

How Do Travel Counsellors Acquire Destination Knowledge?

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When you called your Certified Travel Counsellor to book that long-deserved trip to the Mayan Riviera, you were probably surprised when you asked if the hotel had a swim-up bar by the pool, and your travel counsellor was able to give you the correct answer.

When people choose to become a travel counsellor, the usual reaction is "oh, you want to get a lot of free trips". Well, those trips are referred to as "Familiarization Trips" or "Fam Trips" or "Fams". They are not free, nor are they a vacation. Fam trips are hard work. A recent Fam to a Caribbean destination included 4 days of touring, six hotel inspections each day, a three hour marketing meeting, meetings with other attraction and tourism officials and a grand total of two hours of free time during the entire trip. But Fams serve as one of the key professional development tools that travel counsellors use to gain intimate knowledge of a destination.

Fam trips allow travel counsellors the opportunity to visit destinations and then be able to provide first hand experiential knowledge to their clients. A Fam trip, usually organized by a tour wholesaler or a tourist board, includes a number of features that are not available to a travel professional in a textbook. While these features may vary from trip to trip, they generally include:

- **Multiple hotel visits** and room visits in each hotel, so the travel counsellor can inform travellers about the features and benefits of various room categories, as well as provide first hand experience of room amenities, room locations and hotel features. For example, if the brochure says "ocean view" room, can you really see the ocean without fully opening the window and stretching your neck, or is the ocean right outside?
- **Multiple restaurant visits**, so the travel counsellor can give suggestions to the client about quality of food, location of restaurant, as well as other features that may be of interest, such as ambiance, entertainment, type of food available, wine list, cost.
- **Tourist attractions**, so the travel counsellor can plan an itinerary for the client or suggest the best way to spend a day of site seeing or the best places to purchase a product that is associated with the destination.

This does not mean that travel counsellors obtain all the information they need from Fam Trips. They study brochures, attend product and marketing seminars and many take specialist courses to allow them to concentrate on a favourite destination or geographic area.

The term "travel agent" implied for years that the travel seller was the agent of a supplier. Today's certified travel counsellor has access to many suppliers, many products and an incredible array of options to offer the client. The job is not one of an order taker--the job of a travel counsellor is to "counsel" the client and give advice about all the travel options available.

Travel counsellors understand that in the year 2005, travellers can access a lot of information on their own, on the internet, through newspapers, brochures, television programs and guide books, but in many cases, the traveller then suffers from information overload. If five different sources are saying five different things about the same hotel-- which one do you believe? Who is going to sort out the confusion for you? The solution lies in three words "Certified Travel Counsellor".

A certified travel counsellor will ensure that you end up in the hotel that best suits your needs, whether it is the quiet, romantic room, the in-the-middle-of-the-action room, the swim up bar, the restaurant that specializes in mouth-watering ribs, or that famous attraction down the road.

A full listing of Canada's Top Travel Professionals can be found at www.citc.ca/en/directory or by contacting CITC at info@citc.ca; 1-800-589-5776; 416-484-4450.

Incorporated in 1968, the vision of the **Canadian Institute of Travel Counsellors** is to lead the Canadian travel industry to be the most skilled and professional work force in the world, and to ensure that the CTC (Certified Travel Counsellor)/ CTM (Certified Travel Manager) designations are recognized, accepted and valued by the travel industry and consumers as the ultimate achievement in professionalism. Information on membership, certification, educational programs and publications is available at www.citc.ca

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