

Especially in these tough times, we're sorry to see honest, hard-working people lose business. Over the years, we've had experiences with good, so-so and bad local agencies. Nevertheless, now in our senior years, we've been gradually weaned away from them. With the emergence of the internet, we found we could do the job at least as well by clicking travel sites and online agencies on our computer.



We've been retired for more than a decade, and with luck and health OK so far, we've done it all. We hope we can continue for many more years venturing on cruises and excursions. We've been all over the globe, including Italy, France, Belgium, Germany, Russia, Las Vegas, Reno, Mexico, Panama Canal, Hawaii, Alaska, South America, the Caribbean, Canada, Ireland and many more destinations.

These days, before we decide on any trip, whether for three days or three weeks, we crank up the iMac. One of our most recent ventures was a family event across the country from Arizona to Florida in January. We had enough Southwest (the very best airline) frequent flier credits for free tickets, so the air part of the journey was taken care of.

For booking a Florida hotel, Priceline got us a lower-than-list price. However, the jack-up-room-rate phrase "it's the season" was in effect. The fact that the hotel was at least 20 miles from any beach and in an industrial town had no effect. We had to pay \$200 a night, but fortunately it wasn't as high as the \$350 a night sign on our room door.

That was just an example of how we plan our trips. We have several choices for checking prices and schedules: do it all by phone, get quotes from on-line travel agencies, or make in-person visits to a traditional agency. We long ago gave up on using local agencies exclusively, because we're now as travel savvy as any of their employees.

It is convenient to make travel plans face to face with another human, especially to get immediate answers to questions. However, unfortunately, all of our serious travel glitches happened when employees of our friendly neighborhood agency messed up pricing, bookings and sailings.

We frequently use online hotshots, such as Orbitz, Priceline, Expedia and Vacations to Go, and they've secured some real bargains for us, especially for last-minute cruises and off-season hotel packages. However, when you check in with the online travel agencies, make sure you

thoroughly understand their systems. To these old folks, dealing with those high-tech experts sometimes seems like we're betting on a roulette wheel as prices spin around.

We just recently booked a quickie four-night cruise with our neighborhood agency, and everything went very well. However, like movie houses, snail mail, honest politicians and daily newspapers, it's possible that traditional, bricks and mortar travel agencies may eventually go the way of the dodo.