

How To Find A Superstar Travel Agent (Part 3)



Cover of Bon Voyage!

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In [Part 1](#) and [Part 2](#) I explained in detail why you need a travel agent and how your trips will be both better and cheaper once you start using a good one.

But the key is using a good one. There are plenty of travel agents out there who know a whole lot more about travel than I do. Unfortunately, there are also plenty who know less. How can you tell the difference?

Some travel agents have “advanced degrees,” the most commonly used being the CTC or Certified Travel Counselor. While this does require some actual study and homework, the most impressive thing about the title is that it requires 5 years of full time industry work, which at least helps separate the wheat from the chaff and confers a level of seriousness. Then again there are plenty of bad career travel agents.

As in so many things, personal recommendations are always a great place to start. If you know someone who travels a lot, or whose travel style you envy, ask them. But be aware that the best agents for business travel are not always the best for leisure travel, and vice versa.

In my opinion, the quickest and easiest way to find a good travel agent is to take a look at Virtuoso. Virtuoso is to travel agents what Relais & Chateaux or Leading Hotels of the World are to properties: an elite consortium of the best in the industry, bound together for mutual marketing benefit and clout, with high standards for membership. There are currently about 350 agencies that belong to Virtuosos, employing around 6,000 agents, or as they call them, “travel advisors.” Of course, given these numbers, not every agency is great, and certainly not every advisor, but I have a lot of years of experience with Virtuoso and to me it gives the confidence of a high quality level across the board, akin to Michelin stars for restaurants. Some agencies are one star and some three, but they are almost all very good.

Of course you do not have to be a member of Virtuoso to be a great travel agent. [When I wrote about high end cruises](#), I suggested that the very best travel agent in the cruise industry is Mary Jean Tully, President and CEO of the Cruise Professionals, and Tully has chosen not to belong to Virtuosos. But she is in the minority.

When travel magazines and trade industry publications print lists of the best and most powerful agents, many are members of Virtuoso. The agents and agencies that I routinely personally recommend to friends, including ones I use myself and have mentioned in these

pieces, other than Tully, are all members of Virtuoso: Anne Scully of McCabe World Travel (VA), Leigh Sullivan of Regency Travel (TN), Chad Clark of Chad Clark Travel (AZ), Stacy Small of Elite Travel International (CA), Michael Holtz of Smartflyer (NY), and the largest of these powerhouse boutique firms, Valerie Wilson Travel are all excellent.

In addition to the fact that Virtuoso recruits and supports the very best agents in the business, they band together to extract concessions from their travel partners, which include cruise lines, airlines, a Who's Who of the world's great luxury hotels, and the very best luxury tour operators like Abercrombie & Kent, Lindblad Expeditions, and best in class superstars like Butterfield & Robinson for biking and Micato for safaris. When it comes to hotels, it is easier to name a great one that belongs to Virtuoso than one that doesn't: Peninsula Hong Kong? Check. Four Seasons George V. Check. Hassler? Check. Twin Farms? Check. Necker Island? Check. And so on for hundreds of the world's most revered hotels, inns, ranches, and lodges. When Sir Richard Branson's Virgin Galactic started selling tickets to space, it looked at the marketplace and decided to sell its seats only through Virtuoso agents exclusively, because the company knew that these agents had the expertise to convey and handle their complicated and expensive product.

So what does this mean to you? Well, every single one of these properties is contractually obligated to give clients of Virtuoso agents a special "amenity package" and these often include room upgrades, free breakfast daily, and welcome gifts like chocolate, wine or champagne, and can even include free nights, private airport transfers, club floor upgrades and free spa treatments. These amenities have a typical value of \$250 per night, and in most cases at these hotels, you are also paying the lowest rate you could find elsewhere – or less. In other words if you book it yourself, online or over the phone, it costs you money. It helps that Virtuoso agents collectively booked \$9.6 billion in travel in 2010, so the hotels have to cater to their wishes.

In any case, you can call Virtuoso's offices and after some questions, they will recommend a member agency or two. You can contact any of the agencies I recommended and have personal experience with. You can ask a friend or colleague. But whatever you do, use a travel agent.

But first ask a lot of questions – and they should too. In fact, if your perspective agent does not ask a lot of questions, it's a red flag – move on. Maybe ask them what they think of a hotel you know you love – or one you think is overrated. Be very clear up front about what you like and don't like and what your concerns, limitations, and priorities are, be they budgetary or stylistic in nature. A good travel agent can serve you best when they know what you like and dislike, so the more honesty and information you give, the better trips you will have.

Bon Voyage!