

- Calendar
- Print Ads
- Classifieds
- Special Sections
- Homesource
- Employment

Cloudy 32°
5 Day Forecast



home > regional news > regional news

Regional News Loudoun Fairfax Fauquier Clarke Rappahannock Prince William Classifieds Marketplace

- Regional News
- Loudoun News
- Fauquier News
- Fairfax News
- Clarke News
- Rappahannock News
- Prince William News
- State/Region
- Real Estate
- Classifieds
- Place a Classified Ad
- Marketplace
- Employment
- Business Directory
- Special Sections
- Advertising Rates
- Today's Print Ads
- About Us
- Weather

How Should You Book Your Vacation?

By Pete Peterson
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Each year more travelers are booking their vacations through online companies or directly with the airlines, cruise lines or wholesalers, and bypassing the middle person.

So who's getting the best deals? The do-it-yourselfers, or those who let the professionals handle the details? A lot depends on what you're buying and from whom, the level of expertise you bring to the table and the value you put on your time.

I once had a client who told me my price was \$50 higher than an online company's price for a \$1,200 cruise. I checked the Web site to see if a special was being offered that I could obtain for him. The price was indeed \$50 less, but the fine print said the price did not include a processing fee. Nowhere did the ad provide the amount of the fee, so I called the company.

After being on hold for 45 minutes, I was told I would have to book the trip in order to find out the amount of the processing fee. I told the customer service representative that I would not book the trip unless I knew exactly what the total price was going to be beforehand.

Because she could not provide this information, she said I would have to talk to the accounting department and promptly disconnected me while transferring my call. (I can't imagine trying to get in touch with this company about a problem late at night while on my trip.) I later found out their service fee was \$14.

My client encountered the same troubles and booked the trip with me, saying it was worth the extra \$36 for the personal service I provide and his peace of mind. Several weeks later, I found a special for his trip and got the price lowered by \$100.

Frankly speaking, you will not get this kind of customer service through companies that are more interested in quantity than in quality. There are many Internet companies that simply don't offer the personal touch – call them and you'll soon realize most of the people you talk to have never been on the trip you want to take or even seen a cruise ship. They are simply there to take your order and get on to the next caller as quickly as possible.

Yes, there is no argument that booking airline reservations online has become the way to do business. It's quick, easy and cost-effective. If a plane ticket is all you need, you can do it yourself in a matter of minutes.

Basically, a seat on an airplane is a seat on an airplane – it does not require a great deal of expertise to choose a seat for a few hours on a crowded plane. Plus, most airlines no longer pay commissions to travel agents, so agencies have to charge a service fee to help defray the cost of making the reservation for you. Nationwide, agencies charge an average of more than \$26 for this service.

Sometimes agents can find you a better deal or a special that you won't find online, but it depends on how much time you want to spend and your comfort level on the Internet.

However, if you are taking a cruise or an interesting trip to an exotic location, it's always best to talk to someone who specializes in that area. It doesn't cost you anything to avail yourself of their expertise. And nowadays, with controlled pricing, you will pay the same amount if you go through an Internet company, tour company or cruise line that you would if you use a travel agent. So save yourself the time and trouble by letting them do the work for you.

Sometimes specials are offered that cause prices to drop. I once had 10 people going on a cruise out of Baltimore, Md. Four weeks before they were scheduled to leave, I found a short-term special and got their rate reduced by \$4,500 for the group. If they had booked the cruise directly with the cruise line or Internet company, they would not have gotten the reduction.

Search Archives

Go
Advanced Search

Other TCN sites

Society Pages

As with most professional services in today's world, there are generalists, who know a little about a lot of things, and there are specialists, who have narrowed their expertise.

I am a cruise specialist. Yes, I also sell resort vacations, but I specialize in cruises. I would not dream of trying to counsel a client about a safari in Africa because it's something I know nothing about.

And one last thing – the big travel stores with many agents do not necessarily provide better service than home-based agents. In fact, often you'll find home-based agents are usually available evenings and weekends when it is most convenient for you. They are just as professional, certified and trained as the store agents. And, in my experience, the home-based agents are more dedicated to their clients.

The bottom line in purchasing your dream vacation is not to book it online. It's best to utilize the services of a trained professional who specializes in your area of interest. Find someone you feel comfortable with and who takes the time to get to know you. It's important that he or she finds something that will match your lifestyle and budget.

If he or she doesn't ask a lot of questions, can't fully answer your questions, lacks specific knowledge, recommends only one wholesaler or cruise line, seems in a hurry or is disinterested in your desires, then seek advice elsewhere.

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