

Travel agents no longer a dying breed

By Michelle Higgins, New York Times

The complimentary wine and fruit platter was sent up to Jessica Griffin and her family moments after they strolled into their roomy suite. They were accompanied by a bellhop who placed their bags near a tidy crib made up with luxurious, high thread-count sheets for Griffin's 1-year-old daughter.

The V.I.P. treatment at the Cheeca Lodge and Spa in the Florida Keys last month hadn't come with an extra cost. In fact, Griffin said, she paid about \$100 a night less than the standard rate for her room. And the deal wasn't the result of hours of tedious online research either. She had finagled her savings the old-fashioned way: through a travel agent.

"I needed recommendations and someone to steer me in the right direction," said Griffin, who opted to work with an agent after years of making her own reservations because she needed a getaway suitable for a toddler and had little interest in scrolling through endless and conflicting user hotel reviews online. "There are so many," she said. And with every site displaying beautiful pictures and tantalizing offers, "it can be overwhelming."

"I wanted somebody from a reputable agency who could say yes, you'll enjoy this stay," she said.

According to those in the travel agent industry, clients like Griffin are not alone, and are in fact helping to stanch the bloodletting the industry has experienced since the onset of D.I.Y. booking more than a decade ago. Nearly one in three leisure agencies is hiring, according to PhoCusWright, a travel research firm. And in 2011 travel agencies experienced a second consecutive year of growth; their bookings account

for a third of the \$284 billion United States travel market.

This comes after years during which all signs seemed to be suggesting that travel agents would soon go the way of telex operators. And it's true that the numbers are stark: During the industry's peak years of the mid-1990s, there were about 34,000 retail locations booking trips. Today, there are 14,000 to 15,000, according to PhoCusWright. In 2009 alone, in the throes of the recession, bookings through traditional agencies plummeted by 23 percent.

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