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For families in business

Genie to the stars

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by Margie Goldsmith

It's two days before Christmas and you'd kill to spend the holiday in the trendiest hotel in St Barts, but it's been sold out for over a year. You're in Manhattan, salivating to have dinner at a hip Union Square Café, but it's booked solid for the next two months. You forgot all about your anniversary, and you'd do anything to charter a private yacht on one week's notice, but nothing's available.

Not to worry. If you're the kind of person who refuses to take "no" for an answer and money is no object, call Bill Fischer, travel agent extraordinaire. Fischer can get you anything you want: into sold-out resorts, onto overbooked flights, reservations at the hottest restaurants with only a few hours notice – except first, you'll need his unlisted phone number.



And even if you find a friend who has his number, before Bill Fischer will help you, you'll have to pay a non-refundable \$100,000 membership fee plus \$25,000 a year in dues. And that does not include tickets, reservations or services.

No surprise that his clients are mostly celebs, VIPs, and Fortune 400 A-listers. But for that price tag, your every wish will be granted. Consider Fischer your fairy godfather – not just for private jets, yachts, and the most coveted suite at the most over-the-top resort. Fischer's clients demand much more.

Sitting on a couch in the lounge of his midtown Manhattan office, the 72-year-old Fischer is impeccably dressed in a Valentino suit, monogrammed hand-tailored shirt ("so no one can steal it," he grins), silk tie and trademark matching pocket handkerchief. Draped on the couch next to him is a \$2,000 red cashmere blanket with "Fischer" stitched in white letters. "Just a little 'thank you' gift for his clients," he says.

Directly outside the lounge, his 25 employees man the phones and computers; and, like Fischer, even when not in the office, they're on call 24/7 with phones and beepers. Says Fischer, "If people are in Beijing, London or Paris and they want something or want to change something, they're speaking to the same person. It's not a 'tap-in-27-numbers-this-call-may-be-monitored' scenario. You don't want to go through all this red tape."

Fischer's corner office is crammed with magazines, folders, and framed photographs of himself with celebrities. He doesn't use a computer or email, preferring to conduct business on either of two multi-lined telephones which sit on his desk along with two rotary rolodex card files, each the size of a large cantaloupe, and containing about 2,000 contacts – not just the personal phone numbers of hotel managers, private airports or yacht charter companies, but specialists such as doctors, tutors, translators, diplomats – whatever it takes to satisfy his clients.

"People call us with all kinds of needs, not just travel," he says. "They need a new butler, a new chef, liposuction or plastic surgery. We're like a lifestyle company – we manage lives. And they love us because whatever they need we're able to secure for them." He once sent a client to a private island and arranged for a helicopter at the client's request in case the client wanted to go out at night to a casino or dinner or dancing. The landing pad had no lights, so Fischer had the lights shipped overnight from California to the Bahamas. The FAA then demanded an inspection, which can take two to three months.

Fischer called someone he knew, and two days later, the lights were inspected. Then there was the time a wife wanted to guarantee that her husband, on a fishing trip in Africa, landed a big one. Fischer arranged to have a frogman ensure that a fish landed on the line.

After graduating from high school in Brooklyn, Bill Fischer chose a job over college. First, he worked for his father, who owned a famous restaurant in Brooklyn called Jack Fish's Little Oriental Restaurant. (This was before Chinese restaurants, when "Oriental" was a steak broiler). Around that time, a friend opened a travel agency in Brooklyn, and Fischer joined the company, but wanting something more prestigious, he left to work for Fugazy Travel in New York City.

"Most of the people who worked there were from European backgrounds," says Fischer. "If you wanted to find out about a place in Germany or Poland or Paris, there was always someone who lived there. I was taught by some very well-travelled people."

But mainly, Fischer was selling \$199 packages to Las Vegas. He was not happy. When he himself went on vacation, he always stayed at the most luxurious hotels, but noticed the guests were never really being taken care of the way he thought they should be. "There were other services besides booking a hotel," says Fischer, "limo services, restaurant services, massages and golf lessons. Whatever they needed, that's what I was prepared to do to take care of the people."

With this in mind, Fischer approached travel agency owners and offered to train the managers on how to sell luxury travel; no one wanted his services. "After two years of everybody refusing me, I had such a burning desire to do this, that I went to my brother in law and borrowed money," says Fischer.

His first breakthrough was a client who was willing to pay 10 times more than the worth of the trip, provided Fischer could deliver what he desired. After five years, the business finally began to take off. "By the eighth year, I began to think what could I do that's different, unusual?" says Fischer.

"I decided to unlist my telephone number. Everybody thought that was the craziest thing ever – a travel agency with an unlisted telephone number. Then, people would call us who wanted a suite at Christmas time. 'If you take care of me, you'll get all my business,' they said. So we'd get them whatever they wanted and we'd never hear from them anymore."

I said to my accountant, 'We're going to start charging a membership fee of \$5,000.' He said, 'Are you crazy? People are going to walk across the street to a travel agency where they can get it for free. They're not going to pay \$5,000.' But I did it. I started at \$5,000. From \$5,000 it went to \$10,000. Then to \$20,000. Then to \$50,000. And now it's \$100,000 plus \$25,000 a year to stay on as a client."

What Fischer succeeded in doing with his clients that no one else had attempted was to get people what they couldn't otherwise get: onto private jets and yachts, tickets to the Olympics and the Academy Awards, into sold out hotels and villas. He did this by promising to deliver the "right" clients. These same hotel managers who would say no to 50 others, said yes to Fischer and still do.

Presently, Fischer has about 500 clients, and although he won't reveal any names, word has it that Martin Scorsese, Calvin Klein, Jonathan Tisch, and Bruce Wasserstein are among them.

To personally check out new places around the world, Fischer travels three or four times a month, about 200 days a year. One day he might be in the Riviera Maya, the next day, on Kiawah Island. And after more than a quarter of a decade in the business, the favourite part of Fischer's job is still getting the impossible, even if it means calling someone twice a day for three and a half months, such as he did to procure reservations in a trendy European ski resort.

"The manager told me, 'Forget it, we're 30 rooms over booked. No way are you going to get those.' So I proceeded to call her twice a day. She said to me, 'You know, it feels like I go to bed with you at night and I

wake up with you in the morning.' I said, 'Well how is it?' The next day I come into the office and there's a fax: 'so and so confirmed 22 December to 2 January.' So I know it's going to happen and I never take no for an answer."

Fischer has one daughter, 46-year-old Stacy, whom he hopes will some day be the successor. "She's great," he says. "If you could clone someone, she'd be a clone. She's been here 24 years already, and within the last 10 or 12 years she's blossomed into her own person and really understands the clients."

So how long does this energetic 72-year old plan to stay with the company? "Probably another 30 or 40 years," he grins. "That's it. Then I'll give it up. It's fun when you can make all these impossible things happen. It's what gets your juices running everyday." When asked his legacy will be, he chuckles. "Bill Fischer never took no for an answer."

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