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# SMALL DETAILS MAKE A BIG DIFFERENCE

Counter Intelligence and other Secret Agent Practices

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05 OCT 2015: Travel consultants who are accused of being counter intuitive or of engaging in counter intelligence usually smile with pride and confidence. It indicates that the accuser has

encountered not only excellent value on their vacation but also niche market-fulfillment. And they owe it all to the advice you provided.



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In Japan, for instance, you counselled the client to fully engage in culinary discovery by foregoing the tables and sitting at the counter in sushi, soba and sashimi restaurants as well as izkayas. After all the counter is where the action is. That's where you engage with other diners, get to know the chef (and his family), see and inhale the food preparation process, and become 'one' with the dining experience. Your client is now 'counter' intuitive and has willingly joined you in the field of counter intelligence! (get it?)

We've all seen those clever marketing ads that start off with "Things your travel agent won't tell you..."

The idea is to find a controversial heading that gets the consumer all worked up before they even read the ad. The bottom line is that travel consultants will provide clients with all the information they have at their disposal ... but

sometimes they may not realize or appreciate the impact of the knowledge they've acquired unless the client specifically asks. The Japan dining experience is only one example.



When I was a tour guide in Washington DC many (many) years ago, we would spend a day visiting the Smithsonian Institute, which now comprises 19 museums, art galleries and a Zoo.

Each museum was chock-full of exhibits and the more popular ones, such as the Air and Space Museum, could easily take two to three hours to visit. As guides, we would describe one or two exhibits that we really loved so the clients would have some direction; some place to begin, before they started to explore on their own. In most cases, the comment was “we would never have found that if you hadn’t mentioned. Thank you!”.

And the application for travel is that when you explore a destination, dine in a restaurant, visit an attraction, inspect a hotel, cruise down the river, shop in the market or relax in a café, you should note not only what you loved (or didn’t love), but also something unique or unusual or intriguing about the venue that you can relate to your clients. Be a “secret(s)” agent!



On a recent trip to the Boyne Valley just outside Dublin, we visited the 15th century ruins of Slane Abbey. Hidden in the stonework were the faded, eerie images of gargoyles. Something easily missed, but very impressive to witness and photograph.

In Khong Chiam, located in Thailand's Isan Region, our guide departed from the itinerary and took us to visit a forest monastery. There, we met the Abbot and sat down for a talk. He had been an insurance salesman for 26 years and then decided there was more to life than explaining policies. He became a monk and now presides over a very small monastery on a mountain, surrounded by trees, living in simple accommodation and engaging with the villagers. It was a simple, beautiful experience that obviously impressed me.

In Agra, India, a special full moon excursion to the Taj Mahal was available to those interested.

While the majority of the fam trippers chose to stay in the hotel, two of us figured that we were here and it was an opportunity we may never have again, so we signed up for the visit.

When we arrived, the clouds rolled in and the full moon was hidden. Other visitors who had also paid for the special visit started to grumble. However we walked away from the complainers and realized, after a few minutes of precious, absolute silence, that the Taj Mahal was cloaked in a

mysterious, ghostly darkness and offered a vision and an atmosphere that was one-in-a-million. It didn't matter whether the moon was shining or not. It was an amazing experience.

Here are a few pointers on how to put together your secret agent files:



1) Cater to your own niche interests when you travel. Don't just see and experience what the tour guide or fam host wants you to see. Go out of your way to explore foods or attractions or hotels that you personally want to see, so you can discuss these with your clients.

2) Look after your clients. Search out unusual experience in which your clients may wish to indulge. Where is the chocolate shop in Havana? The monster house in Rome? The camel market near Cairo? One thing I often do before I visit a new destination is 'google' "weird" (or unusual or

off-the-beaten track) things to do". I get a list and try to check out as many of the ideas as I can. It makes for great stories, great photos and often great personal memories that translate into 'traveller-bragging-rights' with kudos to the travel counsellor who made the suggestions.

3) Write down, photograph, videotape and record the details of your secret finds and travel tips and then file them appropriately when you return.

When a client is heading to Bali, you can pull out your file folder marked "Bali Top Secret" and let them know the best place to sit and take photos during the Kecak Dance at Uluwatu, or the best seaside grill for dinner in Jimbaran Bay.

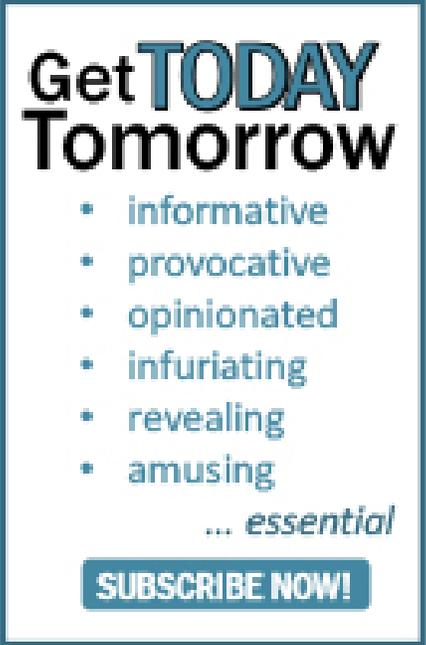


4) Draw a Treasure Map. If you don't remember exactly where something is located, then your advice may not be that valuable. Find a map and mark it (with a big X). You can reproduce this for your clients travelling to that destination. Want the best street café to munch a lunch of sausage, sauerkraut and beer while in Prague? How about the best place to buy masks in Melaka? Or where you can find one of the best wine stores in Lima?

5) Make friends. Tour guides, restaurateurs, bar tenders, izakaya owners, hotel concierges, taxi drivers and locals you meet may have invaluable insight into the destination. Want a non-touristy trad bar in Galway? How about a visit with a cigar maker in Suchitoto? Or learn where to find the

critically endangered golden frog in El Valle,  
Panama?

In the travel industry, secret agent status transcends any job description you may choose: generalist, specialist, super specialist etc. It's the nature of the game that travel consultants love to travel, which in turn, opens the door for you to specialize in those unique travel tips that make your clients want you to become part of their trusted circle of service providers.



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Counter intelligence is only one way to showcase your travel know-how. Start your “Jane’s or Joe’s list of ‘only I know about this—I discovered it on my travels—and I will share it with my clients’. Your knowledge of small details, hidden gems and secret finds will make a big difference in your client’s travels as well as their attitude toward the value of you!



Steve Gillick

A tireless promoter of "infectious enthusiasm about travel", Steve delivers his wisdom once a month in his column *The Travel Coach*.

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