure into a mere commodity, their demise has long been predicted. Evolution, however, has saved this particular species. Travel agents have become travel advisors, and they're on the rebound.

Most deserve the new label because in the shakeout that came with online DIY experimentation and lost airline commissions, those most likely to survive were the dedicated professionals whose value lay in experience, expertise and connections rather than the ability to staple tickets into a nice folder. In the words of one leading consultant who spoke to *GT*: "The agencies that have survived the downturn obviously evolved to survive, so social Darwinism is alive and well in our business."

Anyone can browse an airline or accommodation website, click and pay. But it's the tricky decisions before that – the time-consuming process of sifting through and attempting to compare a dizzying number of itinerary options – that has made specialised knowledge advisable for anything more ambitious than Point A to Point B jaunts. The short answer to why we need travel agents is that they know more than we do and, unlike an online travel tool, they know what's important.

Matthew Upchurch, the chairman and CEO of luxury travel network Virtuoso – whose 8,900 travel advisors across 20 countries write \$12.5 billion of business each year – stresses the contrast between

the personal and the impersonal transaction.

"We build a relationship with our clients with trust, value and collaboration as the basis," he says. "We don't just write tickets; we enrich lives through human connection."

While the number of retail travel agencies has diminished since the advent of online shopping, the role of the travel advisor has expanded to meet the increased complexity and specialisation of travel. And it seems that creative deconstruction of the old travel agency business model is not all bad.

Michael Londregan, Virtuoso's executive general manager for Australia, New Zealand and Asia, says the fragmentation of markets within the travel industry has allowed his company's members to focus on clients who require specialised expertise and service – from securing the best rooms in the world's top-rated luxury hotels to organising guided exploration of pre-Columbian Mayan ruins on Mexico's Yucatán Peninsula.

"This has created a relationship away from purchase and transaction and towards engagement and advocacy," he says. "The fragmentation has provided a clear lesson about the importance of knowing your proposition and understanding your most likely customers. It opens up the opportunity to reach the front in your own lane."

For the traveller, being in the wrong lane is a bad place to be. More than one billion tourists crossed international borders in 2012. Decades ago the American Society of Travel Agents coined the

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slogan: "If you're not with ASTA, you're on your own." These days you are not only on your own, you're on your own with a billion others.

When the itinerary is complex, when the expectations and the expenditure are high, a good travel consultant – and that's usually one who asks a lot of questions of you – is worth their weight in gold. Craig Adamson, the Australia and New Zealand director of Leading Hotels of the World, says the group's core business in Australia is still driven by travel agencies. "Our customers value unique experiences, quality and service, and of course they value recognition," he says. "Travel agents go out of their way to ensure we and our hoteliers know the importance of their customers."

Londregan believes there will always be a role for travel agents. "We live in an advisor service culture... people who can add value to our lives will always have a future," he says. "People who can help us allocate our most valuable non-renewable asset – our leisure time – will always be invaluable. In Australia, where travel is hard-wired into our lifestyle, the travel advisor's future is bright."

While DIY online travel tools are likely to continue multiplying, says Yvonne Verstandig, of Melbourne agency Executive Edge Travel + Events, so too will confusion about choice. "The future of luxury travel will actually be defined by the need for expert travel agents," she says. "As long as travel agencies can offer a service that travellers can't get on their own, the luxury travel business will continue to thrive."

Verstandig was recently voted Most Admired Travel Advisor in Australia and New Zealand at the Virtuoso Gala Awards in Las Vegas. As a veteran in the industry, she's acutely aware of the need to update the little black book constantly.

"Destinations can be hot today and not tomorrow," she says. "Hotel brands are ever-changing and new properties are being developed every day. To keep a handle on what is cutting edge at any particular time requires infinite dedication and passion."

"We also keep our eyes open for unique experiences. Increasingly, luxury travellers want the 'ungettable' get – one-of-a-kind adventures: driving the Formula One race circuit at Monza, planting a coral

garden in the Maldives to preserve their endangered reefs, going on a dinosaur dig in Montana with *Jurassic Park's* palaeontologist."

Michael Shean, of the upmarket Sydney travel consultancy Shean & Partners, points out that a unique experience might just as well be a simple room in an odd street in an interesting neighbourhood in Manhattan's lower eastside, as white-water rafting in Bhutan. He believes there's no substitute for personalising the travel experience.

"Just clicking and buying online versus planning with the assurance of a human voice, face and contact is no contest," he says. "The travel advisor can greatly enhance the travel experience conversationally, inspirationally and organisationally. People need only to understand the difference between price and value. Focusing purely on cost is often at the expense of efficiency, knowledge and all the other wisdom that should accompany large financial outlays."

The best travel advisors, of course, are not only familiar with all the aspects of luxury travel, they have a network of international contacts. Londregan says Virtuoso members favour working with companies well established in relevant destinations – there's nothing like an insider's knowledge. Shean says interaction between agents is fundamental to creating the optimum travel experience for the client.

And there's also the clout factor. One of the advantages of using a top travel agent is the benefits that flow from the respect and loyalty he or she has established with airlines, hotel GMs, tour operators, chefs and guides over years of business. We all know someone who books the economy fare online and checks in wearing suit and tie in the hope of being upgraded. Who do you think gets the upgrade at the check-in desk or hotel reception – the anonymous online buyer or the travel agent who calls the senior executive he has known for 20 years and with whom he makes hundreds of bookings a year?

The online shopping revolution has thrown a rock in the pond of many industries, and travel is no exception. While travellers may feel empowered by the avalanche of options at their fingertips, it takes a travel industry specialist to turn an itinerary into an unforgettable experience. **CT**

THE EXPERTS

During our research into the changing world of the travel advisor, a few names cropped up frequently as savvy specialists in an increasingly specialised industry.

Yvonne Verstandig of Melbourne's Executive Edge Travel + Events has access to contacts who ensure indelible experiences in great destinations, such as a hands-on cooking class with Countess Enrica Rocca at her family palazzo in Venice. executiveedge.com.au

Melinda Gregor of Gregor & Lewis Bespoke Travel in Noosa Heads is the go-to agent for luxury adventure expeditions, with Peru, Patagonia and the Galápagos Islands currently among the most popular destinations. gregorlewis.com.au

Michael Shean of Sydney's Shean & Partners is the fashionable choice of fashion traders and fashionistas who feed on his knowledge of prime shopping and dining addresses, particularly in New York's Lower East Side. sheantravel@bigpond.com

Claudia Rossi Hudson of Sydney-based Mary Rossi Travel has built worldwide connections and serves an incredibly loyal clientele built during the company's 40 years. A specialist in small-group travel to villages even Italy has forgotten. maryrossitravel.com

Andrew Jones, of Hobart's Andrew Jones Travel, specialises in slow travel, which shares many of the values of slow food. His company is known for leisurely paced, custom-designed and escorted tours of Europe, Asia and India. ajtravel.com.au

