

Travel

Travel agents offer a helping hand

Booking an overseas trip online without using a travel agent is easy, but what happens if you strike trouble while away? **Danny Gocs** speaks to travel agents who have come to the rescue of clients.

IT'S easy to search online for the cheapest flights and best-value hotels for your next overseas holiday and do everything from a computer or smartphone. It seems so easy that you wonder why people bother to use travel agents anymore!

Unfortunately, the world of travel is not completely trouble-free and anything from flight cancellations to natural disasters can throw your trip into chaos.

When disaster strikes, hotels are booked out quickly and alternative carriers snapped up. That is when travel agents show their value and come to the rescue of clients who have booked with them.

Mark Chaskiel, CEO of FBI Travel in Caulfield North, says his travel agency offers around-the-clock assistance to clients – and his office is regularly called on for help.

“The reality of travel today is that things can go wrong – and we can help them if we have the booking details,” he says.

“When flights in and out of Bali were cancelled due to the volcanic ash cloud earlier this year, we had a call from a family with an ill child who was running low on medication. They could not get a flight out.

“Our job was to get them out on the first opportunity as they were getting desperate. Garuda and Jetstar had huge backlogs in every class, but we were able to organise a flight home via Kuala Lumpur.”

Wayne Ackerfeld of Travel Associates in Elsternwick also had clients stranded in Bali during the volcanic ash crisis.

“Usually what happened was that we were first alerted by an airline that our clients’ flights had been cancelled. As an agent we then jump on the phones and have the ability and experience to get them rebooked on their original airline or an alternative airline,” he says.

“Travellers who booked on the internet themselves are solely left to their own devices.”

Ackerfeld gave another example of a client who travelled to Italy and encountered an unexpected problem. When he checked into a five-star hotel, he was advised that the deluxe suite



International airports can quickly become chaotic when flights are cancelled.

Photo: Dreamstime

he had booked was no longer available and was downgraded to a normal suite.

“The client contacted us and we rang the hotel to complain about the treatment, and within an hour they were swapped over to the deluxe suite they originally booked,” he says.

“They also got flowers, champagne in their room, a free meal in the hotel restaurant and \$1000 compensation. As a travel agent with a relationship with the hotel we were able to achieve this.”

Yvonne Verstandig, director of Executive Edge Travel in Caulfield, says travel agents are available 24/7 to help clients who experience any problems during their travels.

Verstandig recalls receiving an email from clients who were travelling in Spain and learnt that their flight to Paris the following night had

been cancelled. She soon learned that there was an impending strike in Paris which would affect some flights, and managed to book the clients on an earlier flight the next day.

As they would be arriving in Paris much earlier than expected, Verstandig contacted their Paris hotel and arranged an early VIP check-in.

Verstandig cited the case of a couple holidaying in Scotland at the start of a five-week trip.

“On the fourth day, the client’s wife took a terrible fall, broke her ankle and was admitted to hospital for an operation. They had to cancel the rest of the trip,” she says.

“We found alternative accommodation arrangements for the husband so that he could be near his wife in hospital and assisted them with their insurance claim paperwork.”

David Goldman, managing director of

Goldman Travel Corporation in Sydney, says: “Australians travel a lot and generally all is well. Luggage doesn’t get lost and flights leave on time, but every so often, disaster strikes.

“Try calling your web-based travel site then. You’re on your own with a travel website and with increased security issues, seemingly worse weather events and the greater risk of incidents because of the increased appetite for international travel, the likelihood of disruptions is growing.

“We have had customers who say to us that they will never again book directly on websites after not being able to get through to an airline office by phone from overseas, but were able to ring our office for help. It’s comforting to them.”

Goldman says his staff often help clients with advice to tackle any problems they encounter with travel insurance claims.

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