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HOW TO BE THE
WORLD'S
SMARTEST
TRAVELER

(and Save Time, Money, and Hassle)

CHRISTOPHER ELLIOTT

NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC TRAVEL EXPERT

HOW TO BE THE
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CHRISTOPHER ELLIOTT

 NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC
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Introduction

Let's get one thing out of the way: I'm *not* the world's smartest traveler.

As *National Geographic Traveler* magazine's reader advocate, I've been helping solve your vacation problems for more than a decade. I'm an inveterate traveler, having spent the last four years crisscrossing the United States with my family, and many years before that exploring the world on my own.

But simply traipsing from point A to point B didn't turn me into a travel genius. Neither did the thousands of cases that crossed my desk as a magazine ombudsman. Instead, with each refund I secured and every botched reservation I helped repair, I learned what *not* to do when I'm on the road.

I have you, my readers, to thank for that education. I'm beyond grateful. Now it's time for a little payback. In this book, I'll show you ...

→ **HOW TO SAVE TIME.** Whether you're planning a honeymoon or a business trip to close a deal, time is a finite and precious commodity. The travel industry likes to waste yours by making you stand in line, wait on hold, or read pointless form letters. I'll show you my favorite shortcuts.

→ **HOW TO SAVE MONEY.** Let's face it, no one likes to overspend. I'll tell you when you don't need to shell out more—and when you should. I'll also give you a heads-up on where the bargains can be found and I'll disclose which ones are too good to be true.

→ **HOW TO PREVENT HASSLES.** From onerous contracts to come-ons by opportunistic timeshare salesmen, the last thing you want when you're traveling is to be harassed. I can show you how to avoid these annoying roadblocks.

I've spent my career covering an industry that's perfected the art of separating you from your money. *How to Be the World's Smartest Traveler* is the antidote to a business that has lost its way, too often relying on customer-hostile policies and junk fees to eke out an undeserved profit. I'll explain precisely how the travel industry takes your hard-earned vacation dollars and time from you and then coughs up a substandard product.

You deserve better. I'll help you get it.

Use this book to plan and enjoy your next trip. If you do, you'll vacation like the world's smartest traveler.

How to Use This Book

Think of *How to Be the World's Smartest Traveler* as a survival manual for your next trip. Everything that can possibly go wrong, from misspelling the name on your ticket to falling for a scammy timeshare pitch—it's all here. The wisdom I'll offer in these pages is focused on keeping you out of trouble and surviving your trip with your health, dignity, and bank account intact.

You can read *How to Be the World's Smartest Traveler* in two ways. Either review it from cover to cover, and learn about common mistakes and solutions at each step. Or turn to this book when you're in trouble, find your travel problem, and fix it.

- Most chapters start with a **decision matrix** to help you figure out if the chapter applies to you. If it doesn't, just skip it.
- Look for the **Smart** and **Not Smart** boxes throughout the chapters. These are quick tips that you can use right now to improve your trip.
- Throughout the book, be on the lookout for the **Problem Solved** headers. They're real travel problems I've helped mediate.

If you're reading this as an ebook, I recommend downloading it on your reader, tablet, or phone before your next trip. When you're in trouble, type the keyword or phrase that describes the problem to find a fast and authoritative answer. I've also included an appendix with the contact information for most of the large travel companies mentioned in this book. For some truly subversive bonus information, including the names and email addresses of managers at these companies, check out my website at elliott.org/contacts.

If you're a seasoned traveler, I'm sure you'll find most of the information in *How to Be the World's Smartest Traveler* incredibly useful. But some of the material, particularly in the first few chapters, may also seem to be laughably commonsense advice. I'll be honest; I'm laughing with you because I wish it wasn't necessary to share these strategies. I wish everyone *knew*. But my years of advocating for customers—and making so many of these mistakes myself—tells me otherwise.

Also, some of the tips, especially when it comes to problem-solving advice, overlap with advice in other chapters. That's because some of you will read the sections separately when trouble rears its ugly head. I want all the information to be *right there* when you need it.

By the way, if this book makes you want to stay home, I don't blame you. While most trips are incident-free, some are not. I'm a realist. I'm not going to apologize to a travel industry that too often tries to put a positive spin on everything for telling you the truth about what could happen. If you don't go on your next trip with your eyes wide open, then what kind of consumer advocate would I be?

**PART ONE:
BEFORE YOU GO**

Find the Most Reliable Travel Advice

The truth about online reviews, guidebooks, and what your friends won't tell you about the travel advice.

Where should I go? Stay? Eat? If you're having trouble sorting it all out, take a number. Thanks to the proliferation of blogs, social media, and user-generated review sites, we're drowning in information. And while it's hard to know what's authoritative, that shouldn't stop you from trying. I'll help you make sense of it.

A little knowledge can be a dangerous thing

Many of the dominant online review sites, such as TripAdvisor and Yelp, position themselves as definitive guides to everything from accommodations to shopping. Other sources, such as blogs and guidebooks, would have you believe they're one-stop resources for travelers who need to know the "best" hotel, restaurant, or destination, and would just as soon skip the comparison shopping.

But make no mistake: Consulting just one site can be a serious error. Any single source—and that's especially true of user-generated sites where travelers write the reviews—is prone to manipulation by innkeepers, restaurant owners, and reputation-management operatives. (For more on how reputation management works, check out my last book, *Scammed: How to Save Money and Find Better Service in a World of Schemes, Swindles, and Shady Deals*.) On top of that you'll need to factor in the inevitable instances of plain old bad judgment on the part of some reviewers. When it comes to travel, you simply can't place all your trust in a single source. Instead, you have to use multiple resources to triangulate the truth. Don't worry, I'll explain.

What's out there?

- **Guidebooks**, such as Fodor's, Lonely Planet, and, ahem, National Geographic, are printed-on-paper books written and researched by professional travel writers. Some of the information in these guides may also be available online or as ebooks. These have traditionally been the go-to source for travelers. Also, articles in mainstream media publications such as *National Geographic Traveler* can be excellent resources, although they often focus on just one aspect of a destination or experience.



SMART TRIANGULATE A TRAVEL RECOMMENDATION.

Facts have to be verified by at least three independent sources when you're a journalist. The same rule applies to travel recommendations. Don't put all your money on one review from a single source, or even on many reviews from one source. Ideally, you'll want to make sure three sources that are independent of one another confirm the review.

- **User-generated review sites**, such as TripAdvisor and Yelp, are free crowdsourced guides that you can find online. They are relatively new, in comparison to guidebooks, and are still

developing and evolving as credible sources.

- **Social media sites**, such as Facebook and Twitter, connect you to your friends and colleagues, but they can also put you in touch with a broader community of travelers, who might offer reliable and customized advice.
- **Word-of-mouth recommendations**, often the source of the best advice you can find.

GUIDEBOOKS

Printed guidebooks have seen better days. (A little ironic that I should be writing this in, of all places, a travel book.) But guidebooks can still be an excellent resource for your next trip. Spend a little time on *Amazon.com*, *BN.com*, or at your local bookstore browsing through the guidebooks still being published. Look for the following qualities:

- **UPDATES.** When was the last time the book was updated? Always check the copyright date. Did the publisher simply slap a new date on the cover or did it revise the entire manuscript? Updating only the cover is a time-honored guidebook trick that serves to line the pockets of the publisher. The best way to tell is to look at the previous version and, perhaps, to read some of the reviews of an individual guidebook or a guidebook series on a book retail site like *Amazon.com*.
- **FOCUS.** Does the guide cover the aspects of a destination that interest you most? For example, if you're retired, you probably won't want a *Let's Go* guidebook on your next trip to Europe; that series is written for students. If money is no object, you might prefer a Luxe guide to a Rick Steves tome.

NOT SMART BRANDISHING YOUR GUIDEBOOK WHEN YOU'RE ABROAD.

Not only does the guidebook peg you as a tourist—making you an easy mark for any number of crimes—but it can also distract from the enjoyment of a destination. Visitors who obsessively consult their guidebooks risk missing the best part of their vacation: the spontaneous experiences no book can anticipate. (Of course, that doesn't apply to *this* book.) Most guidebooks are available as ebooks, which you can download to your tablet or smartphone before leaving home. Still, don't forget that electronic devices are tempting targets for thieves the world over, so hold on tight to that iPad.

- **CREDIBILITY.** Look for guidebooks that at least give a nod to ethics. For example, writers for the Moon series “don't accept free goods or services in exchange for positive coverage”; nor does money buy inclusion in the guides. Too often, guidebooks rely on an army of underpaid—or unpaid—contributors who write only about hotels and attractions that offer them free stays, services, or products. It offers them a powerful incentive to write about those businesses in flattering terms and to ignore other deserving places that refuse to play the game.
- **A CAUTIONARY NOTE ABOUT MAINSTREAM TRAVEL PUBLICATIONS.** A magazine or newspaper travel section is a smart place to consult for vacation ideas, since many publications don't accept

articles based on sponsored trips. However, don't make the mistake of booking a trip based solely on the word of a professional journalist, no matter how prestigious the publication. Good travel reporters pride themselves on providing useful, objective content, but like anyone else, they have their own perspectives that may or may not match your tastes.

What about “star” ratings?

The best known of the American ratings are the American Automobile Association (AAA) Diamond Ratings. These reflect a combination of overall quality, range of facilities, physical attributes, and level of services offered. These can be useful in identifying first-rate hotels and restaurants—so-called “five diamond” establishments. For the rest of us, the “AAA Approved” sign out front signals a minimum standard of cleanliness and service.

Outside the United States, star ratings are sometimes regulated by the government or an industry group, and they have a more specific meaning. Any ratings system based on a clear, consistent, and easy-to-find methodology is more credible than something cobbled together willy-nilly online. More on that in a moment.

USER-GENERATED REVIEW SITES

“Should I trust user-generated reviews?” is a question I hear a lot. The short answer is: not entirely. For the purpose of exploring how they can be used to make more informed booking decisions, I'm dividing user-generated reviews into two general categories: forums, or sites that don't use any discernible methodology to review and rate a travel product; and review sites, which use a numeric or star rating.

Should I turn to a forum for help or advice?

Forums such as Lonely Planet's Thorn Tree (lonelyplanet.com/thorntree) or FlyerTalk (flyertalk.com) are unstructured: In general, they aren't organized around a particular cruise ship, individual hotel property, or restaurant. Instead, they're loosely grouped by topic or destination and follow a discussion thread based on the poster's personal interest.

These sites predate the blogging revolution, and were, originally, helpful places to post questions and get a fast answer from one of your peers. To some extent, they still are helpful, but because of the way these sites are structured, they also have some inherent weaknesses.

→ **THEY'RE SOMEWHAT RANDOM.** If you're looking for information about a particular product, you have to sift through a lot of posts to determine what's relevant to you.

→ **THE TROLLS OFTEN RULE.** Perhaps the most disappointing aspect of forums is that the discussions often devolve into name-calling and negativity. Contributors who actually want to help and have meaningful information to share are too often drowned out by angry know-it-alls.

→ **THE INFORMATION IS SOMETIMES INACCURATE.** Finally, there's the problem of fact. Most of the information is highly subjective—one person's opinion versus another person's. It's like a guidebook, minus the research.

No effort is made to verify any of the content on these forums, so you can never be entirely sure about accuracy. For this reason, I would advise extreme caution in using or believing anything you find in a forum. The information may be fact, but then again, it may be fiction.

How about review sites? Aren't they believable?

Sort of. Yes, these sites are organized around some sort of quantifying system, awarding star or number ratings in ascending order based on quality. But no, the reviewers are not verified and they often remain anonymous. Even though sites such as TripAdvisor and Yelp do their best to convince us that they comb through their reviews looking for fakes, they often miss the bogus write-ups and delete the real ones. The sites operate on the assumption that because they have so many reviews, and the ratings look legitimate, their credibility can't be challenged. That's wrong.

How about the star ratings used by some online travel agencies?

Some online travel agencies where you can book travel products, notably Hotwire and Priceline, use aggregate "star" ratings based on their own reader feedback and user-generated reviews to classify hotels. This is particularly important for sites like Hotwire because when you book through them, you're buying an anonymous star-rated hotel. The sites don't generally reveal the name of the hotel—only its star rating and location—before you make a nonrefundable reservation.

Although the sites claim to use a methodology in compiling their ratings, the classifications are too often called into question by travelers. These are, by far, the least credible of the user-generated reviews, and while the travel sites that publish them almost always stand behind them, in the sense that the nonrefundable purchase you made based on the rating really *is* nonrefundable, the online agencies can't always tell you how they came up with a particular rating.

Should I just ignore the reviews?

No. The reviews, like the blog and forum posts, are just single data points. Individually, the recommendations are not reliable, but put them together and they may guide you to a reliable recommendation. Here are some methods used by smart travelers to distinguish the true from the false.

→ **DISREGARD THE TOP AND BOTTOM 5 PERCENT OF THE REVIEWS.** Assume that the top reviews are written by employees or relatives of employees and that the bottom 5 percent are penned by competitors. The rest are probably submitted by real travelers.

→ **WEED OUT THE ONES YOU'RE LIKELY TO DISAGREE WITH.** If someone posts a favorable review about a restaurant or hotel you're considering, check the person's previous posts. If that same person has reviewed another establishment you've been to, and you disagree with what they've written, odds are good that you'll also have a problem with the current assessment.

→ **LOOK FOR SUSPICIOUS FLAGS THE "ALGORITHM" MISSED.** The review sites' vaunted fraud-detection

algorithms—programs designed to identify fake reviews—are deeply flawed and often unreliable. If you see an obviously suspicious account (for example, someone who only posts once with something very positive or very negative), then ignore the advice—it might be bogus.

→ **WATCH FOR A REACTION FROM THE BUSINESS.** If a hotel or restaurant responds to negative review in a responsible and non-dismissive way, it's hard evidence the owners care what customers think and will try to do better. That's a good sign.

→ **USE COMMON SENSE.** If something looks too good to be true, it probably is too good to be true. (Brace yourself: I'm gonna say that a few times in this book.) Sure, it's well-worn advice, but you would be surprised at how often common sense and reason go out the window when you're researching your dream vacation.

SOCIAL MEDIA SITES

Social networks are only as helpful as the people who are on them. So, you might have a sizable network of Facebook friends or an impressive Twitter following, but if nobody has any firsthand travel experience of the kind you're seeking, you'll be barking up the wrong tree. On the other hand, on a smaller social network like LinkedIn or Pinterest, a few travel-savvy buddies can offer up a trove of useful advice. Bigger isn't always better.

Generally speaking, here's what you'll find on each network:

→ **FACEBOOK.** As a stand-alone network, Facebook isn't the first place I would turn to for travel information. However, combined with an application like GoGoBot (gogobot.com), which lets you exchange vacation information and travel photos across Facebook, it can be leveraged into a powerful tool for exchanging travel tips. Facebook also allows you to search for a subject by hashtag (#), making it easier to find related posts. Try posting something using a travel-specific hashtag to get responses from others in your network.

→ **TWITTER.** Even if your network lacks travel-savvy followers, fear not. You can build a fairly quick list by following Twitter's sanctioned travel experts (twitter.com/who_to_follow/interests/travel), or by tracking the hashtag #travel and then following the most influential users. After a while, Twitter will begin suggesting other travel-related accounts to follow. Use a more specific hashtag to find users at your destination. So, for example, if you're visiting Orlando, try searching for and using #Orlando in your tweets.



SMART LOOK FOR INTEL THAT CAN MAKE YOUR STAY BETTER.

Say you find a hotel that everyone “loves” except one guest, who claims there's a problem with street noise. Why not use that information to request a quiet room away from the street? Or, if you're a light sleeper, use that comment to rule out a reservation at that property. Also, pay close attention to reviewer-posted photos, which are more likely to show the true look of a hotel than the glossy professional pictures on a property's own website.

→ **LINKEDIN.** Although LinkedIn is known as a network for professionals, it contains some valuable content for travelers, including a forum for frequent travelers ([linkedin.com/jetbiztravel](https://www.linkedin.com/jetbiztravel)). It also has added travel-specific “influencers,” including yours truly, who contribute occasional stories.

→ **GOOGLE PLUS.** Google Plus, Google’s social network, is known for its travel photography. Also, check out Google’s communities (plus.google.com/communities), which can introduce you to other travelers, no matter where you’re planning to go.

→ **PINTEREST.** It’s easy to get lost among the boards on this photo-heavy social network, but staying focused on the “travel” category (pinterest.com/all/travel) will lead you to other like-minded pinners. Pinterest is great for window shopping for a beautiful destination, but as for exchanging ideas and tips, it’s probably the least useful of the major social networks.

Travel blogs

As with social networks, you don’t want to base your purchasing decisions on a single blog or blog post. Instead, use the information you find online as individual data points that can, collectively, lead you to an informed decision. Although there’s no shortage of destination blogs or websites that focus on a particular place, there are relatively few credible sites that cover travel from a consumer perspective. Be particularly wary of blogging networks for frequent travelers or cooperatives that host multiple bloggers, many of which are set up primarily to sell affinity credit cards that allow you to earn loyalty points with each purchase. Their advice may be tainted by commercial interests and could be misleading.

WORD-OF-MOUTH RECOMMENDATIONS

It probably goes without saying that the most credible advice often comes from a word-of-mouth recommendation from someone who knows you. But I’ll say it anyway. It could come from a travel agent (a subject covered in [Chapter 2](#)) who’s had a chance to get to know you based on a prior working relationship, or from a friend or relative or colleague or neighbor. This is not the same thing as advice typed into a PC or phone, and shared online (people say the darndest things on the Internet, don’t they?).

Although word-of-mouth advice may have the most value when it comes to making travel-related choices—at least according to researchers—not all person-to-person advice is created equal. A few questions to ask before considering any such advice:

→ **WHEN DID THE PERSON LAST VISIT THE PLACE IN QUESTION?** Destinations change, and often the recommended restaurants and attractions of yesteryear are no longer there—or worse, they’ve turned into just a pale shadow of their formerly great selves. Make sure the advice you’re getting isn’t from the 70s.

→ **HOW WELL DOES THE PERSON KNOW YOU?** This may seem obvious, but it’s worth underscoring. If it’s a close relative or friend, chances are good that he or she will know what you might like and, more important, what you *dislike*. An acquaintance or a co-worker might not know that

you have a peanut allergy, don't like hot weather, or that you love spicy Chinese food. Be prepared to take some of that person's well-meaning advice with a grain of salt. Better yet, without making too much of it, briefly clue the person in on some of your interests and quirks.

NOW WHAT?

By now, you should *know* who knows the most about the place you're visiting. You've collected tips from guidebooks, the Internet, your social network, your travel agent, and your immediate circle of friends and relatives. Let's rank the advice in order of credibility.

1. Word-of-mouth advice from a close friend, relative, colleague, or trusted travel adviser.
2. Personal advice from your social network.
3. Advice from someone within your social network who lives at the destination or has recently been there.
4. Published advice, either in a guidebook or from a professional reviewer, such as AAA.
5. Advice from a blog or travel publication (in which the writer is named).
6. Anything written on a forum where anonymous posts are allowed, or anything from a user-generated review site.

What if the advice is no good?

If you have a problem with the advice given to you by a travel agent or a friend, you can go back to that person and complain. A guidebook author (or more likely, the publisher) can be contacted and offered constructive criticism to avoid inaccurate or incomplete advice in future editions. But once you enter the domain of anonymous reviews and forums, you're on your own. You can't ask TripAdvisor for a refund. Your only option is to leave a negative review for the hotel or restaurant, and that may be removed. If you do opt to post a negative review, try not to rant. It upsets the fraud-detection algorithm.

I'm here. Who do I believe?

So far, I've focused on the pre-trip information you need to make an informed decision. Many smaller decisions will be made on the fly, with the help of some or all of these resources, plus a few others. There's nothing quite like asking a local to recommend a favorite bakery or restaurant. Or is there?

→ **A PERSONAL FRIEND OR A FRIEND OF A FRIEND.** A local who knows you and lives in the place you're visiting is generally the most reliable source of information. If you know someone in town who knows someone—in other words, if you have a friend of a friend—then you might be in luck. They're far less likely to offer bad advice, because they're accountable to someone.

→ **A CONVENTION AND VISITORS BUREAU OR TOURIST INFORMATION CENTER.** These visitor centers, usually located close to the major attractions, can offer reliable tips, maps, brochures, and information about attractions that may not be available online. But not always; often, they recommend only the services of "members." Also, not all information centers are official.

Orlando, for example, has more than a few fake “visitor” centers that offer misleading or incomplete information to tourists. How do you tell the difference? Both Twitter and Facebook will “verify” real tourism sites with a check mark, and these in turn often list the locations where you can find more information. Fake “information” centers also practice a hard sell, hawking event tickets or theme park admissions.

→ **YOUR HOTEL CONCIERGE.** Many hotel concierges will offer unbiased advice, as well as other services, to hotel guests. But don’t count on it. Concierges are sometimes offered kickbacks from establishments they recommend. How do you know they’re on the take? If they give you a card that promises you a discount or a free drink or appetizer, odds are the restaurant is using it to track the referral.

What if I received misleading advice while I was at a destination?

Because you’re there in person, you have more options than when you’re researching a place online. You can go back to that friend and say the restaurant was awful or the museum was boring, but the feedback loop is most effective when you’re dealing with a third party like a visitor center or a hotel concierge. If they point you in the wrong direction, they can be held accountable for it, and they should be. Let ‘em know you’re unhappy and don’t be afraid to ask for a supervisor if you’re dismissed.

→ **IF A VISITOR CENTER GIVES YOU BAD ADVICE:** Pay a second visit to the center and let them know you’ve had a negative experience. If the referral is from a member of the chamber of commerce that funds the center, then it should have the wherewithal to address your grievance—if not with an apology and a promise to do better (which is a given), then with a refund or a future discount. Remember, these centers often have a direct relationship with the business, and if the product or service is found to be seriously lacking, the business could lose its membership.

→ **IF A CONCIERGE GIVES YOU BAD ADVICE:** First allow the employee to resolve it—again, an apology, a partial refund, or a discount on a future purchase could be offered. If that doesn’t work, then reporting the concierge to a supervisor at the hotel, to the hotel chain, or to a professional concierge association like Les Clefs d’Or (lcdusa.org) may yield a desired result. Either way, you owe it to yourself and to future visitors to warn friends and family, as well as your extended social network, when you’re misled by bad advice. In fact, the only reason bogus “visitor” centers and crooked concierges can continue to mislead travelers is that those who are duped never bother to complain about their negative experiences.

BOTTOM LINE

Although there’s more information about travel available now than perhaps at any other time in history, it’s not all reliable. You may never be able to determine what is true and what isn’t. But by using basic research techniques and knowing which information is most trustworthy, you can make the smartest travel choices. And if you don’t, be sure to write a review so you’ll warn others.

PROBLEM SOLVED

HEY, THAT'S NO FOUR-STAR HOTEL!

QUESTION: I recently booked a hotel in Prague through Expedia.

Based on amenities and price, I chose an unnamed four-star hotel that was being offered for \$58 a night. I paid for the three rooms I needed, and then was shown the hotel name and class.

The class was only three-star. I couldn't believe it.

Thankfully, I made screen captures of the offer and the result. I immediately sent an email to Expedia's customer service department explaining what had happened. Expedia replied with a short notice saying all sales were final. I then replied that this was not an issue of wanting money back or a change, but of getting what I paid for, namely a four-star hotel.

The next response I received was infuriating. I was told Expedia was unable to verify the change in star rating. I then responded with the screenshots. In each instance, I was told to call in to discuss the matter. I told them I wanted everything in writing.

I am very unhappy at the moment. I work at Kandahar Airfield in Afghanistan, and I take my vacation time very seriously. I want Expedia to either give me the four-star hotel I paid for or refund my money immediately. Can you help?

—Albert Muick, *Kandahar, Afghanistan*

ANSWER: If you paid for a four-star hotel, you should have received a four-star hotel booking. Problem is, no one can really agree on what a four-star hotel is—or isn't. There's no high court of hotel stars, no international governing body. As far as I can tell, if I call something a four-star hotel, it is a four-star hotel.

You made screenshots? Nice work. You insisted on conducting your correspondence by email? Even better! Keeping meticulous records on your grievance can usually ensure a fast resolution, and when it doesn't—well, that's where I come in.

I'm kind of surprised Expedia shot a form response back to you, and then, after you replied, sent another one. Come on. Is anyone reading these emails?

You might have tried a brief, polite appeal to an Expedia executive. (Contact information is listed in the Appendix and in more detail on my website, elliott.org.) That might—or might not—have worked.

This is a textbook case of a traveler doing almost everything right, but still finding himself unable to reach a fair resolution. I hope this is one of those rare occasions when Expedia didn't bother to carefully read your well-crafted email.

I contacted Expedia on your behalf. It reviewed your grievance and found that a "system error" occurred when you made your reservation. You've received a full refund.

Book Your Next Trip

The real difference between an online travel agent and a person, and how to tell if you can do it yourself.

When you're planning a trip, you can do it yourself or you can let someone else do it for you. That *someone*, a travel agent, can guide you through the sometimes confusing world of travel, which includes reserving, ticketing, confirming, and then, if necessary, troubleshooting a trip. But you can also turn to an online travel agency, or click directly on a company's website, or even pick up the phone to find a deal—and still have a great trip. Confused yet? Not a problem.

When to use a travel agent:

- **WHEN YOU WANT A PROFESSIONAL** to assist you with your travel arrangements.
- **WHEN YOU DON'T HAVE THE TIME TO** pull together a complex itinerary and need a person to do it for you, or when you need someone to help you when you're on the road.
- **WHEN YOU NEED THE EXPERTISE OF AN AGENT** for a special event or trip, like a destination wedding, honeymoon, or anniversary cruise. (Travel agents' rates for this type of travel can cost more than self-booked trips. Be sure to shop around and compare prices.)

When to book travel yourself:

→ **WHEN IT'S A SIMPLE TRANSACTION**, like buying a train ticket or a round-trip plane ticket, or booking a hotel room.

→ **WHEN YOU ENJOY THE CHALLENGE** of finding the best deals on your own.

→ **WHEN YOU KNOW ENOUGH** about a destination that you don't require the advice of an expert and are willing to resolve any disputes that arise directly with the airline, car rental company, cruise line, or hotel.

Mind the jargon!

Human travel agents cringe when you refer to a site like Orbitz as an "online" travel agent. They also draw distinctions between the terms *travel agent*, *travel adviser*, and *travel counselor*. I'm not going there. Instead, I'm sticking to the basic term *travel agent* to describe a real person, and *online travel agency*, or *OTA*, to describe a website.

A *direct self-booking* means you're dealing with the company, without an intermediary. You might still have the protection offered by your credit card, but there's no middleman handling or processing the transaction. You're flying solo.

Booking through an online travel agency means you're buying travel through a third party, usually a website like Expedia, Orbitz, or Travelocity. It's similar to a self-booking, in that it's fairly automated, but there's a company acting as an intermediary. That can be helpful.

TRAVEL AGENTS 101

Human travel agents remain an excellent resource for travel information, special offers, and recommendations. An agent can either work for a large, established agency, such as American Express, AAA Travel, or Travel Leaders, or can work as a freelance agent or for a smaller mom-and-pop agency. A good travel agent will offer advice, advocacy, access, and accountability.

→ **LIVE AND IN PERSON.** Many travel agents have real offices (so-called *brick-and-mortar* agencies) with real office hours. Some agencies with retail storefronts are capable of offering services like 24-hour assistance. If you like doing business with a real person whom you've personally met, a human travel agent is a smart option. Some home-based agents work remotely, but can often arrange to meet you if you need to discuss your plans in person.

→ **SPECIALIZED ADVICE.** The best travel agents spend a career honing their expertise in a particular geographic area. Look for certificates offered by accrediting organizations such as The Travel Institute (thetravelinstitute.com), which not only certify the agent's expertise but also refer you to an agent with the know-how you need.

→ **SPECIAL INTEREST.** Chances are, there's an agent that specializes in the kind of vacation you're hoping to book. For example, if you're into luxury travel, you'll want to check out an agent

belonging to the Virtuoso agency network (virtuoso.com) or Signature Travel Network (signaturetravelnetwork.com). Other agents specialize in disability travel (look for membership in the Society for Accessible Travel & Hospitality).

How do I choose the best travel agent?

→ **ASK FOR REFERENCES.** A competent travel agent should be happy to provide you with a list of other clients and their phone numbers. The agent may have to ask for permission from them before handing out their contact information. At the very least, travel agents should be able to offer credible testimonials from past clients.

→ **VERIFY PROFESSIONAL MEMBERSHIPS.** Most reputable travel agencies belong to either the American Society of Travel Agents (ASTA) or the Association of Retail Travel Agents (ARTA). These memberships signal that your travel agent pledges to adhere to certain basic ethical and business standards.

→ **LOOK FOR ACCREDITATIONS.** Two main “degrees” are used to certify travel agency expertise. The Certified Travel Associate (CTA) designation is for agents in sales, customer service, and communication, and requires little previous experience. The Certified Travel Counselor (CTC) designation is for agents with at least five years of experience and focuses on leadership, business development, and management skills. If your agent has a CTA or CTC designation, it’s a good sign.

→ **AND MORE ACCREDITATIONS ...** If you are considering a cruise, the Cruise Lines International Association (CLIA) is the primary accreditation organization. It certifies members based on years of experience, comprehensive testing, and ship visits. The Accredited Cruise Counselor (ACC) is the first step, followed by the Master Cruise Counselor (MCC), and then the Elite Cruise Counselor Scholar (ECCS). ASTA also certifies agents for specific destinations (Destination Specialists, DS) or for specific lifestyles like gay and lesbian or senior/mature adults (Lifestyle Specialists, LS).

→ **ASK TO SEE THE SELLER OF TRAVEL NUMBER.** Many states require all sellers of travel to register with the Attorney General’s office and to display the registration number on all advertising. That’s no guarantee that the company is reputable, but a lack of a valid registration can mean trouble.

→ **CHECK THE BBB RATING.** Individual travel agency businesses are often rated by their customers on the Better Business Bureau (BBB) site. While BBB ratings can be manipulated, and in my experience often favor the business, a low or failing grade can be a red flag. Note: Just because an agency doesn’t have a BBB rating, doesn’t mean it is in any way suspect. After all, you have to pay to belong to the BBB.

→ **CHECK YOUR GUT.** If you feel “off” or just disconnected from the agent, look elsewhere. You are preparing to spend a lot of money, and you should feel good about the agent you’ve chosen.

How do I know if an agent isn't right for me?

- **NO COMPRENDO.** Some agencies cater to a specific market or niche. If the storefront is in another language, and the people at the reception don't speak your language, you've probably stumbled into one of those businesses. These niche agencies, which often cater to large immigrant communities, may offer amazing deals on "bulk" airfares to certain destinations, so don't dismiss them. Use your high school Spanish and save!
- **THE AGENT DOESN'T LISTEN.** Travel agents work for you, so when one doesn't listen to your wants and needs and tries to book a vacation that isn't right for you, maybe it's time to look elsewhere. (See "How is my travel agent compensated?" below.)
- **THE AGENT IS "CERTIFIED" THROUGH AN ORGANIZATION YOU DON'T RECOGNIZE.** Some unscrupulous organizations allow anyone to buy a certification without any training or knowledge. If you see a certification you don't recognize, find out if anyone can buy their way into the program. If that's the case, don't walk away—run!

How is my travel agent compensated?

A travel agent's advice isn't free, even if you don't pay anything for it up front. It helps to understand how your travel agent is compensated.

- **BY YOU.** When you buy something through an agent, you will probably pay a transaction fee of anywhere between \$50 and \$100, depending on the type of booking. This covers only a fraction of the agent's actual costs.
- **BY THE TRAVEL COMPANY.** Airlines, car rental companies, cruise lines, and hotels sometimes compensate your agent with various types of commissions and bonuses. They can range from an outright sales commission of anywhere between 5 and 12 percent (and sometimes higher) to an override bonus for exceeding a sales quota.

Is my agent telling me the truth about his or her compensation?

You can ask, and some will tell you. Others feel that their actual remuneration—at least the part that comes from a hotel or cruise line—is none of your business, and they might be offended if you bring it up. But it's important to know who pays your agent. A great agent is not a slave to commissions. That person wants happy, repeat clients who will spread the word to family and friends, leading to more business. But mediocre agents will follow the money—and chances are, you're not paying them enough.



SMART HOW MUCH IS THAT AGENT?

Always ask about the cost of an agent's services before you start planning. Many upscale agencies charge an hourly rate or a percentage of the overall sale, and a few even require a retainer. Many will charge a "plan-to-go" fee, which is often refunded when you book your travel. Such fees ensure that "tire kickers" (people who look but don't book) don't eat up valuable agent time. Find out before you sit down to plan your dream vacation.

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