When do I need to use a specialist travel agent?

Hire a professional if your trip involves:
- complicated or customized itineraries.
- superior three, or four- or five-star hotel stays.
- English-speaking guides.
- special access to monuments, sights, or people.
- a special occasion

You don't need a professional to help with:
- single or cheap components of a leisure itinerary (a flight in coach class or on a low-fare airline, train tickets, a one-day tour).
- accommodations that are inexpensive (e.g., a B&B) or run-of-the-mill (say, a midrange chain hotel).
- redeeming frequent-flier miles or guest points for simple trips.

Do you have any general advice on working with one of these specialists?

Find the right fit: Not every consultant will be the right match for every client. If you're not immediately enamored of the first one you contact, try some others. Consider personal rapport, in addition to expertise and cost, when deciding which consultant to use.

Don't be phone shy: A travel consultant is making personal decisions on your behalf (the type of hotel you'll stay in, the sights to see or skip). An initial phone conversation is essential for the consultant to understand your personality and needs; further correspondence can often be done by e-mail. Never delegate tripplanning to an assistant.

Offer ample background: The consultant will want to know about you in order to design an itinerary that best matches your personality and fulfills the goals for the trip. Be as honest and specific in your responses as possible. You will likely be peppered with questions about your past trips, your expectations for this one, your hobbies, your physical condition, and your travel companions, among other things.

Establish a budget: Have an idea of how much you want to spend, which you can estimate by doing some background research. Remember that luxury comes at a price, no matter the cost of living at the destination—and don't forget to factor in fluctuating exchange rates. Even if your budget is tight, a good consultant can often be able to stretch your dollars.

Expect a fee: Consultants earn their living through commissions from travel suppliers (e.g., tour operators, and some hotels) and/or charging clients a service fee. You will likely pay either a fixed amount (typically from $100 to $500) or a markup (about 10 to 15 percent) that is built into the total trip cost.
Sometimes the up-front service fee will be applied to the cost of the trip if you end up booking it. Travel agents who book cruises and tour operator packages often do not charge service fees since they make sizeable commissions on the sale. You should not pay a fee for a trip that has not been customized for you, nor should you pay before the consultant has persuaded you that the value he or she can bring to the trip planning is worth the extra expense.

Plan ahead: Contact a consultant as far in advance of your trip as possible and be prompt in offering feedback and requesting any adjustments to the proposed itinerary, whether it be a flight time, an excursion, or a hotel. Involve your travel companions from the beginning so that all parties are familiar with the plans as they evolve. Last-minute changes can be difficult and costly to accommodate.
Be proactive: If during the course of the trip you're not satisfied with something, contact the consultant or the local tour operator. They will replace a so-so guide with someone that's more compatible, switch you to a different hotel, or change the pacing of your trip by tweaking the activities. Your travel planner will be far happier to solve a problem midtrip than to first hear about it when you come home dissatisfied.
Value the relationship: Treat your consultant not as hired help but as an expert who can enrich your travel experiences. The consultants on our list receive dozens of queries every week from prospective clients and do their best to address them all. Extra effort on your part during the trip-planning process—such as a thank-you note or a phone call-will make you stand out form the hundreds of clients these consultants work with each year.