THE MAGAZINE FOR TRAVEL PROFESSIONALS

JULY/AUGUST 1990

## THE OTHER EUROPE

Get set to sell the "new"
Bulgaria, Czechoslovakia, East Germany,
Hungary, Poland, and Romania

**Rating the Tourist Boards** 

**Telluride Takes Off** 

Great Trips for Families

No Kidding! It's David Brenner

Transylvanian-born Rodica Varna of Litoral Travel in New York City specializes in Eastern Europe.

MESPORT

### You've got a friend in Japan...and mexico,

MANANA

How today's international tourist boards are reaching out to travel agents

AND ITALY, AND BERMUDA, AND AUSTRALIA...

BY DAWN M. BARCLAY

**WANTED:** Travel agency

with foreign-bound clientele seeks assistant to aid in research, promotion, and marketing. Must be able to increase professionalism by uncovering special-interest tours to exotic destinations, finding creative ways to market group tours, organizing complimentary fam trips abroad for staff, and providing the lowdown on hotels most suitable for clients. Must also supply extensive geographical/ political/historical/cultural information. No pay. Apply within.

OULD YOU USE A CO-WORKER with those qualifications? Before you dismiss the idea as a pipe dream, take a look at what national tourist boards—just a call, fax, or keystroke away—are doing for other savvy retailers. Free. Take Sande Davidson, CTC, owner of Davidson Travel in Phoenix. The French Government Tourist Office helped her agency promote a Bastille Day group tour to France. The Jamaican Tourist Board intervened for Skip Meyers of Ameri-Travel in Miami to get a refund for his clients who were walked from an overbooked hotel.

Tourist boards, the government agencies that countries open in the U.S. to promote outbound tourism, "are an absolute goldmine resource—one that most agencies don't take advantage of," raves Davidson. Thanks to ever-growing consumer interest in international travel, tourist boards are reaching out more than ever to become travel agents' promotional partners.

"Travel agents are our bread and butter," explains Don Ford, chairman of the European Travel Commission, or ETC (the promotional organization for 24 European countries). "North America is an enormous market, and reaching the large number of potential travelers is difficult for an individual tourist board on its rather limited resources. Therefore, many boards have found it more productive to take a 'rifle' rather than a scattershot approach to marketing. And that means going through travel agents—single entities that can reach hundreds, or even thousands, of potential consumers."

Tourist boards' desire to court the travel agent is evident in many of their newest marketing strategies. To make themselves more accessible, for example, several have installed toll-free numbers, and most have added fax machines. Perhaps the most sophisticated examples are the Scandinavian National Tourist Boards' agents-only phone number and fax, which are set up to solely receive agents' brochure requests.

India, Argentina, Great Britain, the U.S.S.R., and West Germany can now be contacted directly through one or more computer reservation systems, while Austria, the Bahamas, and New Zealand offer central reservation services through which agents can make many bookings with one call. A growing number of boards also publish travel agent sales manuals and trade newsletters, conduct educational seminars, exhibit at trade shows, and host fam trips—tactics aimed at keeping agents up-to-date and therefore better equipped to promote their countries.

"Travel agents underestimate the extent of our resources," says Simon O'Hanlon of the Irish Tourist Board in New York.

Agent-assistance innovations have developed in addition to boards' main functions: to answer inquiries and to distribute general information about their countries, such as brochures on cultural, historical, and scenic highlights; maps; railroad and ferry schedules; hotel guides; and facts about special-interest travel. These materials are usually forwarded free to travel agents—a moneysaving alternative to purchasing country guides in bookstores. Some boards will provide such materials for tour group members. "These services make us look good to our customers," says Catherine Thompson of Murdock Travel in Salt Lake City.

Retailers who specialize in arranging or wholesaling group and incentive travel can use international promotional offices to help plan and market smooth-running tours, counsels Howard Tanenbaum of Express Travel in Philadelphia. "Maybe you need to know which hotels in Vienna would best suit your clients, which restaurants can accommodate groups of 50 to 60, and which places will let tour buses pull up in front," he explains. "Not only will tourist boards supply you with answers, they can also introduce you to the right contacts."

Once a tour is packaged, many boards then supply agents with the tools to sell it: letterhead and shells on which to publish sales literature (sometimes at a small cost); posters, videotapes, and slide presentations to show prospective clients; and occasionally even financial assistance toward a destination evening for food, liquor, or perhaps a hotel-stay giveaway. A tourist board official may even accompany agents to a client presentation or organize site inspections to preview a location and its facilities. Usually the extent of assistance offered depends on two things: the size of the group and how well the tourist board knows the agency and its principals.

For that reason, Sande Davidson makes a point to meet officials in person, even if it means flying to New York or San Francisco from her agency in Arizona. Tanenbaum advises in-person contact even if you aren't planning a big group. "Spending an hour or two with a tourist board can raise your confidence in selling a destination. It's great for agents without firsthand knowledge of a locale," he says.

Luckily for agencies not in Los Angeles, New York, or Chicago (where most countries locate their tourist offices), nearly all boards exhibit at major trade shows such as those sponsored by the American Society of Travel Agents (ASTA) and the International Travel Industry Expo (ITIX). Others take their shows on the road, often under the banner of umbrella groups like the ETC, the Caribbean Tourism Organization (CTO), or the Pacific Asia Travel Association (PATA). The ETC Supermarts, for example, travel to more than 20 cities each winter. A few countries, like India and Ireland, sponsor touring educational seminars for travel agents.

Both tourism officials and travel agents agree that it's to everyone's advantage—theirs, yours, and your clients'—if more agents learn how to tap into international tourist boards' wellspring. "Unless governments see results from disseminating materials and information, they may not continue supporting their tourist boards, and that would be a terrible loss," notes Davidson. "It's like that old expression: use it or lose it."

DAWN M. BARCLAY, a former travel agent, is now a freelance journalist in New York City. She wrote "Licensed to Sell" in the March/April 1990 Travel Life.

### To: All Travel Agents From: Tourist Board Officials Re: Tips for Working With Us

- Remember that most tourist boards are information centers, not reservation offices. Don't expect us to place bookings for you or collect deposits from your clients.
- If you have print materials on hand, check those first for answers to simple questions. Try to compile your questions so you can ask them all during one call.
- Get to know us, either by visiting our offices or by attending trade shows and educational seminars.
- ♦ Tap our knowledge by turning to us for suggestions on how to sell our destination.
- ♦ Study geography. Learn to distinguish Switzerland from Sweden, Belgium from Holland. A map will quickly tell you that Australia and New Zealand aren't connected by bridge or ferry. Such basic knowledge will save you from calling us with unnecessary (and embarrassing) questions. Political geography is helpful, too—knowing that Hong Kong is not yet part of China, for example, or with which countries the U.S. has diplomatic ties.
- ♦ If your knowledge of geography is rusty, heed our counsel. Complains one tourist board official from Brazil, "I've had agents who insisted that Margarita Island is part of Brazil (it belongs to Venezuela), that Brazilians speak Spanish (we speak Portuguese), and that there is summer skiing in Brazil (there isn't). Please listen to us, and believe what we tell you!"
- ♦ Be understanding about reasonable delays; we handle thousands of requests each year. The more specific you are about what you need, the faster we can provide answers. Says one Argentinian representative: "Many agents don't always know what they want. If we tell them something's free, they ask us to send three. If we say there's a charge, they don't want it."
- Remember that we often encounter the same obstacles as travel agents. An official from Austria explains, "If a hotel in the mountains is closed from mid-October until Christmas, we can send them 10 telexes on your behalf, but we won't get an answer about availability—no matter how hard we try."

-D.M.B.

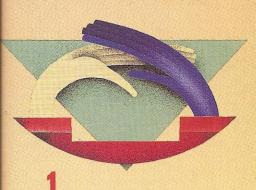
ma the tourist boards

Who's working hardest to help travel agents?

A three-part survey of tourism offices in 30 of the most

popular destinations for North American travelers.

See chart, next page



### PART ON THE PHONE

A caller identifying herself as an agent phoned the New York office (the main U.S. office for all but New Zealand, Australia, Hong Kong, and the Bahamas) on the same day, between 11:30 a.m. and 3:30 p.m. including lunchtime because many agents squeeze in destination research then.

Our undercover reporter asked two basic questions: the driving time between two major cities and the average temperature in April of one of those cities. Calls were timed by stopwatch from when the phone was answered until the second question was completed to the agent's satisfaction. The caller then asked to have a full information packet ("as extensive as possible") sent to her agency.

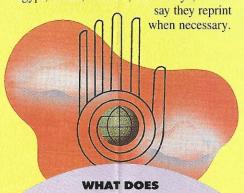
**RESULTS:** Despite occasional busy signals, someone picked up the call in each office except Australia's, Bermuda's, France's, Great Britain's, the Netherlands', and Scandinavia's. The longest wait was for Scandinavia-an answering machine kicked in after three rings, then our caller was transferred to the correct extension and waited nine more rings for someone to come on the line.

Although more than half of the boards redirected the call or put us on hold before the two simple questions were answered, we usually got the information within a minute. One exception, France, took more than 10 minutes to respond. Stephanie of the French Government Tourist Office acknowledged that the board was a little shorthanded that day, but that they were also "very, very busy." Later calls there, however, yielded similar results.

Additional information about each tourist board's internal operations (size of staff, availability of a toll-free number) was later obtained from a public-relations person or a senior staff member.

**RESULTS:** The number of offices (headquarters and satellites) that countries maintain in the U.S. varies from one (Brazil, Portugal, U.S.S.R.) to 15 (the Bahamas), with three the average. Of the 30 countries that were surveyed, all but Argentina, Brazil, China, and Kenya have separate offices in Canada. Staff sizes ranged from five (Egypt) to 19 (Ireland).

All the boards offer some sort of promotional material (videos, shells, letterhead, posters) for agents' use, usually free but occasionally at cost for bulk orders. Almost all boards reported updating their sales materials annually. The exceptions are Bermuda, Egypt, Israel, Mexico, and Kenya, which



### IT ALL MEAN?

This informal survey of 30 tourist boards' promptness, helpfulness, and efficiency supports the feelings of travel agents interviewed: that boards are working hard to fulfill agencies' information requests and marketing needs.

There are, to be sure, places where service is uneven—the U.S. Virgin Islands, for example, answered our two questions in 10 seconds but took 12 days to fulfill our request for print information. Japan offers no fam trips but supplies some of the most comprehensive sales materials available. Despite such inconsistencies, however, all 30 international boards surveyed recognize the travel agent as a key partner—important in light of the tremendous goals they have set for themselves in approaching the American and Canadian markets.

-D.M.B.

### PRINT MATERIALS

Information kits were evaluated for speed of arrival and for content. All boards sent their materials free except Egypt, which requested that we send \$2 and a self-addressed, stamped envelope or (because our caller was local) have a messenger pick up the parcel.

RESULTS: Packages from Greece, India, Mexico, Morocco, and Switzerland arrived within one day to our New York City address; most others were received within a week. At press time, five months after our request for information, nothing had arrived from Argentina and China. The most disappointing mailings, in size and scope, were from France, the U.S.S.R., Mexico, and Kenya, which sent only single slim brochures. (France, however, included an order card for its "1990 France Discovery Guide.")

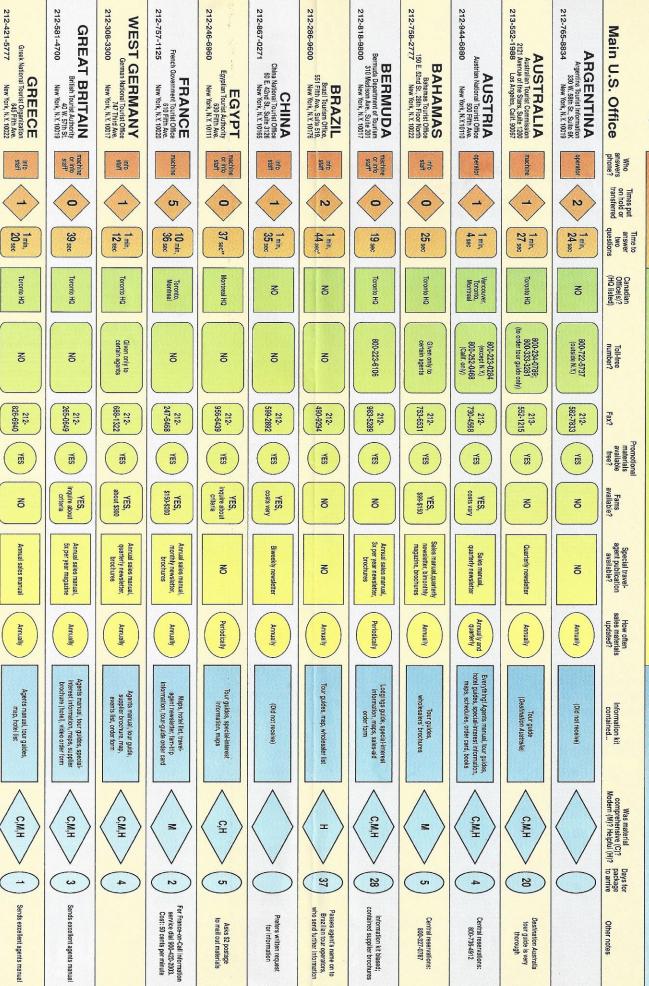
On the other hand, information kits from Great Britain, Greece, Ireland, Italy, New Zealand, and the Netherlands were outstandingly comprehensive and attractive. Austria's hefty cardboard box merits special

Though three-fourths of the boards reported that special-interest information is available, such extras didn't always accompany the basic package. Japan wins kudos for the special brochures it routinely distributes on economical travel, business travel, and accommodations in traditional Japanese inns.

Switzerland failed to include its agents' manual with the material forwarded but claims to send it annually to the 6,000 to 7,000 agents on its mailing list. The Bahamas, the U.S.S.R., and India included tour operators' brochures, making their objectivity questionable. Some boards enclosed order cards for agents wishing additional materials, while West Germany inserted a Rolodex card listing its CRS access codes. The Netherlands even sent a questionnaire inviting

agents to evaluate its offerings.

# PART ONE: ON THE PHONE PART TWO: SERVICES PART THREE: PRINT MATERIALS 30 countries offer travel agencies. Your clip-and-save guide to what



Hong Kong Tourist Association 333 N. Michigan Ave., Suite 2400 312-782-3872 Chicago, Ill. 60601-3966

NDIA

HONG KONG

info

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21 sec

Toronto HQ

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312-782-0864

YES

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Annually

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