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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

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 fares. 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 “concierge

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.

Why You Need A Travel Agent, Part 2

[In Part 1](#) of this series I explained why a top travel agent’s expertise, depth of knowledge, and industry connections can help make almost every trip better. Today is where the rubber meets the road – concrete reasons why it is often shortsighted, even foolish, to book a trip without a travel agent – even if you think you know what you are doing.

In fact, I have found that the biggest resistance to using a travel agent comes from the ego of thinking we don’t need one. This makes no sense: If I needed to design a new home, I’d hire an architect, not use a “be-your-own-architect” website. Years ago I wrote a story on Bill Fischer, a famous “travel agent to the stars” and one of the most powerful agents in the world. Fischer has booked trips for everyone from Barbara Walters to Oprah Winfrey to acclaimed hotelier Steve Wynn. I remember thinking that if these people, with their extensive staffs of personal assistants, name recognition, deep pockets, automatic VIP status and clout, think they can do better with a travel agent than on their own, won’t you? (Don’t bothering searching, Fischer takes new clients only by recommendation from his existing ones).

So to help those on the fence put ego aside, here are some impressive

yet fairly commonplace travel agent accomplishments. Again, as I said last time, I am talking about expert, top tier travel agents.

Airfares: There may be no part of travel as frustrating as booking flights. When several friends and I went to climb Mt. Kilimanjaro, we wanted to fly KLM via Amsterdam because this is the only nonstop flight from outside Africa into Kilimanjaro International Airport. Otherwise we had to go through a hub in Kenya or Tanzania with multiple changes and an extended ground layover. But the fares on KLM were really expensive. I called Anne Scully at [McCabe World Travel](#) and in less than five minutes she had my friends and I booked on the flights we wanted at a steep discount – hundreds of dollars less per person for coach than the best I could do by calling KLM or online (and I know what I am doing). I still don't know how and I don't care.

When a friend of mine went on his honeymoon to Hawaii, he wanted to buy first class tickets for he and his new bride, but at around \$5000 a pop, the price was a little steep. Now this is a San Francisco-based tech loving guy who tried every trick the internet offered, and then called his American Express Platinum Card travel agent, and none of it got the fare down one cent. Then he called me. I put him in touch with one of the high-powered agents I know, and voila, like magic, the same tickets were \$3500. He saved \$3000 in a single phone call without changing the flights he wanted, just by using a travel agent. Enough said.

In Part 1 I relayed how a top travel agent was able to instantly make me Gold elite on a major airline I had never flown.

One other airline miracle top travel agents can work for you is using your frequent flier miles much more effectively than you can on your own. In fact, there are a handful of agents who do nothing but specialize in getting you seats you can't get yourself, using your miles, for a fee, relatively inconsequential, like \$250 to magically turn your miles into first class tickets to Asia. But you don't often need these special services. What a lot of good travel agents do that is even more valuable to many travelers is secure upgrades from coach fares with miles, once again, when you cannot get availability on your own. My same Hawaii honeymoon friend was ready to fork out actual cash for business class seats to Australia last year, and his travel agent actually

talked him down and was able to upgrade coach seats on Air New Zealand with his United miles (he had already tried). He saved thousands.

Finally, if you are considering around-the-world or regional “circle” fares with multiple stops on multiple airlines, use a travel agent. There are many online engines for booking such tickets. I’ve tried them. Call a travel agent.

Hotels: Step one of this equation is that the good travel agents know the hotels, understand the differences, and most importantly, can help you pick the right one for you. Here’s an example: in Rome, some people love Waldorf Astoria’s Rome Cavalieri. It has the city’s best restaurant, and a large outdoor pool, and a secluded resort-style feel. It’s very popular with families or people who travel to Rome a lot and have seen all the sights. But for many first timers and hardcore urbanites, it is way too far removed for the city center, and they would gladly sacrifice the pool and sanctuary for a prime location in the middle of the action, like the Hassler. It is very easy for a travel agent to explain such differences to you at no cost, very hard for you to figure out on your own, and even if you do, there is no upside.

In fact, once you get beyond selecting the hotel, chances are it will cost you more to book it, or you will get less for the same price. This is especially true at luxury hotel brands that typically do not discount below their own web advertised lowest prices like Four Seasons, Mandarin Oriental and Peninsula. The travel agent may get the same rate as you, but in many cases, they get upgrades worth a couple of hundred dollars or more per night, from room class upgrades which are significant to extras like champagne on arrival, free breakfast daily, in some cases even free meals and free spa treatments. Would you rather pay the same for a standard room as for a suite? Of course not. Or pass up a free massage because you didn’t want to call a travel agent? It makes no sense. One of the best upgrades some of these travel agents can get for their client is a bump to club or lounge floors, especially in foreign hotels, which means free breakfast, free drinks, free appetizers and desserts, all day long, plus private concierge services and a private sanctuary. Sometimes the agents get these extras because their firm has so much volume and clout, and sometimes because they belong to a top consortium of agents that

negotiates guaranteed benefits en masse, the most notable of which – by far – is [Virtuoso](#).

1. “We get upgrades and benefits typically worth \$250 per night or more at hundreds of top luxury hotels,” said Anne Scully. “But what I personally do is make sure that when my clients arrive in Paris or London at 8 in the morning from the States and it feels like 1AM, their room is ready then – with breakfast laid out in it.” Personally I have arrived exhausted many times at some of the top luxury hotels in Europe in the early morning hours to be told my room would not be ready for three or four hours. Then again, I don’t have the GM’s number in my phone.
2. “It’s about having the best possible experiences, from hotels to guides to special access, and having everything exactly the way you like it. But at the end of the day, you also will save a lot of money.”

Amen.

[In my final installment](#), I will explain how to find one of these superstar travel agents you can call your own.

How To Find A Superstar Travel Agent (Part 3)

In [Part 1](#) and [Part 2](#) I explained in detail why you need a travel agent and how your trips will be both better and cheaper once you start using a good one.

But the key is using a good one. There are plenty of travel agents out there who know a whole lot more about travel than I do.

Unfortunately, there are also plenty who know less. How can you tell the difference?

Some travel agents have “advanced degrees,” the most commonly used being the CTC or Certified Travel Counselor. While this does require some actual study and homework, the most impressive thing about the title is that it requires 5 years of full time industry work, which at least helps separate the wheat from the chaff and confers a level of seriousness. Then again there are plenty of bad career travel agents.

As in so many things, personal recommendations are always a great place to start. If you know someone who travels a lot, or whose travel style you envy, ask them. But be aware that the best agents for business travel are not always the best for leisure travel, and vice versa.

In my opinion, the quickest and easiest way to find a good travel agent is to take a look at Virtuoso. [Virtuoso](#) is to travel agents what Relais & Chateaux or Leading Hotels of the World are to properties: an elite consortium of the best in the industry, bound together for mutual marketing benefit and clout, with high standards for membership. There are currently about 350 agencies that belong to Virtuosos, employing around 6,000 agents, or as they call them, “travel advisors.” Of course, given these numbers, not every agency is great, and certainly not every advisor, but I have a lot of years of experience with Virtuoso and to me it gives the confidence of a high quality level across the board, akin to Michelin stars for restaurants. Some agencies are one star and some three, but they are almost all very good.

Of course you do not have to be a member of Virtuoso to be a great travel agent. [When I wrote about high end cruises](#), I suggested that the very best travel agent in the cruise industry is Mary Jean Tully, President and CEO of the Cruise Professionals, and Tully has chosen not to belong to Virtuosos. But she is in the minority.

When travel magazines and trade industry publications print lists of the best and most powerful agents, many are members of Virtuoso. The agents and agencies that I routinely personally recommend to friends, including ones I use myself and have mentioned in these pieces, other than Tully, are all members of Virtuoso: Anne Scully of [McCabe World Travel](#) (VA), Leigh Sullivan of [Regency Travel](#) (TN), Chad Clark of [Chad Clark Travel](#) (AZ), Stacy Small of [Elite Travel International](#) (CA), Michael Holtz of [Smartflyer](#) (NY), and the largest of these powerhouse boutique firms, [Valerie Wilson Travel](#) are all excellent.

In addition to the fact that Virtuoso recruits and supports the very best agents in the business, they band together to extract concessions from their travel partners, which include cruise lines, airlines, a

Who's Who of the world's great luxury hotels, and the very best luxury tour operators like Abercrombie & Kent, Lindblad Expeditions, and best in class superstars like [Butterfield & Robinson](#) for biking and [Micato](#) for safaris. When it comes to hotels, it is easier to name a great one that belongs to Virtuoso than one that doesn't: Peninsula Hong Kong? Check. Four Seasons George V. Check. Hassler? Check. Twin Farms? Check. Necker Island? Check. And so on for hundreds of the world's most revered hotels, inns, ranches, and lodges. When Sir Richard Branson's Virgin Galactic started selling tickets to space, it looked at the marketplace and decided to sell its seats only through Virtuoso agents exclusively, because the company knew that these agents had the expertise to convey and handle their complicated and expensive product.

So what does this mean to you? Well, every single one of these properties is contractually obligated to give clients of Virtuoso agents a special "amenity package" and these often include room upgrades, free breakfast daily, and welcome gifts like chocolate, wine or champagne, and can even include free nights, private airport transfers, club floor upgrades and free spa treatments. These amenities have a typical value of \$250 per night, and in most cases at these hotels, you are also paying the lowest rate you could find elsewhere – or less. In other words if you book it yourself, online or over the phone, it costs you money. It helps that Virtuoso agents collectively booked \$9.6 billion in travel in 2010, so the hotels have to cater to their wishes.

In any case, you can call Virtuoso's offices and after some questions, they will recommend a member agency or two. You can contact any of the agencies I recommended and have personal experience with. You can ask a friend or colleague. But whatever you do, use a travel agent.