Written by Mark Jaeger
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Port travel agency helps couple return from Chilean earthquake zone

Talk to Alan and Suzan Schupp about their recent cruise, and complaints about lost luggage and overbooked flights seem petty.

The Port Washington couple was aboard a Princess Cruises ship off the coast of South America when the Feb. 27 earthquake hit. The tremor devastated areas of south-central Chile and touched off a tsunami that raced across the South Pacific.

Authorities now say 700 people were killed in the natural disaster, and nearly $30 billion in damage was caused.

The Schupps, like virtually all of the 2,600 people aboard the Caribbean Princess, were left largely in the dark about the extent of the disaster.

“When it hit, we were still in deep water and we didn’t really feel anything. The waves generated by the tsunami near the coast were only a few feet, which was far less than the 15-foot seas we had experienced going around Cape Horn,” Sue Schupp said.

However, when sporadic reports of the destruction inland reached the boat, there

was great concern among many of the crew members, who were largely Chilean, and passengers worried about getting home.

“The captain would update us on conditions three times a day, but phone service and even Internet connections were unreliable,” Schupp said.

It was clear the infrastructure had sustained significant damage, with flights out of Chile delayed indefinitely.

Passengers were given the choice of staying aboard the boat for an extended trip along the coast to Argentina or going ashore at Santiago and scrambling to make alternative arrangements to return home.

“There were all sorts of rumors circulating. We were debating what to do,” Schupp recalled.

“Finally, I ran to the phone and called Biever Travel (in Port Washington) and was told to call back in 45 minutes while they tried to book a flight home. We knew the airline’s Web site said all flights from Chile had been cancelled.”

The call did not come as a surprise to the travel agency staff, owner Jim Biever said.

“As soon as we heard about the earthquake, we knew Sue and Al would have trouble getting a flight out or finding a hotel room. We pretty much had the arrangements lined up before they called, and got them on a flight the first day planes were back in the air,” Biever said.

The agency even got Delta Airlines to waive the fee it normally charges for altered travel plans, something the air carrier probably wouldn’t have done for individual passengers.

Biever said the Schupps’ story should be seen as an example of why it can be worthwhile to use a travel agent when making vacation arrangements.

“We find a lot of people do research on the Internet but then come to us to make the travel arrangements. The cost of flights is set by the airlines, but the buying power of 10,000 travel agents allows us to offer better prices on things like cruises and resort accommodations,” he said.

“Two or three times a week, we’ll get calls from people who arrive at their destination and encounter something they are unhappy with. Making things right is almost always something we can do more easily on our end than they can on their end.”

Because the travel agency has been in business for 35 years, Biever said, his staff has a wealth of knowledge about specific vacation destinations.

“What people often find is that for $10 more, they could have had a very nice trip. We don’t charge for that expertise,” he said.

Although the agency does not provide a 24-hour help line, Biever said, voice mail messages or e-mail requests can usually bring help within 24 hours.

The most common travel emergency in this area involves travel arrangements cancelled by winter snow storms, but Biever said even the Chilean earthquake didn’t faze him.

“I am not surprised by anything anymore,” he said.

As for the Schupps, they readily sang the praises of working with a travel agent, such as those at Biever’s.

“They were great. Knowing they were looking out for us helped eliminate much of the worry,” Sue Schupp said.

AFTER SCRAMBLING TO find a way home from a South American cruise after an earthquake hit Chile, Port Washington residents Suzan and Al Schupp had high praise for the efforts of their travel agency, Biever Travel. The Schupps met with travel agent Sarah Spielvogel (far left) in the agency’s office on Franklin Street in Port.Photo by Mark Jaeger