

Travel agents get creative in tough times

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Travel agent Connie Ebright books packages to Africa out of her home to keep expenses down.

(AP) -- Many travel agents have left the industry since airlines cut their commissions early this year -- after already being hit hard by the September 11 terrorist attacks that seriously crippled the travel business.

But others are finding ways to be more creative in the face of increased competition from Internet travel sites such as Orbitz, Travelocity and Expedia.

Connie Ebright, an expert on African travel who claims firsthand knowledge of crocodiles and hippos, runs her business from home in Glendale, California, now. She closed another office to reduce expenses.

Ebright, an independent agent, has been booking travel packages to "the continent I love" for about eight years following a career as a fashion representative for designers.

"Things were very tough after September 11," she says. The cutback in airline commissions also hurt.

Now she makes commissions from the tour operators she represents in Africa. She recalls putting together a special package for two couples for \$35,000 per couple.

"They were pampered in luxury from start to finish." The trip included stops in London and Cape Town, South Africa, before a short flight to Botswana for the photo safari of a lifetime.

"Botswana is the heart and soul of Africa," says Ebright, whose clients stayed "in luxury tents" at safari camps owned by Orient Express hotels.

"Botswana is the only place you can do a safari in a mokoro, a small dugout canoe for two propelled by a native with a pole. You are inches above water shared by hippos, elephants, and crocodiles."

The couples went on to Victoria Falls in Zimbabwe, then back to South Africa's Kruger National Park, "the premium game reserve in South Africa," wrapping up the trip at the lavish Sun City resort for a round of golf.

Travel specialists

Ebright also is one of the agent experts listed by a relatively new Web site called Travants.com.

David Feit, 25, launched the travel site in January 2001 to bring agents and travelers together. Initially called Webeenthere.com, its name was changed to Travants.com this May. The Web site

networks about 300 "expert" travel agents, located mostly in the United States.

"Travants offers benefits to both agents and travelers," Feit says. "Wherever you want to go, we have a specialist who covers that country," he said in a telephone interview.

"And we make sure our agents are actually experts."

According to the Travants CEO, all listed agents are carefully screened during interviews and most have been in the travel business for years.

Feit believes many people aren't comfortable entering information online for automatic booking. "I don't think that complicated products like safaris can be booked successfully online."

And with airlines, tour operators and rental car companies all trying to get rid of the travel agent as middleman, Travants keeps agents at work despite the new pressures on their industry.

The American Society of Travel Agents (ASTA), a membership organization, operates a similar Web site designed to promote the travel industry in general.

Tailor-made adventures

Rebecca Falkenberry, a travel agent for five years after an academic career in urban planning, has turned her skills to putting together travel adventures for her clients at Hills Travel in St. Petersburg, Florida. Falkenberry was named one of the top agents in America the last three years by Conde Nast Traveler magazine.

"I set up a recent itinerary for two women who went down the Amazon in a boat and then wanted a side trip to Machu Picchu in the Andes," she says.

She also has arranged adventure trips and cruises for travelers to Alaska, Belize in Central America and the Antarctic. The cruise companies still pay agents commissions, she says.

"We have seen a huge resurgence in travel to Alaska and Hawaii this summer," she notes, "probably because they are still U.S. destinations and people feel safe. They're exotic and have exceptional wildlife."

Steven Goldberg, an independent travel consultant with Citinet Travel in Northbrook, Illinois, outside Chicago, calls his style "high tech, high touch."

"We have all the latest technology and we combine it with personalized service," he says.

A specialist in travel to Costa Rica and Peru, Goldberg, in the business for 25 years, arranges "tailor-made trips" for individuals and groups. He said he prepares trips "down to specific meals and very special needs. Like meditation. I once located an Imara shaman in Bolivia for a client."

'A machine cannot replace experience'

Goldberg often accompanies groups to deal with the finite details and problems that arise during a trip. "I'm there to make sure they have a really good vacation."

About online booking, he observes, "A machine cannot replace 25 years of experience. When you think about price, I'm competitive 75 percent of the time."

George Wakefield, who is an agent with the Carlson Wagonlit Travel branch in Seattle, has worked in the business since 1976, first in wholesale for a cruise line and now helping individuals plan their vacations.

"The Internet has taken a bite out of our business," he volunteers, "but travel has been rebounding lately.

"The agent works more on behalf of the customer, although now we do have to charge fees for booking flights, the only way we can make a profit without airline commissions."

Again, much of the agent's skill comes to play in the details.

"I worked on an itinerary for three people going to England who planned to hike in Yorkshire for seven or eight days. We arranged through a tour operator for the overnight stops at inns or pubs, plus we can get them an unpublished fare that saves \$200."

Access to unpublished fares give some agents another way to save money for clients, and tour operators also pay agents commissions for locating travelers.

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