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Are Travel Agents Back?

By MICHELLE HIGGINS

THE complimentary wine and fruit platter was sent up to Jessica Griffin and her family moments after they strolled into their roomy suite. They were accompanied by a bellhop who placed their bags near a tidy crib made up with luxurious, high thread-count sheets for Ms. Griffin's 1-year-old daughter.

The V.I.P. treatment at the Cheeca Lodge and Spa in the Florida Keys last month hadn't come with an extra cost. In fact, Ms. Griffin said, she paid about \$100 a night less than the standard rate for her room. And the deal wasn't the result of hours of tedious online research either. She had finagled her savings the old-fashioned way: through a travel agent.

"I needed recommendations and someone to steer me in the right direction," said Ms. Griffin, who opted to work with an agent after years of making her own reservations because she needed a getaway suitable for a toddler and had little interest in scrolling through endless and conflicting user hotel reviews online. "There are so many," she said. And with every site displaying beautiful pictures and tantalizing offers, "it can be overwhelming."

"I wanted somebody from a reputable agency who could say yes, you'll enjoy this stay," she said.

According to those in the travel agent industry, clients like Ms. Griffin are not alone, and are in fact helping to stanch the bloodletting the industry has experienced since the onset of D.I.Y. booking more than a decade ago. Nearly one in three leisure agencies is hiring, according to PhoCusWright, a travel research firm. And in 2011 travel agencies experienced a second consecutive year of growth; their bookings account for a third of the \$284 billion United States travel market.

This comes after years during which all signs seemed to be suggesting that travel agents would soon go the way of telex operators. And it's true that the numbers are stark: During the industry's peak years of the mid-1990s, there were about 34,000 retail locations booking trips. Today, there are 14,000 to 15,000, according to PhoCusWright. In 2009 alone, in the throes of the recession, bookings through traditional agencies plummeted by 23 percent.

But now, some green shoots. An improving economy and the corporate travel that goes with it seem to be converging with a population for whom booking travel online has become increasingly onerous and time-consuming. Just how time-consuming? Steve Peterson, the global travel and transportation leader for the I.B.M. Institute for Business Value, set out to answer that very question. In a survey of more than 2,000 travelers worldwide, 20 percent said it took them more than five hours to search and book travel online. Nearly half said it required more than two hours.

No one expects agency business to rebound to pre-Internet levels, but recent signs — like the fact that leisure travelers accounted for a 10 percent bump in sales in 2010 (a bit less in 2011) — suggest that agents can still play a relevant role. And though no one has been keeping track of the reasons travelers are turning to actual human beings, Mr. Peterson suspected it might have something to do with the drawbacks of the Web. “It’s come to a point that it’s too much information to be confident that they have the ability to book the lowest fare,” or uncover the best place to stay, he said of the respondents. “Consumers are hungry for that one-and-done shopping experience.”

As it turns out, after years of losing ground to online sites, a new breed of tech savvy, specialized and collaborative agent has emerged.

“This whole idea that I go to a travel adviser to tell me what to do — those days are long gone,” said Matthew Upchurch, the chief executive of Virtuoso, a network of more than 330 upscale agencies. A contemporary travel agent expects customers to have done their homework, he said: “You’ve done a lot of research, now how do we work together?”

Agents today also know they must set themselves apart from the Web by offering special experiences that consumers can’t easily get on their own, like after-hours tours of the Sistine Chapel, tee times on P.G.A. golf courses normally closed to the public or the ability to pull some strings to get clients into that sold-out hotel or on the next flight out when bad weather strikes.

Such services often come with fees that range widely from \$25 to book an airline ticket to \$12,000 annual retainers. But even for budget travelers, the overall experience can offer better value, as my colleague Seth Kugel found in a recent [test of agents versus online search engines](#). Agents won “nearly every time,” he wrote, “on both price (the objective part of the test) and service (what you might call the essay question). In other words, the agents suggested alternate routes, gave advice on visas and just generally acted, well, more human than their computer counterparts.”

Comfortable with technology and accustomed to information on demand, new agents respond to clients around the clock through text, e-mail, cellphone and Twitter. And when they are not inspecting new hotels or touring the latest cruise ship, they are often

blogging about recent trips or posting their photos to Facebook. Having grown up booking their own travel online, they understand the skepticism new clients may have about whether an agent can do any better and look for opportunities to wow them. Here are a handful of young, up-and-coming agents who have been identified as rising stars by trade publications, peer reviews and the agent community at large for their travel know-how, customer service and budding expertise.

KATIE BROWER

[American Express Travel](#)
Cambridge, Mass.

Age 27.

Specialty [Europe](#), particularly [Paris](#).

Planning Fee Up to \$150, depending on the complexity, applied toward the trip's cost.

Back Story Having worked with American Express Platinum card members for the last five years, Ms. Bower is used to handling complex itineraries for demanding clients, and pushing the envelope on their behalf. Take the time she persuaded a hot hotel in the Alps to waive its minimum stay requirement for a client who wanted to stay only a couple of days. "I spent countless hours and days on the phone with the property," she said. "Luckily, the effort paid off."

Ms. Brower was one of the first agents in 2007 to be hired under the American Express Travel Research Apprentice program, designed to mold young talent into experienced travel counselors. A year after going through the 12-month curriculum, which includes training on everything from customer service to booking systems, she was named an American Express Pacesetter, an award presented to the top 5 percent of performers in sales and customer service; she has received the award every year for the last three years.

On Her Radar Croatia. Affordable (compared with Western Europe), with gorgeous beaches, historic architecture, good food, "it's definitely becoming one of the Mediterranean's hottest destinations," she said.

Travel Tip The best way to get a quick shot of authentic local culture is to visit an outdoor market or grocery store. "Markets are a terrific place to see real people, living real lives, and there are tons of interesting foods and packaging to check out," she said.

JASON COLEMAN

[Jason Coleman Inc.](#)
Los Angeles

Age 36.

Specialty Cruises.

Planning Fee \$75 to \$175 an hour or clients can negotiate an annual flat fee.

Back Story By focusing on a small portfolio of cruise lines that includes Princess, Cunard, Norwegian, Carnival and Crystal, and by sailing several times a year, Mr. Coleman has come to know many of those ships intimately, sussing out everything from the must-do shore excursions to what the various cabins are like.

In college, Mr. Coleman trained for a job in theatrical production and stage management. Although his career took a very different path, he said there were many parallels between producing a show for the theater and advising travelers on their vacations. Travel consulting, he said, is just “producing an enjoyable and entertaining experience for the audience.

“For me, that means delivering a memorable and flawless vacation for my clients,” he said.

Mr. Coleman’s efforts have not been unrecognized: He was cited as one of the top 25 agents of 2010 by Travel Agent magazine; in the same year he was named the 2010 Young Professional of the Year by the American Society of Travel Agents; and last year he received the 2011 Industry Activist Trendsetter Award from TravelAge West magazine for notable achievements in support of travel agents.

On His Radar “The buzz I’m hearing for 2012 is longer, more exotic cruise itineraries, especially [South America](#) and [Asia](#),” he said. “I’ve also seen a spike in interest for British Isles and [London](#); lots of interest surrounding the Olympics this summer.”

Travel Tip Some ships have tiered decks, like a wedding cake, with lower decks that stick out the farthest, he said. If you like the sun, choose an extended balcony on the lower decks.

JULIA P. DOUGLAS

[Jet Set World Travel Inc.](#)

Chicago

Age 31.

Specialty Honeymoons, babymoons and other special occasion trips.

Planning Fee \$250 a couple or family, in addition to hourly fees for concierge services and additional research.

Back Story While working as a commercial property broker at Lloyd's of London, Ms. Douglas earned the nickname Jet Set Julia for her weekend escapes to [Berlin](#), the [French Alps](#), Edinburgh and so on. After becoming the de facto travel adviser for her friends, family and colleagues, she decided to make it her career. In 2005, she moved from London to Chicago and established Jet Set World Travel, which she describes as a luxury travel consultancy and concierge service, often surprising clients with special touches like airport transfers in Bentleys, "triple-room upgrades" and bubble baths drawn upon arrival.

She has personally visited 46 countries and is on the road at least seven days out of every month, inspecting new hotels and destinations. Next month she is off for a nine-night trip to Botswana, where she will be staying at eight safari camps to make sure they are up to snuff for her guests. "We won't unpack," she said. "Between game drives, we're moving every afternoon after lunch."

Last year, she was recognized by the Virtuoso luxury travel network with a "rising star" award.

On Her Radar Bhutan, where a new domestic airport that opened in the Bumthang Valley offers better access to more of the country.

Travel Tip "Build loyalty with an airline or hotel group so you are well taken care of," she said. "We have many Executive Platinum American Airlines clients, and the reservation agents have been with American for 20-plus years and know the traveler intimately, secure upgrades immediately, always find award availability and accommodate changes while in transit."

BETH JENKINS

[McCabe World Travel](#)

McLean, Va.

Age 24.

Specialty Latin America and Western Europe.

Planning Fee \$50 and up, depending on the trip's length and complexity.

Back Story Ms. Jenkins, who studied international relations in college, has traveled throughout [Mexico](#) and [South America](#) and toured Europe while living and studying in Madrid. Though she is the youngest agent in her office by at least 10 years, she knows how to work her travel connections to gain special access for her clients, whether it is setting up an after-hours tour of the Sistine Chapel or getting someone into a sold-out hotel.

“Challenging situations are more easily overcome, and demanding clients more easily satisfied, when you have partners on your side,” she said, noting that she always calls a hotel the day before clients check in to confirm that everything is set for their arrival and to see if they can be upgraded.

“By touching base,” she said, “I never leave any added benefit on the table that my clients could be receiving.” She was listed among Travel Agent magazine’s top 35 travel agents under 30 in 2011, and is on the steering committee for the Young Leaders Conference at Luxury Travel Expo, an invitation-only event designed to bring high-end travel advisers together with premium hotels, cruises and tour operators.

On Her Radar Adventure trips like sky diving in [New Zealand](#) or hiking [Machu Picchu](#). “So many of my contemporaries are really looking for experiential travel — to take bigger or more exotic trips before settling down,” she said. “Taking the ‘bucket list’ trips instead of saying we’ll wait until we are older to do it.”

Travel Tip When flying to Europe from the United States, book the hotel room a night early. That way, when you arrive at 6 a.m. and your body thinks it is 1 a.m., she said, you can have breakfast delivered to your room, then take a nap to avoid jet lag.

RYAN MCGREDDY

[Moraga Travel](#)

Moraga, Calif.

Age 35.

Specialty Family travel.

Planning Fees \$75 to \$300, depending on trip complexity.

Back Story For Mr. McGredy, vacation planning is not just about sending people to great places, but also imagining the most mundane details of his clients’ trips and planning around them. “That means we look at the little things that you don’t tend to think of as a traveler, like the added taxi cost of staying in this place versus that, depending on your itinerary,” he said.

With a background in Web development for Fortune 500 companies, Mr. McGredy said he, like many in his generation, believed that “things are faster, easier and a better value when you do all of the work yourself online.” But after trading some Web development work for a stake in a travel agency, he learned that there were advantages to using an agent. “Not only was I saving myself hours of searching and frustration as I tried to find travel that suited my needs and fit within my budget, but I found that all of a sudden I was being treated like a high-value customer wherever I went, with special treatment —

like free breakfast or a room upgrade when I checked in. I feel like this is something that my generation is missing out on, and so I want to focus on ways to show this world to them.”

Last year, Mr. McGredy was named the Young Professional of the Year by the American Society of Travel Agents.

On His Radar Family adventure travel. “We’re seeing a lot more of the family trip to Costa Rica or Peru,” he said. “We’re also finding with high airfares that people are seeing the value in spending a little more to take their vacation someplace exotic. Since going to [Hawaii](#) or Cancun can run you anywhere from \$800 to \$1,000 per person for airfare, many clients are opting to spend an extra \$200 to \$500 per person and go to [Australia](#), [Europe](#) or even [Africa](#).”

Travel Tip Buy travel insurance. “I know it makes me sound like the guy at the electronics store trying to push the extended warranty, but I have so many examples where it has saved clients so much money,” he said.

EMILY MEREDITH PRENTISS

[Valerie Wilson Travel Inc.](#)

New York

Age 23.

Specialty Family travel and exotic destinations.

Planning Fee \$150 a person, depending on the trip’s complexity.

Back Story Under the wing of her mentor, Kimberly Wilson-Wetty, a co-president of Valerie Wilson Travel, a well-established luxury agency in New York, Ms. Prentiss plans custom vacations for well-heeled clients looking for V.I.P. attention. Through the company’s deep-rooted connections with airlines, resorts and tour guides, she secures exclusive rates and special treatment for her clients whether it is an overwater bungalow in Bora Bora for less, a private dinner for two in an ancient temple in Cambodia or getting a family of five into a sold-out resort two weeks before Christmas.

“It is imperative to keep in touch and maintain good relationships with our representatives because they do so much to assist me and ultimately my clients,” she said.

Last year she was named one of the top 35 travel agents under 30 by Travel Agent magazine.

On Her Radar Myanmar, as a newer destination that has opened its arms to travelers. “It offers an element of mystery and romance whether visiting sacred sites, river cruising or walking through bustling markets,” she said.

Travel Tip Plan ahead for greater flexibility and better rates. “This advice seems very simple but believe it or not, sometimes even my clients think they can get a better deal by booking last minute,” Ms. Prentiss said.

LETTING SOMEBODY ELSE DO THE WORK

How to Find an Agent

Word of mouth is often best. If that fails, a number of online matchmaking services connect vacationers with experts in the place they are going or in the kind of trip they want. At Tripology.com, travelers describe their interests through online forms and then receive e-mail alerts with up to three itinerary proposals from competing agents.

Additionally, agency groups such as [Travel Leaders](#) and [Travel Savers](#) offer online databases to help you find an agent. And AmexTravelResources.com allows users to search by destination and interest for American Express agents with corresponding expertise.

Travel magazines are another place to look. *Travel + Leisure* and *Condé Nast Traveler* each identify top travel agents annually in print and online.

What to Look For

In short: someone who has been where you want to go. Agents flash various credentials around — C.T.C. (certified travel counselor), L.C.S. (luxury cruise specialist), C.L.S. (certified lifestyle specialist) — but, as Tony Gonchar, chief executive of the American Society of Travel Agents, put it, “The three-letter acronym has less influence over the reason why you’d go to one professional over another than their reputation and experience.”

It also doesn’t hurt if the agent is a member of a major travel consortium, which often has access to special negotiated rates from partner hotels, airlines or cruises. (Virtuoso, for example, offers guaranteed amenities ranging from free cocktails upon arrival to spa services at more than 900 luxury hotels.)

Keep in mind that the relationship between agents and hotels, cruise lines and other travel suppliers is a two-way street. The suppliers benefit from agent referrals and often pass those benefits on to customers. But the agents can benefit, too, with kickbacks or discounts. Nevertheless, good agents won’t risk a client’s experience on one hotel or

cruise line just because of some kickback. Feel free to ask whether and how your agent is benefiting from your itinerary.

Also, don't be shy about asking for references from past clients.

What Should You Pay?

Fees vary widely based on everything from the agent's experience to the complexity of the trip. But how much travelers pay should generally correspond to the services provided — say, \$100 or so to plan a basic weeklong vacation to \$500 or more for a major multiweek group trip with detailed custom itineraries, not including the actual cost of the trip.

There are exceptions to this rule. Bill Fischer, the New York travel agent with a famously unlisted phone number, charges a \$100,000 membership fee for his services and a \$25,000 annual retainer. Jacyln Sienna India, 30, commands a \$12,000 annual retainer for her personalized travel services, planning every detail of her clients' trips down to creating a custom soundtrack for their flight.