



The End of Booking Online? Pandemic proved a travel agent's your best friend.

Having a trusted travel adviser in your pocket is starting to look like a sensible plan.

The internet has been such a boon for travelers. We've become adept at researching and booking trips online, scrolling through photos of hotel rooms and short-term rentals to find the most appealing; comparing prices of flights to get the best deal and directly emailing tour operators to go over details of itineraries.

Enter the pandemic. Many of us have endured the disappointment of repeated cancellations and the pain of trying to negotiate credits and refunds.

"When things go wrong, the website won't fix it for you," says Fiona Dalton, of Virtuoso Travel in Australia and NZ.

COVID-19 has made travel complicated, but it's not the only problem travelers may face in an uncertain future. The latest Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change climate report, released as Lismore disappeared under water, warns that the frequency, severity and unpredictability of fire, floods, heatwaves and drought will increase if we continue on a warming trajectory of between 2 and 3 degrees. It's happening now, not at some distant point in the future. That translates to more delays, cancellations and destinations made inaccessible by natural disasters. If you don't like bumpy flights, hang on.

And with Russia's invasion of Ukraine, we now have international conflict to factor into the risk equation.

Having a trusted travel adviser in your pocket is starting to look like a sensible plan ("adviser", not agent, being the preferred word these days.)

Travel agencies were the hardest hit of all professions these past two years. Businesses fell off a cliff, with a 90 per cent drop in revenue in 2020 as the effects of the pandemic took hold. The carnage was visible everywhere in empty shop fronts on suburban shopping strips.

The independent agency closest to me is now a flower shop. Another became a laundromat. Another is a discount designer clothing store. The travel industry lost a lot of expertise as advisers found work in other professions.

Despite having zero income and no way to plan for an unknown future, many independent advisers worked tirelessly for their clients, negotiating refunds and re-booking trips. Most did it for free.

Independent travel advisers (not those working in big retail chains) generally ask a fee for preparing itineraries or for "concierge services", such as arranging all aspects of a trip from transfers to restaurant bookings, but it's not much different to paying a financial adviser's fee. You're buying expertise. And for someone to sit on the phone for hours if necessary for you.

Fiona Dalton says the loss of jobs in the industry means airlines and other travel companies have less manpower to help customers with their inquiries (anyone who has recently been on hold waiting for customer service from an airline understands this all too well.) "Never before has human connection been so important," she says.

Virtuoso is an invitation-only collective of independent advisers from around the world, many with specialities such as cruise, family travel or honeymoons. advisers leverage their collective knowledge and the relationships developed over time with hotel GMs and tour operators to give the client a highly personalized experience. This means that if something goes wrong, there's a real person and network on the ground.

In the next year, Virtuoso clients are expected to spend three times their 2019 travel budget. Much of it is sitting there in complicated travel credits with different expiration dates. Travel advisers need to be strategists to make sense of all this, Dalton says.

I'm highlighting Virtuoso here because the collective has taken the pause in travel to emerge more proactive in encouraging good choices in conscious travel. It commissioned and released a white paper which examined the sustainable future of the

travel industry and found 82% of Virtuoso's clients genuinely want to travel with a lighter footprint.

Acknowledging the leadership role an army of 20,000 Virtuoso travel advisers can take, the organization has deepened its mission to make sustainability a greater factor in consumer choice when planning travel. Virtuoso defines sustainable travel as travel that celebrates and honors culture, supports local economies and protects the planet.

Called the "conscious comeback" it helps travelers make better choices by promoting suppliers that exemplify sustainability leadership. "We're trying to make a conscious choice to work with partners who care," Dalton says. "If we don't do this now, we may not ever get another chance."

In the future, your travel adviser will not only be your booking agent, concierge, confidante and security expert, they might be your conscience as well. (Lee Tulloch)