



Q: CAN TRAVEL AGENTS/ TOUR COMPANIES SAVE YOU MONEY?

—HERU PRAYOGO, INDONESIA

A: Sometimes, but that's not the primary reason to use them. With the rise of online booking and crowd-sourcing websites, do-it-yourself vacation planning has never been easier.

Yet travel agents and tour operators, or “consultants” as many prefer to be called, are still thriving, and with good reason. A top-tier agent offers you years of insider industry experience and connections, all for a usually modest fee. The best agents have established relationships with hotels and airlines, often giving them leverage when it comes to negotiating discounts and extra perks. Think about it: a powerful agent who deals with hundreds of customers per year has a lot more clout when

it comes to requesting a room upgrade, the best seats in a coveted sushi bar, or a gratis spa treatment.

Linh Le from Trails of Indochina, a bespoke tour operator that arranges trips around Southeast Asia, says, “Guests can typically expect to save approximately 20 percent when booking a whole package with [us] rather than buying individual services.” When you're dealing with first-class everything, that 20 percent can be a pretty sizable amount. →

The Fix

Dan Fraser, one of the founders of the Bangkok-based Smiling Albino, adds that using a tour operator can definitely amount to savings when it comes to logistically complicated trips. “A frugal family saves infinitely by hiring us to manage a biking and boating experience along mountains and rivers in Northern Thailand when considering the safety and logistical preparations needed to do it correctly.”

At the end of the day though, most of the benefits of using an expert have more to do with insider intel than with price. Though sites like TripAdvisor offer near endless opinions, they can also be a

BY THE NUMBERS



300,000

The number of Starwood Starpoints a loyalty-program member bid to get courtside seats at the 2013 US Open.



Q: MY HOTEL HAS A FREE TOWN-CAR SERVICE. HOW MUCH SHOULD I TIP THE DRIVER?

A: Because they're providing a complimentary amenity, drivers are instructed not to expect tips. However, it's not uncommon for travelers to offer a gratuity. The minimum starts at around US\$5 and goes up as the distance increases. Chauffeurs are generally making above-market wages, but they'll appreciate being recognized for going the extra mile—literally.

minefield of conflicting advice and, in some cases, fake reviews. A trusted agent can help you sift through all of the excess data to find the genuine gems. It can save a whole lot of time—not to mention give you the opportunity to customize your trip. Want a personal shopping guide as you stroll through Singapore? A family meal in a private home in Luang Prabang? Or a guide through the highs and lows of Bangkok's nightlife? Unless you've got local friends in the know, call in the professionals.

“Using a well-qualified tour operator bypasses the hassle and time and safety concerns of doing all yourself. It also provides you access and relationships and opens doors

to you that otherwise would rarely be possible on your own,” says Fraser. “There are reasons rock stars have hired us to spontaneously arrange helicopters, Ducati's, private roads, catered lunches—gluten free... and try explaining that in Thai—at the drop of a hat, rather than trying to save cash by arranging it themselves.”

This doesn't necessarily mean that you should always turn to an agent or an operator. For short, one-stop trips, especially with destinations you've been to before, stick to planning it yourself. For a more complicated trip with multiple flights and hotels, a professional can save you a headache and ensure that you get the vacation you want.

What's Your Problem? MY HOTEL IS OVERBOOKED!

Do...



Plan ahead. Book directly with the hotel and confirm your reservation the night before.



Ask to be comped for your first night (at least) if you are moved to another hotel. You may also get restaurant or spa credits.

Don't...



Expect much. Hotels usually move guests to properties of equal or lesser value. Your hotel doesn't want you too happy at the competition.



Be late. If you think your hotel is overbooked, arrive early. The last guest typically loses out.

THE FINAL SAY

Q: WHY CAN'T FLIGHT ATTENDANTS ACCEPT TIPS?

A: Sure, flight attendants will pour you a drink, but they are safety professionals first and foremost—not service staff. To avoid any misunderstanding, airlines make it a company policy to refuse tips (unless a passenger may otherwise be offended). If your attendant went beyond the call of duty, let the airline know. Your good review will be used to evaluate performance and could ultimately lead to a pay raise.

BY THE NUMBERS

US\$18

The average pay per flight hour.