

## 9 tips for choosing a tour itinerary

### How to pick the best organised tour for your style of travel

Organised tours are great. They're fun, engaging, informative, a good way to meet new people and create amazing memories. How you go about finding the one that is right for you is the tricky part. With lots of information in brochures and online, it's easy to get overwhelmed.

How do you choose the tour itinerary that will deliver the holiday you want?

- Choosing to travel on an organised tour is a great option because –
- You don't want to spend hours and hours of your spare time researching destinations, hotels, activities and transport and co-ordinating it all with lots of different operators who don't speak the same language
- You want to know exactly how much to budget for your trip
- You either want to travel solo or want to travel at a time when none of your friends are available or they aren't interested in the destination you have chosen. Or you want to travel with a group of friends without the responsibility of co-ordinating a holiday for the whole group and trying to meet everyone's requests.
- There are amazing trips to far flung destinations that are challenging to get to on your own
- You want to have local knowledge and guidance available to you during your whole trip
- All of your transport is taken care of, this will save you hours of organising and waiting in your destination
- You want to authentic interactions with local communities

You have made a decision on your destination, now it's time to choose an organised tour. How do you do that?

The amount of tour products available to travellers is at an all-time high and they cater for all types of budgets, interests, travel styles, and demographics.

The criteria I use when choosing a tour and tour operator is –

#### 1 - Group size

This can make a huge difference to your overall experience. Get this wrong and you will come back home regretting your choice of tour and tour operator. Think about the type of holiday you want to go on and what your purpose is for the trip. Is it to party? Is it to explore and connect to culture through food? Is it to travel with purpose and feel like you are giving something back to the destination and communities you visit? Group size should be the first thing you think about when choosing a tour as it will shape the kind of experience you will have.

*Coach tours* generally have between 20- 45 people on tour and they can be a mix of many different nationalities. Large coach tours usually have a minimum of 20 -25 booked passengers to confirm a departure.

Larger escorted/guided tours can allow access to special events like dinners at venues not available to the general public, special interest events and VIP entry to museums, art galleries and events due to the guaranteed number of guests. If you want to party your way through a destination, then big

groups can be better as you have a ready-made group to roll into the club with and you are safer than partying on your own in certain destinations.

This type of tour is good if you haven't travelled before, like staying in larger hotels and eating in restaurants that can offer food that doesn't vary greatly from what you are used to at home.

*Small group tours* consist of 2 to 16 people usually travelling in a small coach or mini bus. Small groups also use public transport depending on the tour company. Many tour operators will run a small group tour if there are at least 2 passengers, this means you could actually end up with a private tour at a great rate. You can also be travelling with people from other countries which can add another layer of interest to the group.

Small group tours give you a more authentic experience because it's easier to accommodate a smaller group of travellers in a local community. If minimising your environmental footprint matters to you, then small group travel is a winner as most tour companies now actively participate in reducing their global footprint and supporting the local environments they visit. They focus heavily on staying in locally run accommodation, eating in smaller, locally run restaurants and using local guides.

There are pros and cons to this type of travel, I personally really enjoy it as I love interacting with the locals and finding out where I can eat local food that won't make me sick. There is a certain amount of adventurous spirit required for small group tours as you tend to have more time to explore on your own.

*Self-guided/Independent tours* are great for travelling on your own or with your own group. You follow an itinerary arranged by the tour operator and can choose to have meals and local guides included or be completely self-sufficient. Unlike Coach and Small group tours, you choose the style and location of accommodation that suits you.

Self-guided tours are great for active holidays, many tour operators offer walking or cycling itineraries that have been tested and are safe with plenty of amenities along the way. They arrange luggage transfer, bike or equipment hire and provide you with route maps and notes.

*Fully customised* means your choice of activities, accommodation style and pace of travel. Creating a itinerary with a tour operator gives you the best of both worlds, you get to access the insights of a destination expert while you choose what you want to see and how long you wish to stay in the destinations you choose.

It's easy to read lots of travel blogs and see amazing Instagram pictures and decide to add a long list of destinations to your travel list, but it may not be realistic in the time frame you have allocated, budget you have or season you are travelling in. An experienced and specialised tour operator will help you create a realistic and enjoyable itinerary.

## **2 - Pace of travel**

Do you want to see as much as possible or take your time to explore a bit and wander the streets and lanes? Pace of travel is determined by the amount of time you choose to allocate to your holiday and the number of destinations you want to see.

The beauty of organised tours is that they range from 1 day to over 40 days and you can mix and match the tours to suit your travel plans. This can work really well when you want to stay in particular destinations longer and skim over others.

Many tour operators are creating slow itineraries or customisable itineraries where you choose your pace of travel.

Read the itinerary carefully, it outlines exactly the hours spent travelling in between destinations, how long you will be in a destination and included activities. Some activities you can opt out of, others you may not be able to. If you are in doubt about the itinerary, contact the tour operator, they will answer your questions and give you options.

## **3 - Cost**

Do you want all-inclusive so that the money you take with you is all spending money or do you want to have freedom to choose and pay for activities depending on the destination you are in? 20 something travellers often choose Contiki tours because once they pay for the tour, the rest of their budget is for eating, drinking, and shopping.

It's easy to look at a tour and say "I can do it for much less" but you may not actually be able to when you take all the components into account including the amount of your personal time spent planning, researching, and following up emails and tracking price changes.

Tour itineraries are very transparent and list all activities, both included and optional. Read the itinerary carefully before you pay for the tour.

Read the trip notes on the tour website as they outline everything you need to know and what is included. If the website doesn't have trip notes, ask for them to be emailed to you.

## **4 - Style**

If you are not a backpacker or like staying in hostels, don't choose a basic tour because you will be travelling on local transport and staying in basic accommodation. There are tours that will cover a huge range of travelling styles from homestays to luxurious old palaces and everything in between. Often, the destination I am travelling to will determine the style of trip I choose, not all accommodation is equal! For example, it is very common in big cities to get hotel rooms without windows, will this work for you?

The tour style also indicates the demographic you will be travelling with. A luxury trip tends to cater more for the over 45's while a standard trip will cater for everyone. A budget trip can also cater for all age groups and will appear to be great value, but is that your kind of travel companion?

If you want to have your own room and bathroom and love a big buffet breakfast, then a budget tour may not be for you.

Many small group tour operators offer home stay experiences in rural areas, often this means a shared bathroom and shared sleeping spaces that can just be a mattress on the floor, I thoroughly enjoy the experience as I know that I am helping a community prosper from tourism and my travel dollars, but is that your travel style?

## **5 - Tour prices**

Prices are always quoted in twin or triple share depending on the tour, you can usually choose to pay a single supplement if you do not want to share a room with a stranger. Don't believe what you read in travel blogs about tour operators slugging you the single supplement, reputable tour operators all quote tour prices based on twin share, single supplement is an opt in.

## **6 - Included activities**

These vary greatly and is what will set many operators apart. Do you want to hike, bike, kayak and connect with nature? Do you want to walk through streets, lanes, markets and alleyways? Or do you just want to eat?

Tour operators work hard with their destination management operators to include safe, fun activities in their itineraries. A lot of them are included in your tour price but can be optional to participate in, if you choose to not participate, you cannot request a refund though, it's a choice you make.

When choosing a tour and looking at the activities, don't forget to take the weather into account in your chosen destination. Do you like the heat or the cold and what kind of activities do you enjoy doing. Bike riding in high heat and humidity can be very challenging and unpleasant, same as hiking when it is cold and wet can leave you with memories you didn't have in mind at the time you booked your tour.

## **7 - Are you willing to be flexible?**

When travelling on an organised tour you are part of a group following a set itinerary. There is some flexibility and down time built into the itinerary to allow you to do some extra activities, explore the destination on your own or just chill at your hotel.

Please don't take your independent traveller ideals with you on a group tour. No, the group cannot wait for you to wake up at the time you choose. No, the group cannot wait for you while you meander through shops when it's time to move to the next activity. No, the group cannot come back and pick you up. No, the itinerary cannot be altered because you find a destination boring and are ready to leave. No, you cannot get a refund for not participating in a pre-paid activity.

Finally, YES, you do need to contribute to the group kitty to cover tips for the tour guides, drivers, and hotel porters and to buy the water that you drink on the bus after a hot and sweaty afternoon of sightseeing.

## **8 - Destinations**

Look at the complete itinerary to ensure that you want to visit all destinations included as they cannot be changed and if you want to skip a destination and meet the tour at the next destination, you will have to arrange and pay for your own transportation.

Before you choose a tour, check the season you are travelling in, the tour might be a great price but are you travelling in rainy season which can make sightseeing difficult or middle of summer when everything is unpleasant if you don't like hot weather.

Contact the tour operator and ask questions. Check how long the travel days are between destinations and how long you will spend in each location. Often there is a reason for structuring the itinerary in a particular way due to geography, transport, dining options or accommodation availability.

An organised tour can be a valuable dress rehearsal for future travel as the reality of a destination may be very different to your perception of it. I found this out when I went to India, it had been a bucket list destination for a very long time and I was thinking of planning a month long trip. I decided to do a short organised tour before planning a longer trip and while the tour was wonderful and I met great people on the tour, I realised that India wasn't the destination I thought it would be for my travel requirements and preferences.

Sometimes organised tours are the only way to visit destinations, this can be due to cultural sensitivities, geographical and transportation logistics or language barriers.

## **9 - Value alignment**

This is an important factor when you choose a tour and tour operator. Does the brand stand for the same values that you do when you travel? Are the activities included aligned with your values? For example – do you want to interact with animals or observe them from afar? Do you want to volunteer in a school or orphanage?

Many tour operators have changed how they interact with the communities they visit and their values and philosophies are clearly stated on their website. Research the brand to ensure that they are the right fit for you.

Responsible and sustainable tourism has become a core component of how many tour operators build their itineraries now. Do these matter to you? This can be an important deciding factor for choosing both a tour and tour operator as you will be travelling with like-minded individuals.