

Students on agents

With a worldwide trend towards independent travel and easily accessible information via the Internet, why do students continue to book their language travel courses through agencies? GILLIAN POOLE finds out what students liked and disliked about the service they received from their agents.

The fact that agencies provide a convenient, comprehensive service is the main reason students book their language travel programme through an agent, as 30-year-old Irina from Austria points out. “[By booking through an agent] it was easier, [took] less time, and they sent me all the information and booked my flight.”

Going through an agent also offers first-time language travellers certain reassurances. “This was my first [language travel trip],” says 42-year-old Lukas from Switzerland. “It was a good idea to use an agent. It was a simple way to organise such a trip.”

Student opinions

Language Travel Magazine conducted a survey of 30 students, who had booked through agents, to find out what they thought of the agency service they had received. Here are the results.

- 36 per cent of students had found out about their agency from the recommendation of friends; 16 per cent had found the agency on the Internet; 10 per cent through advertisements or presentations at their university; a further 10 per cent had seen an advertisement in a newspaper; and seven per cent had found the agency listed in the telephone book or other directory such as Yellow Pages.
- Although only 16 per cent first heard about their school via the Internet, a total of 32 per cent had visited the agency website.
- When asked why they used an agent, 36 per cent of students replied that it was the easiest way to book a course; 10 per cent said that they didn't know of any language schools

agency but contacted them via email. I had several emails and telephone calls from the individual who deals with the German language course.” Anna says she visited the agency “for about five minutes as I knew [what I wanted] before I came to the agency”.

Although the majority of students said they would use an agent again, some agency clients said they would book independently next time. “I hadn't used a language travel agent before,” says Satoe from Japan, “[but] now I think I [could] do it by myself.”

Neda from Switzerland said she would investigate other possibilities next time. “I would book through an agent again, but first I would compare several before I chose one,” she says.

that of previous clients. “The [most valuable information] I got from my agent was that many people had said that they were satisfied with the school,” says Irantzu from Spain.

Where students felt let down by agencies was when they did not receive the level of detail they expected. “[The agents] need to have more information about [the location], the school, the host family, etc,” says Luisana from Venezuela, adding, “The school is smaller [than I expected] and there are a lot more students in each class.”

Although generally satisfied with her agency, Neda was disappointed that lessons at her school concentrated mainly on conversation when she had wanted to improve her



overseas; and a further 10 per cent of respondents said that they had decided to use an agency because it had been recommended to them.

- 23 per cent of respondents said they had used a language travel agent before; 71 per cent said they would use an agent again; and 64 per cent said they would use the same agent.
- 23 per cent of students said they thought the agency could improve its service.
- 52 per cent of students felt their agent gave them impartial advice about study options, 10 per cent said they did not feel the advice was impartial, and 13 per cent had visited an agent who represented only one school.
- 42 per cent of students said their language travel experience lived up to their expectations, while 26 per cent said it did not (32 per cent did not answer this question).

For Markus from Germany, booking through an agent in his country brought him more security and made it easier to pay, while Russian student, Anna, says that help with the visa was one of the main reasons she decided to use an agent. “It [was] easier for me as I [didn't] have to go to the embassy and do all the stuff with documents.”

The amount of time spent at the agency and the level of consultation received varied from one student to another. “[I spent] more than one hour with the agent, and he would have spent more time with me if necessary,” says Irina. “All my questions were answered.”

A number of students took a rather more independent approach to their booking. British student, Yvonne, says, “I didn't visit the

The Internet is playing a growing role in the client/agent relationship. Sixteen per cent of our interviewees found out about their language travel agency through the Internet, and a further 16 per cent had gone to the agency's website for more information. Austrian student, Marion, says of her agency's website, “It's a good site with lots of pictures. The only negative thing was that it was hard to find the prices.” Stephanie from Switzerland adds that her agency's website was useful, because “it had lots of information about the study location”.

Despite the importance of the Internet, the students we interviewed still valued the personal consultation and detailed information they received from an agent – often based on the agent's own experience of the school or on

writing skills. She also felt that it would have been valuable to have more information about the different options available to her. “[Next time] I would ask the agent [about] other possibilities, such as work experience.”

All in all, however, the students we interviewed were pleased with the agencies they had used. “I've already recommended [my agency] to a few friends,” says Irina.

The students who took part in our survey were studying at: Aspect ILA, UK; Centro Internazionale Dante Alighieri Siena, Italy; Garden City English School, New Zealand; Horizonte, Germany; Institut Linguistique Adenet, France; Leicester Square School of English, UK