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Do it yourself

Tell a good travel agent at your destination what you want

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'So, you're going on a package tour to Vietnam?' my friend Dave asked as he glanced over my 22-day itinerary. "Who's it with?"

"It's with me." I replied.

"You mean you went online and researched everything and booked it yourself?"

"Not exactly," I replied, "I found a good travel agent in Vietnam and let him take care of the details. I just told him how long I wanted to go for, what I wanted to do, my budget and left the rest to him."

"It must be really expensive having your own tour set up like that," Dave mused.

Actually it's not. In fact in the four trips I've taken to various places around the world it's actually been cheaper and hassle-free.

My friends tend to fall into two distinct groups: those who book an organized tour that more or less meets their needs and my more adventurous friends who simply hop on a plane and go.

I'm not comfortable with either of these models. I have a problem with organized tours since they are designed to accommodate the lowest common denominator -- you get to see and do a lot of things you might like; but then you also have to go with the group to do things that don't interest you in the least.

The alternative of just "winging it" absolutely terrifies me. I spend nights tossing and turning, dreaming of all the disasters that might befall me.

I've come up with the solution -- a tour that's designed just for me. I've employed this method on several trips; most recently to Kenya and Vietnam.

I began by researching the names of several Kenyan travel agents I found online and in guide books from my local library. I then e-mailed them asking if they would be interested in putting a package together for me.

I told each of them the amount of time I wanted to spend in Kenya and my modest budget. Based on their responses (or lack thereof) I was left with two I was more or less satisfied with.

I then used online travel tools such as the Lonely Planet's travel forums and TripAdvisor to check out the reliability of the agents. One in particular had glowing reviews, so I settled on him.

My trip was quite complicated as I wanted to do a series of things: I wanted to go on safari; I also wanted to do some scuba diving (yes there is diving in Kenya) and some R&R on the beaches at Mombasa before I came home.

My trip would be 17 days and called for stops at four different safari camps, three National Parks, two beachside resorts as well as a hotel in Nairobi. My agent also arranged all local transportation, including personal pickup and drop-off at each airport. As well he booked all my dives and arranged for rental equipment for me.

My 17-day trip cost about \$3,200 (not including airfare to Nairobi) which also included all my meals, except for two lunches. If you're not a diver the trip would have cost only \$2,700.

The closest comparable 14-day tour I could find online was about double that and in low season. Most tours were well over \$5,000 when you added in the "extras" to make them truly comparable with my custom trip. My 23-day trip to Vietnam, complete with five days of diving, cost even less.

Given all the connections and activities that were packed into my trip I fully expected there would be some glitches.

I might not be met at the airport on time; the hotel would not have a record of my reservation; or the dive company would not have the promised equipment. On each step of the trip I was met personally by a representative of the tour company and escorted to my next destination. There wasn't one single glitch or hiccup on the whole trip.

Recently in Vietnam, I had dinner with a group of tourists who were just "winging it."

Comparing our experiences, they confessed in future they'd rather go the route I took.

"We waste a lot of our precious vacation time," one of them confided.

"When we arrive at a new location we spend half a day looking for accommodations. Then it's checking out numerous local travel agencies to see who has the best local tours at the best prices; even then you end up sorry half the time on your impulse choices."

My on-site travel agent also provided me a local 24-hour phone number should I experience any difficulties -- one of the benefits of having a travel agent residing in the country you're planning to visit.

They not only know the best local deals and which of the subcontractors are most reliable, but also they can personally vouch for and stand behind their choices.

If something does go wrong they're there for you. One essential tip is to take an unlocked cellphone with you.

You can pick up a local SIM card upon arrival at the airport usually for under \$20, and it will come bundled with several hours of connect time.

Program in the phone numbers of your local tour representatives, so if there are problems, all you have to do is reach in your pocket for help.

On one of my recent trips, the driver had a heart attack and my cellphone probably helped save his life.

The other essential thing is for you to listen to and trust your chosen travel agent. At the conclusion of my trip I told him how perfect my trip was. He replied that I was equally responsible as I listened to and trusted his choices rather than second-guessing him.

Often what you see in brochures or online bears little resemblance to what you find when you finally do arrive at your destination, so you need to have someone who has actually been there -- someone you can trust -- and for my time and money, it's a good travel agent.

So, next time you're planning that special exotic vacation, instead of taking a pre-packaged tour, why not make your own package and do it "your way?"

IF YOU GO ...

- TRAVEL AGENTS:

FOR MICRONESIA, BALI, PACIFIC ISLANDS

Cindy Harris at MDA Travel in Guam

www.mdaguam.com

FOR KENYA, TANZANIA, UGANDA

Raza Visram

AfricanMecca in Nairobi

www.africanmecca.com

FOR VIETNAM

Philip Deans

Countryside travel agency

Nha Trang Vietnam

www.countrysidetour.com/

- To find the cheapest flights, check out www.kayak.com, which checks most airlines against each other and gives you the cheapest options. You can even set an alert to warn you if a cheap flight suddenly is advertised on the dates you want to travel.

It's a long trip from Canada to Nairobi. Even with minimal stopovers of only a few hours the trip will easily take 24 hours. Mombasa to Toronto took 32 hours. I strongly suggest spending a day or so in Europe (You can't fly direct to Nairobi, you have to transfer in one of the European hub cities) if your time and budget will allow.

- CELL PHONES:

Don't take your cell phone with your current Canadian provider's card installed. The roaming charges will be extremely expensive. Take a GMS cell phone that takes a SIM card. In Canada most Rogers phones take the cards; Telus phones do not. You can pick up a used GMS Motorola cell phone for about \$25. You can make this your travel

phone and use it wherever you travel. Taking your own phone will be very expensive with the roaming costs.

Make sure your phone is "open." That means you can use any service with it. Any local cell phone shop can do that for you for about \$10; or if you are computer literate you can do it yourself. Resist buying the SIM card BEFORE you travel. You can get one at the airport when you arrive -- it's a lot cheaper, and the attendant will even put the card in the phone and program it for you.

A link that will give you more information is:

http://www.telestial.com/gsm_phones.php?GSM_900=Y&GSM_1800=Y&

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