

6 reasons why travel agents are not yet obsolete in 2020

Being a travel advisor has not been the most lucrative enterprise in 2020, but that doesn't mean the profession has become obsolete. On the contrary, it has never been more pertinent.



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Despite the Covid-19 pandemic, which saw borders closing and international travel coming to a standstill, travellers are still dreaming of packing their bags and escaping to exotic destinations.

And once South Africa's borders re-open and it is safe to travel again, we can expect to see more travellers turn to a professional to help them navigate the new post-Covid travel world.

Six reasons why it would be to your benefit to chat with a travel advisor in 2020:

1. Keep your travel dreams alive

Unfortunately, in 2020, a number of travellers have had to put their travel dreams on hold. A romantic getaway to Tuscany to experience the MotoGP in celebration of a 60th birthday. A European holiday with friends looked forward to for almost a year. A sentimental trip following in the footsteps of one client's parents. And a couple who had to call off their honeymoon cruising the Mediterranean (as well as their wedding plans here in South Africa).

These represent just some of the stories behind the bookings that travel advisors have helped their clients put on hold.

But by postponing rather than cancelling, travel advisors help keep clients' travel dreams alive, while forming a connection with them on a whole new level. Travel advisors have made it their mission to overcome the obstacles of amending entire itineraries, minimising cancellation penalties and keeping clients hopeful at the prospect of realising their travel dreams in the future, post-Covid.

2. Fight for your right to refunds

We have all seen and heard the horror stories of people unable to secure refunds for their holidays. Call hold times to airlines and cruise lines reportedly ran up to three to four hours, only to be disconnected.

Representing 95% per cent of South Africa's retail travel community, ASATA (Association Of Southern African Travel Agents) saw many of its members working around the clock to re-accommodate travellers, dealing with rapidly changing airline and supplier policies in the early days of lockdown.

"There is no question that South African travel agents have been exemplary in these unprecedented times, which have left them with no income for the foreseeable future and very little support from the airline community which is currently holding the monies that have been paid over for tickets not flown," comments Otto de Vries, ASATA CEO.

Despite many suppliers refusing to issue refunds, thereby putting travel advisors at the coalface of these contentious policies, travel advisors have unwaveringly fought for their clients' rights in accordance with the Consumer Protection Act.

Lara Casasola, Owner at Lara Travel, shares one such success story: "My client did not want to make use of a travel voucher. I made a personal call after hours to our airline representative and was given a waiver to refund the client in full. This was against airline policy at the time; however, this was achieved due to the long-standing business relationship established over the years."

3. Select the best destinations for 2020

Which countries have lifted travel restrictions and are once again welcoming travellers? What attractions are available? Which countries are imposing quarantines for travellers?

Travelling in 2020, and likely beyond, brings a whole set of new complications as countries continuously change and adapt regulations to accommodate the impacts of Covid-19. Having a travel advisor by your side can go a long way in making sure you make the right decisions for your next holiday. What's more, these experts have a wealth of destination information that reaches well beyond the Covid 'need to know'.

"The bright side of the pandemic is that my travel knowledge has grown extensively with all the workshops that I have been doing, Zoom training that I have been attending and travel videos that I have been watching. I hope that I get the opportunity to use all this information soon," says Saloshni Chetty, assistant manager, Checkout Travel.

4. Help you prepare for a new and different travel experience

Travel will eventually return – and people across the world will once again explore other cultures and expand their horizons. However, we can expect the travel experience to be significantly different.

Airports have become 'touchless' environments where travellers are expected to self-scan their boarding passes, wear masks and adhere to social distancing. Hotels are looking different as measures have been put in place to keep all travellers safe. Travellers could be asked to produce 'health passports' to travel to certain destinations.

The changes are endless and will no doubt be daunting for prospective travellers.

This is where the travel advisor has a valuable role to play, according to Ingrid Burger-van Pinxteren, travel designer, Kukummi Safaris. "We are putting a lot of time and effort in personal services, providing clients with information that is factually correct and guiding them through the new travel process."

5. Negotiate savings and perks on your behalf

Covid-19 has led to an unprecedented cash crunch that has left many South Africans with next to no disposable income.

The good news is that travel advisors often have access to deals that the average person doesn't. As a result of the volume in which they purchase travel and the relationships they have built with suppliers, they can often offer you valuable savings on your holiday.

6. Always by your side

It is often said that people will only realise the value of a travel advisor when 'things go wrong'. Twenty-twenty has shown us exactly how many things can go wrong. Luckily, travel advisors are natural problem solvers who are always by their clients' side.

Gisela Piercey, owner, African Twist Travel, helped her travellers get home safely when the Covid-19 travel restrictions were imposed worldwide. "I had clients staying at a very remote beach lodge in KwaZulu Natal. On their departure day, massive local protests led to a blockage of all the regional roads. It was impossible for my clients to leave the lodge. They started panicking: they were supposed to drive to Johannesburg to catch their international flight home.:

Piercey says she was immediately on emergency standby to assist them with a plan. She says: "Together with the help of the lodge staff, and almost a day of delay, the clients were eventually personally guided out of the area on back roads to their car. I had to arrange a different travel route for them to get to the next guest house and make sure that the guest house owner would still check them in at midnight.

"We stayed in WhatsApp contact nonstop along this adventurous journey. They eventually made it back home safely and were so grateful for the assistance from the lodge and myself."

The collective message from travel advisors is: keep dreaming, planning, and seeking out inspiration for your next trip. Travel will return, and with it, all those wonderfully unique memories that make travel so incredibly valuable.

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