

TRAVEL

Getting on Board the Right Group Tour

BY EVE GLICKMAN

IF YOU PREFER TO AVOID THE STRESS of driving down unfamiliar roads while on vacation or fumbling through a dictionary to figure out how to say, "Where's the water fountain?" in Portuguese, think about taking a group tour. "These tours free you from the nuts and bolts of life on the road," says Barbara Radcliffe Rogers, the author of more than 20 travel books. Someone else does the work—leaving you free to relax and have a good time.

Because there's economy in numbers, group tours can also offer significant savings. Packages typically include the services of a knowledgeable guide, hotel accommodations, local transportation, baggage handling, and many sight-seeing fees at rates far better than those you could find yourself.

But there are possible minuses. You may wind up with people you'd never invite into your home. Your hotel room

might face a dingy back alley. Or you may find that you're rushed from one attraction to the next without being able to appreciate any of them.

In short, group touring can be a hit or a mess, unless you do a little research beforehand. Here are some factors to consider and questions to ask.

What are the real costs? To calculate whether you'll really save money by taking a tour instead of traveling on your own, you first need to decide what you want from the trip and how often you plan to stray from the group to do your own thing. Also find out how much flexibility the tour offers in terms of what you buy and how you pay for it.

Suppose, for example, you have frequent-flier miles that could get you to your destination free. Will the tour operator deduct the cost of the airfare

from the total price? Are hotel discounts available if you want to extend your stay? Another option to consider if the tour group's activities don't suit your taste: Join up just for the lower airfare and hotel rates, and then sight-see on your own.

There's no doubt that group tours usually get the best rates. Billie Gruszynski, a 63-year-old Arlington, Texas, retiree, learned that lesson when she stayed over at the end of a tour and had to pay almost twice as much for the additional nights she booked in Rome, Paris, and London.

Other cost considerations: Will you be taken on shopping expeditions to



stores that have made deals with the tour—and that may not offer the best prices—or will you be allowed time to shop wherever you want? Also, will the tour company be able to get you tickets for performances or exhibits that you'd probably have trouble obtaining on your own?

If you're willing to splurge a bit, book with a tour that offers first-class meals and wine; plusher, more centrally located lodgings; and a group size limited to, say, 12 instead of 40.

What's not included in the price?

Asking this question should eliminate some unpleasant surprises, like discovering on a tour of Italy that a visit to Michelangelo's David is an "optional excursion" costing extra. Another possible expense: Tips are generally not included in the package price.

Who's taken this tour in the past?

Does the tour tend to attract families, singles, women only, retirees? Where are they from? Ask the tour operator. Obviously you won't be able to hand-pick the group you travel with, but at least you'll get an idea of the kinds of people the tour is geared for.

For those who share specific interests, specialty tours can be especially rewarding. Many groups—from the National Trust for Historic Preservation to local opera companies—offer trips of particular interest to their members. Such tours tend to cost more, however.

Will the tour company supply you with the names of former clients?

Beware of any tour group that won't provide client referrals, advises Heather Killingbeck, general manager of Country Walkers, a tour operator in Waterbury, Vermont. If possible, also check the credentials of the guide who'll be conducting the tour you're interested in. And if you want to immerse yourself in the history and culture of the country you're visiting, choose a tour company that specializes in that area.

Truffles or McDonald's? Don't hesitate to ask about dining options. Are you limited in what you can order in restaurants, for example? Must you eat every meal with the group? Are special dietary needs accommodated? Is wine or beer included with the price of dinner? Will most of your meals be in American-style restaurants, or will you be trying native cuisines?

What consumer protection is provided? Check the brochure to see if your tour operator offers a consumer protection plan that guarantees you'll get your money back if the company goes bankrupt before you take your trip, suggests Jean Dorn, director of sales for the Globus & Cosmos travel agency in Littleton, Colorado.

How much physical activity does the tour entail? Because group tours generally involve a routine of bus-and-walk, they're usually not pleasurable experiences for the weak of knee. So if you have any kind of physical limitations, ask how much walking is involved and what provisions are avail-

able for people with difficulties.

What does the daily itinerary include? You probably don't want to spend the greater part of your vacation on a bus, so find out what the driving time between destinations is. If you don't like changing hotels and cities every night, be sure the tour offers at least two nights' stay in one or more locations. Also, make certain there's time built into the schedule to just do nothing or to go off on your own. If you want to meet friends who are traveling in Tuscany when you're there, for example, can you break away and rejoin the tour two days later in Assisi?

"If it's Tuesday, this must be Belgium" is an old joke, and one you won't find so amusing if you're one of the cast of characters on a poorly run tour. Group tours are the perfect way to travel for many people—after all, there is some truth to that saying, "The more the merrier." But doing a little research beforehand will go a long way to ensuring you're on the right tour bus.