

With or Without the Travel Agent - That Is the Question

No matter how you look at it, organising your travels is always an exciting journey. These days, much of this has become a digital experience. Certainly increasing efficiency, but perhaps also taking away some of the fundamental thrill...

The travel landscape has changed dramatically over the last decade with the advent of online booking, abundant of information and review sites, GPS, and now mobiles/apps.



No doubt, the introduction of low cost airlines has also been a major game-changer. This is what truly pushed the average person to jump online and book their own flight, seeing it was so much more affordable (usually the first key component of an itinerary) and without the need to physically visit a travel agent. In doing so, this opened the door to booking all other travel options, i.e. hotel reservations, travel insurance, rental cars, trains, buses, and attractions.

And we haven't looked back since...

Do It Yourself: Efficient, Cheaper & Accessible

No argument, hitting the road and travelling is far more romantic and exciting. But in truth we always had some sort of aid along the way, i.e. reading a map, a guide book, travel brochure, TV commercial.

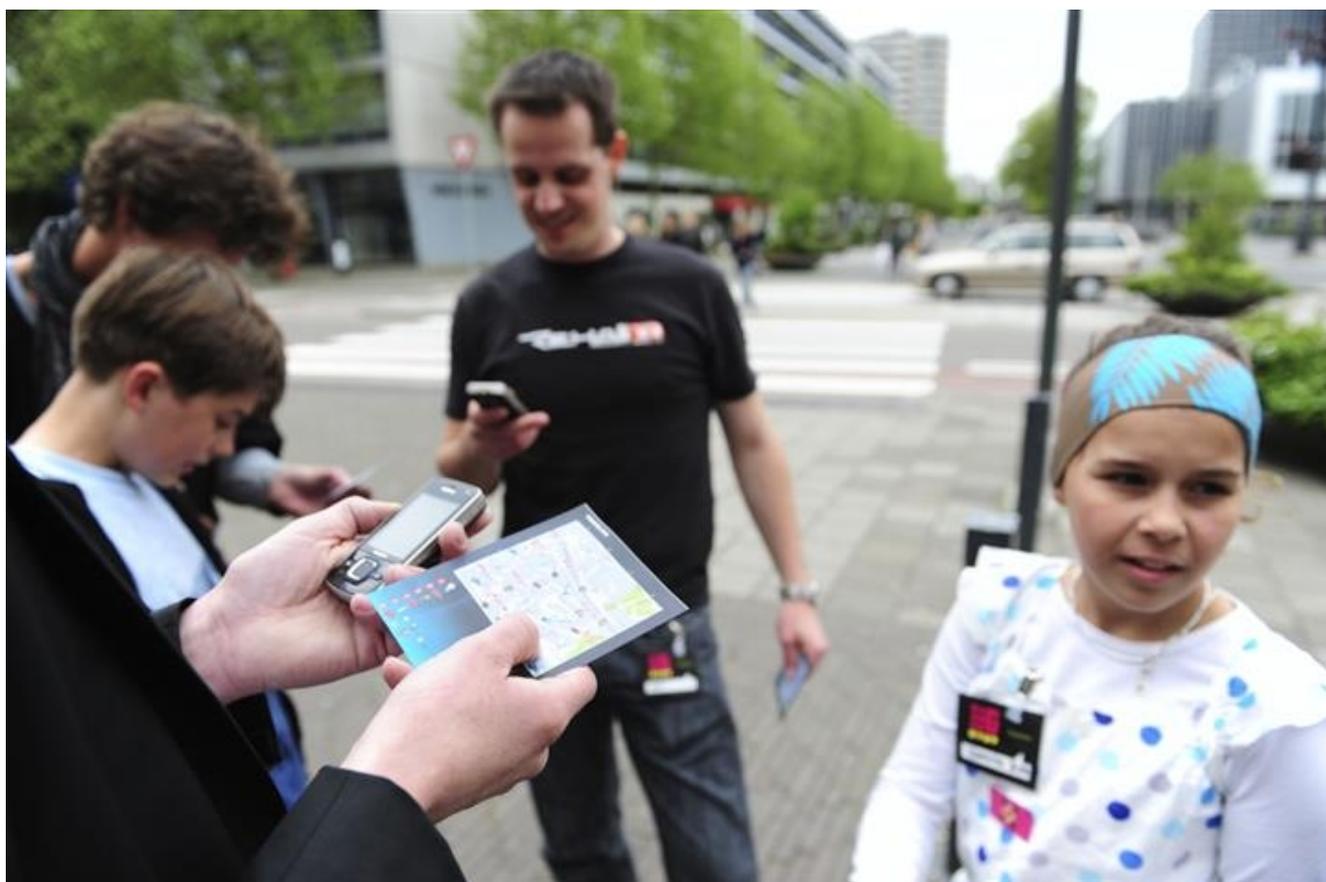
Today, the reality is booking travel options on the spot and in person, namely hotels and flights are far more expensive than pre-booking; be it online or via a traditional travel agent.

Indeed, flights increase their prices as seats become less available and close to the flying date, whilst hotels charge the highest price (sometimes close to rack rate if really busy) for walk-in guests. They want to ensure their occupancies, and not rely on last minute turn-ups.

Thus, 'Do it Yourself' travel tricks have naturally become all about having the right insights, and in turn digital multi-tasking abilities. From finding the best travel agent online - traditional and Online Travel Agent (OTAs) - to actually booking everything autonomously and separately.

"Online travel bookings have been around for ages, it's certainly not a new phenomenon. That being said, technology has matured and customers are feeling more comfortable with it. There is also more inventory online and the rise of mobile devices allows consumers to search and book wherever they are. Price comparison and meta-search allow people to feel more comfortable they are getting a good deal as well," Head of Online Partnerships, Lonely Planet, Floris Billet tells us in an interview.

The Internet has indeed given us the ability to rapidly explore travel scenarios and instantly see all the various options in front of us, easily compare and benchmark prices, value, and of course book when ready. All in the comfort of our own space and with no pressure from a sales agent.



"As for future trends, it's mobile mobile mobile! Especially for those parts of travel bookings that happen in destination, e.g. activity bookings and restaurant reservations," continues Billet

"To that end, Lonely Planet has travel booking services integrated with our beloved content right onto our website. As consumers research their trip, looking for ideas and inspiration, they can also buy travel insurance, book a flight, make a hotel reservation based on our expert reviews, rent a car, book a tour, etc.," he adds.

Tips for travellers:

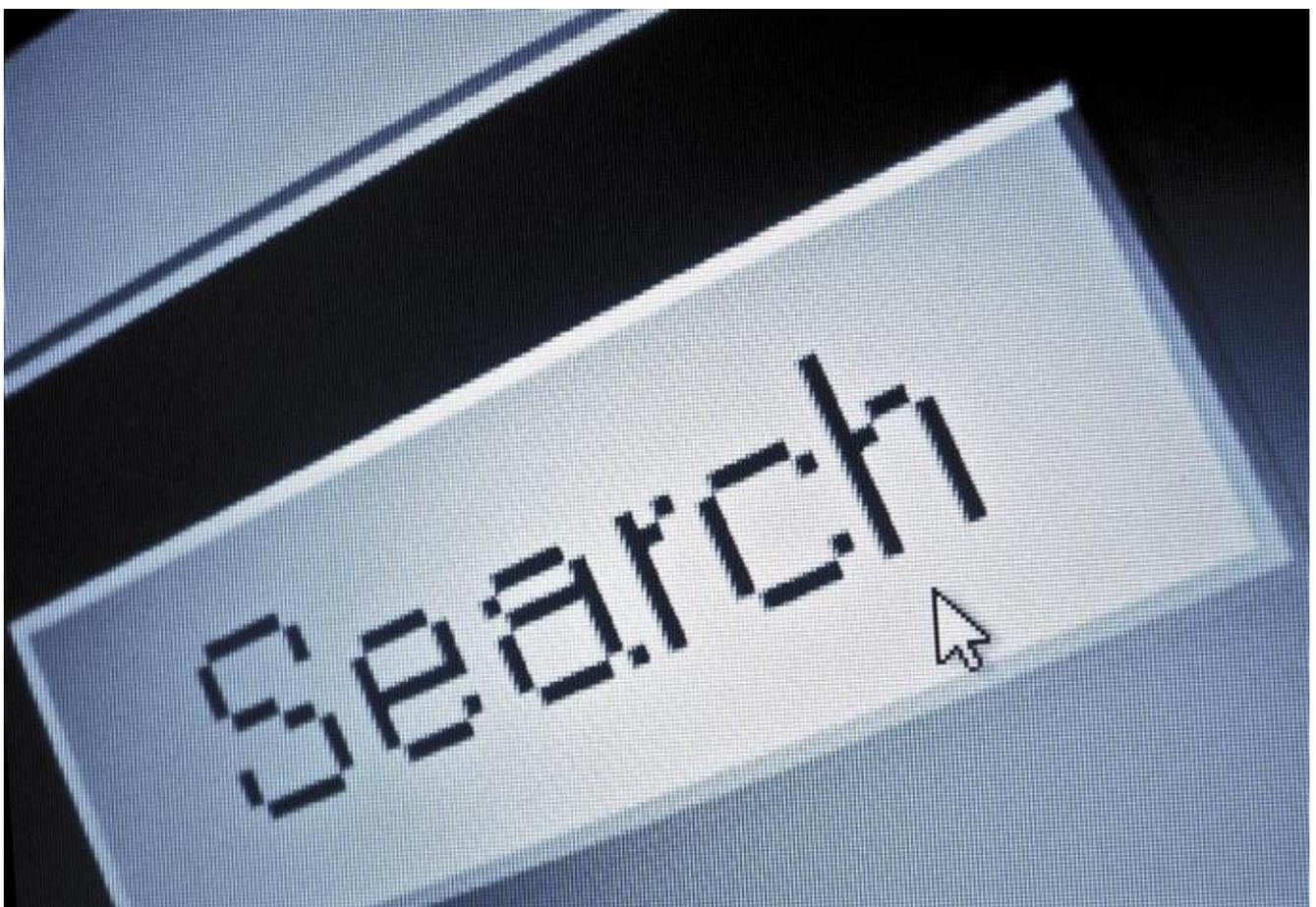
Research well in advance, and read as many reviews as possible to get the best overall idea. Using a PC can be much more efficient, as you can have multiple windows/tabs opened and switch back and forth. Book flights early. They always get more expensive as time passes. Flight comparison sites such as skyscanner.net is always a good place to start, but keep in mind not all low cost carriers are on here. Although there might be fewer options, booking your hotel the night before generally gets you the lowest possible price, i.e. last minute deals. Hoteliers rather fill their rooms at the lowest possible price (before losing money on their operational expenses), then have the room totally empty. This rule does not apply during high peak times, such as major events. Secret/mystery hotels are always a good option and usually offer best value-for-money. If you're a frequent traveller, or even only a couple times per year, purchasing yearly travel insurance usually works out much better. There are tons of options available locally and online.

Do It with an Agent: Unique, Custom & Reliable

Traditional travel agents are certainly not obsolete and still very much serve their purpose. Doing it this way can have its obvious advantages.

They provide a more personalised and tailor-made service, including specialised advice - especially important for the not-so-experienced traveller, those that have limited time to do it themselves, and in the corporate/MICE sector.

In many ways, there is too much information available online, via so many websites and applications. How do you really know where to start and which to trust? Whereas your agent is a professional and has the expertise and experience to better guide you; or consolidate information to one area.



Another flaw of doing it yourself is reliability. For instance, missing connections because a low cost carrier was delayed/cancelled, or a staying at the hotel from hell because you trusted the exaggerated descriptions, spruced up photos, or worse-still, fake reviews. Whereas your travel agent is a real person, offering upfront transparency, and dedicated support while you are on the road (well at least the good ones). No doubt, they rely on reputation in the local market, so they need to provide excellent service.

Beyond this, many travel agents have deals that you cannot normally find by 'doing it yourself', namely packaged and inclusive tours.

Of course even traditional agencies are now digital. Thus, "doing it yourself" in this regard has become about searching online and finding the best agent to handle your needs.

"In an era when information has a necessity to be instant, Top Kinisis through its digital network makes sure of that by keeping up to date with everything that has to do with the online travel environment," says Vice President, Topkinisis Travel PLC, Elena Tanou.

"Our company has had to make sure that it moved with the times knowing that everything around them was becoming digitised. The fact that people could now book their holidays online from the comfort of their home, in an era where people are always fighting against time, brought a new perspective to the travel market in general. Travel packages, hotels, flights and so on would now have to be shown clearly and booking options would have to be fast and uncomplicated," adds Tanou.

No doubt, travel vendors, especially smaller independents are now facing the challenge on how to compete and stand out, particularly when other major players - be in OTAs or larger multinational travel agencies - have so much power (i.e. in online content, resources, reach, and commercial backing). However, this should also be their strength. That they are more personalised, tailor-made, and specialised.

Tips for independent travel agents:

Focus on the advantage of being bespoke; more personalised and tailor-made. Try to offer something unique and creative in your service, differentiating from larger online travel providers. Reach your audience/market through more direct channels of communications; both on- and offline, such as social media, blogging, email marketing, and direct marketing. Focus your digital marketing communications and SEO on specific niche areas, and more on local markets. Build customer loyalty and referrals based on your unique and added-value service, and ensure others hear about this. Use personalised digital channels to better promote this aspect.

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