

Why travel agents are here to stay

When a local tech blogger posted about her travel woes recently, the conversation about why you would use an old-school travel agent suddenly became something that South Africans wanted to talk about.

The demise of the travel agent has been a favourite topic in media articles over the past decade. Headlines like "The 10 jobs that won't survive the future", "The High Street travel agency will be dead in within five years" and "Is the travel agent dead?" used to receive lots of air time.



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In a twist of fate, today's headlines about travel agents are more a tale of survival and adaptation than death. Now we see: "Why travel agents are back from the dead", "Why are travel agents still a thing?" and "Travellers are embracing human agents again".

Here's why:

"Travel has too many variables to be simple. While an online booking tool or online travel site can capably deliver an online response to your specific enquiry, it cannot necessarily divine the right solution for your specific situation.

"If you want a travel app, booking engine or travel website to do your thinking for you and deliver multiple variables other than what you've specifically searched for – other than just letting you build a trip with a flight, hotel and car rental – you're

going to need a human to lend a helping hand,” says Otto de Vries, CEO of the Association of Southern African Travel Agents (ASATA).

Online tools cannot predict that your travel plans are flexible so if it’s cheaper to change your travel dates, you will. You would need to input lots of separate searches to get enough variables to guide your decision, and that takes time.

Get it wrong and you’ll miss a connecting flight, sit in an airport for hours or spend much more on accommodation than you would have if you travelled when there wasn’t a massive conference in town. When the airline staff strike and you’re stranded, who are you going to call? Travel happens and when it does, you’re going to want to talk to a human.

Professional hands-on expertise and knowledge

The 21st-century travel agent cannot be replaced by an online travel site. This is a travel professional who has the expertise and knowledge to understand intimately what their traveller needs, preempts any pain points along the journey and strives to reduce these. And yes, sometimes they’re actually cheaper than going direct, even if nothing goes wrong.



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“We get preferential rates from suppliers that are cheaper for clients than the suppliers’ rates on their website. Knowing the logistics, we can find the cheapest and quickest routes,” explains Sandra Devoti, general manager at Giltedge Travel.

When you’re pressed for time and have only two weeks’ holiday, the last thing you need is to lose a day because you’ve made the wrong decision.

We’ve had clients who have booked their own bush and beach safari and didn’t know there’s a flight connection between Nelspruit and Livingston, or Nelspruit and Vilanculos, so they return to Johannesburg and waste a day of travel,” says Devoti.

And if there’s an emergency, knowing there’s a reliable accredited travel company on hand to help at the end of the phone provides a great deal more peace of mind than bits and bytes. Would you pull a tooth because you’ve seen how to do it on YouTube?

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