



S O U T H L A K E  
S T Y L E

# Trips Of A Lifetime

Southlake Travel Agents Make Dream Vacations Come True.

BY DAVID DUNN FEBRUARY 27, 2023



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A relaxing beach day basking in the sun. A ski trip up in the snowy peaks of Colorado. A luxurious cruise along the Mediterranean Sea. Whatever vacation looks like to you, spring break ultimately represents the same thing to everyone — a time to rest, recharge and enjoy some quality time with family and friends. According to a joint survey between Vacasa and Allison + Partners, this spring is shaping up to be the busiest travel season yet with more than half of Americans planning to go out of town.

Between the frantic packing and crowds trying to find their gate, traveling during peak flight times can be stressful. But it doesn't have to be. After all, local travel agents such as **Karen Dawson** and Brenda Tosso specialize in making even the most elaborate vacations seamless. Whether you're looking to sip on Pina Colodas or visit world-famous attractions, some smart travel planning can help ensure your next vacation meets expectations.

## **Travel Training**

As the founder and owner of the **Southlake Travel** agency, Karen Dawson's life is filled with phone numbers, reservations and backup plans for every trip.

However, it wasn't always that way. In fact, her childhood aspirations were to become a high school English teacher while growing up on a dairy farm outside Austin.

"I had never been on a plane, train, boat, ship or [in a] hotel," Karen says. "I never traveled anywhere."

That initial lack of travel might have led Karen to change course and become a travel agent when teaching didn't work out.

"Back then, you had to go to travel school for two years," Karen says. "There were no computers back then, so every flight, hotel, tour and cruise had to be looked up in a book. We learned destinations, we learned how to book a cruise, how to book tours and flights. We gained firsthand knowledge of the travel industry and how to best navigate it."

Meanwhile, Brenda Tosso experienced the world of travel as a hospitality director for over 25 years. After retiring in 2015, she decided to see more of the world as a tourist herself. She enjoyed her subsequent travels to Europe, Hawaii and Mexico so much that she decided to make a second career through her own business, Brenda's Adventure Travel.

“I’m very passionate about travel,” Brenda says. “I have a really investigative mind, and I just love putting the puzzle pieces together. Not everybody enjoys that aspect – that’s what made me realize I could help everybody with their travel.”



## The Perfect Plan

Before conversations with her clients go too far, Karen likes to discuss the destination and timing to see if the weather conditions are acceptable.

“I just had a couple getting married, and they wanted to go to Italy in March,” Karen says. “I told them ‘No you’re not. You’ll be too cold.’ I always start with the weather and make sure it’s ideal for whatever it is you hope to do.”

After settling on an appropriate season for the chosen destination, clients are then asked about their interests so the trip can be personalized just for them. Brenda says getting to know your clients’ desires makes all the difference.



“Travel is very personal – you really just have to get to know the person,” Brenda says. “I have the conversation with everyone – how do you like to travel? Where do you like to eat? What do you like to do in your free time? One good question is worth a thousand good answers. The more you tell me about your expectations, the better I can meet those.”

As far as where people travel, that depends on who you’re asking. In March, the majority of spring breakers gravitate towards beach vacations in the south, whether that’s in Cancun, the Bahamas or the Caribbean. But some of Brenda’s clients prefer the ski slopes in Jackson Hole or Colorado, while many of Karen’s clientele enjoy overseas travel and sightseeing in cities like London or Paris.

Everyone knows the most exciting part of any trip are the experiences, and this is what Karen and Brenda love planning the most. Thanks to years of research and building connections through Virtuoso and Strong Travel Services, Karen and Brenda have access to several on-site experiences not regularly available to the public. From all-inclusive resorts to lavish food and wine tours and hard-to-book luxury cruises, a good travel agent is only limited by their client’s desires.

“If you wanted to go to Rome and have lunch with the Pope, I could make that happen. It would cost a lot of money, but it can happen,” Karen chuckles. “It’s what I call sprinkling my pixie dust to make it an amazing vacation.”

While adult excursions are simple enough to plan, mixing in activities for younger travelers are a little more challenging – especially with larger families involved. Luckily, there are workarounds in those cases as well. Karen recommends including children while planning so they can pick out an experience or two that appeals to them. That way, everyone feels invested in the trip and has something to look forward to.

But even in cases where children are brought along for more mature experiences, there are ways to make it engaging and exciting for them.

“I remember one time I was planning a trip for a couple who were taking their 6-year-old to Paris for two weeks,” Karen recalls. “The father wanted to go to the Louvre Museum, and I panicked. How do you take a 6-year-old to the Louvre without having a meltdown 15 minutes into being there? What we ended up doing was we created a scavenger hunt for her. She had her list and her pencil, and she was a woman on a mission, looking for the six pieces of art we picked out for her. She did two hours non stop, no whining, no complaining, no meltdown.”

Of course, getting there is only half of the trip. The other half involves getting home, and with record flight cancellations last winter, that can be tricky for some families. Brenda always encourages travelers to pack lots of patience, remain flexible and be prepared for something to change.

“I don’t care what you do or how well you think you’ve prepared – stuff happens,” Brenda says. “You just need to have some foresight on what might happen and adjust your schedule from the get-go. You have to have an adventurous mindset because when the perfect plan crumbles, that’s when another adventure can begin.”



Since most major travel restrictions were lifted early last year, Karen and Brenda have been busy like never before. According to the Economist Intelligence Unit, global tourism will rise by 30% in 2023, with Italy, Japan and Southeast Asia

being among the most popular destinations. More people are planning further out into the year as well, with more than half of travelers already mapping out their summer and winter travel plans, according to American Express Travel.

With traveling largely absent in 2020 and 2021, Brenda says 2023 is largely poised to become the comeback year for travel.

“Last month has been one of my busiest months ever,” Brenda says. “I booked about 300 trips in 2022, and 2023 is on track to be about the same. I’m nearly at the point where I have to be more selective with which trips I plan. I’m almost too busy.”

But ultimately, Karen believes that’s a good thing – because it shows more people are returning to their normal routines.

“When I grew up, your family lived either in town or within 30 miles of you,” she says. “Now people are scattered all over the United States, and a lot of people haven’t seen their parents, grandparents, sisters or brothers. I’m getting a lot of calls to do family vacations that they haven’t been able to do for the past two years. A lot of it is just families getting back together again.”

Those family trips are Karen’s favorite ones to plan for because those are the ones that end up being the most special.

“I always tell grandparents, your grandkids aren’t going to remember what you bought them for Christmas as a gift,” Karen says. “But they’re always going to remember every trip they took with grandma and grandpa. It’s those experiences you want your children and grandchildren to remember.”

For Brenda, traveling represents much more than that – it represents getting out into the world and seeing just how big it really is.

“There’s nothing better that a person can give themselves than to experience another culture. That creates compassion and understanding for people who are

different from themselves,” Brenda says. “In the end, I like to think I’m making the world just a little bit better through every trip that I plan. Every trip is the trip of a lifetime. You only hope you can give them one more.”