



Travel

Travel Editor Sarah-Kate Lynch

When the net becomes a tangled web, I'm grateful for an expert to take the hassle out of my holiday!

5 reasons to use a TRAVEL AGENT



Myanmar must-do: Take a balloon flight over the temples.

Despite being a die-hard DIY travel organiser, I caved recently while trying to put together a trip to Indochina and was delighted with the results.

1 They know A from B

When it came to planning my trip to Vietnam and Cambodia, I couldn't work out where A was, let alone how to get to B from there. Enter Backyard, a boutique Asian agency recommended by friends who'd just done a similar journey. Says Backyard expert Maeve Nolan, "A good travel agent can take you on the best insider tour of street food stalls or to meet a curator of a gallery or suggest the best restaurant." I was coordinating three people in two different countries and Backyard organised all internal flights, most accommodation and amazing sightseeing – without a hitch.

2 It needn't cost more

Sue Matson from Flight Centre NZ says agencies have better access to a total range of airfares (plus Flight Centre promises a lowest-airfare guarantee) and can package them with

accommodation for one upfront cost, so trolling the internet for bargains yourself may not end up being cheaper in the long run. And Maeve says that with busy lives, to book all services takes a lot of time. I'll vouch for that! She adds that sometimes when you DIY, there's a risk of hidden costs like extra tax, cancellation fees or – yikes – breakfast not included. The agencies also have buying power with regular suppliers so can offer competitive prices.

3 You have someone to blame

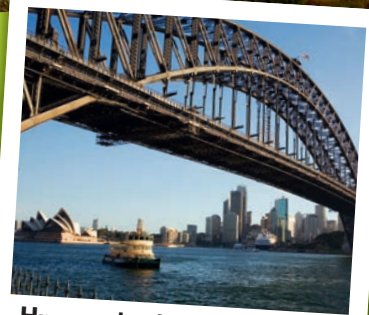
Or to put a more positive spin on it, you have someone to help when things go wrong. "It may be hard to reach anyone on the website you booked on," says Maeve, "but we're on hand 24/7 and what's even more practical is we have teams in each of the destinations we offer." We never had any problems in Indochina, but I did get in touch some days to change the itinerary for the next day, depending on what the group felt like. Susan agrees that being able to alter plans with one phone call is a huge advantage of booking with a consultant. My friend Mike swears by agents since he booked a hotel in Paris online and never again found the details, so paid but never stayed!

4 You get personal advice

Some of my best experiences have been recommended by well-travelled friends – that's why I went to Vietnam. Then when I cottoned on to Maeve, she not only gave me first-hand pointers on cocktails (she favours an espresso martini) and spring roll emporiums, she told me what attractions I could skip at a pinch and what I shouldn't even dream of skipping. This is gold when time is key. Susan says even if it's a girls' trip to Sydney, a consultant can be that well-travelled "friend", offering tips on places to eat, hot shopping spots and whether you should do a Harbour Bridge climb or a day trip to the Hunter Valley.

5 Speaking of which ...

Maeve has worked and lived in Asia for 19 years in Vietnam and Thailand, but her favourite holiday experience "would have to be taking a dawn balloon flight over the temples of Bagan in Myanmar". Another was watching fireworks over Angkor Wat in Cambodia for the millennium. Susan can't go past New York. "The atmosphere is electric, the shopping's the best and it's an amazing city with a huge variety on offer – there's nothing like it!"



Hmm ... should I scale Sydney's Harbour Bridge or sail under it and watch the world go by?



After chatting to my friend in the know, I'm all juiced for cocktail hour. Cheers, Maeve!



Bliss in a bite: The trusty travel agent directed me all the way to the ultimate spring rolls.

PICTURES: LUCINDA EAST.