

SHOULD YOU USE A TOUR COMPANY?

By Chase Binder

Face it. We baby boomers are getting on in years. Some us no longer have the physical ability to fly to faraway places, drag our own luggage everywhere, or drive cars in unfamiliar territory. Some of us can tolerate the physical stress perfectly well, but don't want the bother of navigating the world of travel on our own. We've earned the right to sit back and leave the driving to others!

Lucky for us, there are literally thousands of tour companies ready and able to shoulder these burdens in part or in full. So how do you pick the one that's right for you?

Begin with a brutally honest self-assessment. Traveling with a tour group requires ceding most control over things like hotel selection, itinerary, daily schedule of sightseeing and even restaurant and menu choices. It also requires at least some sociability, often with strangers whom you may or may not like, as well as lots of patience—bathroom stops for large groups can take a long, long time.

If any of this seems like a nightmare to you, stop reading now. You'll be much happier going the FIT (Foreign Independent Travel) route. I'll write about that in an upcoming column. But if you're not hyperventilating yet, read on!

Tour companies come in all shapes and sizes and are designed for all types of budgets and travelers. Since money is a consideration for most of us, deciding your general category of travel is a good place to start. With a few exceptions (more about them later), true luxury tours abroad will set you back \$5-9,000 per person per week—though you can reduce that slightly by booking 2-4-week tours. Mid-range tours will run \$3-5,000 per person per week. Budget tours to the same countries can be had for as little as \$1800-3000 per person per week.

What's the difference? Luxury tours book 5 and 6-star hotels, nor-



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mally specialize in small, intimate groups (12-20) and make sure that guests have the best food/drink/experience possible—think silver and crystal tableware and Cordon Blue chefs on tented safaris in the African bush. Some luxury tour companies even assure you that fellow travelers will be “like-minded”—perhaps code for well-traveled, well-educated. If you'd like to explore these, start with Abercrombie and Kent (abercrombiekent.com) for a comprehensive selection of worldwide destinations. Although there are other specialty luxury tour companies (National Geographic Expeditions comes to mind (natgeoexpeditions.com), A & K set the standard early on.

If you can handle slightly larger groups, perhaps up to 30, and feel that 3 and 4-star hotels would be acceptable, try a mid-range tour company. These vary from companies that tend toward the higher end like Tauk (tauk.com) to ones that have a broader range of price-points like Collette Tours (gocollette.com) or Trafalgar (trafalgar.com). These companies generally provide more types of tours—some small group, some larger—and also allow you to book at various levels, normally meaning you can upgrade to a better

hotel. Still, you'll often be eating in restaurants that accommodate larger groups and have fixed menus.

Budget tour companies are able to provide travel service using economies of scale—larger groups (often 50), bigger busses, bigger “tourist class” hotels (think Red Roof Inn, Econolodge), and fewer options to personalize your experience. Many have co-marketing arrangements with AARP, so aarp.org is a good place to start looking at these travel options.

No matter which option you choose, always look at the list of inclusions and exclusions. Airfare is the biggie, of course, and is rarely included—though explore flying on points if you have them and always look for promos. Another creeping cost is meals. “Most meals included” can mean a sparse continental breakfast at the hotel and a box lunch on the bus. If you're on your own in parts of Scandinavia for dinners, that can mean adding \$100/day per person. And don't forget gratuities. Most tours will include luggage transfers and tips for group meals, but rarely bus drivers or tour guides. Again, look for promos.

Most importantly, decide what's most important to you. Bud and I admit we like a nice hotel...but we also are cost-con-

scious. I will often look at luxury tours to see what hotels they use in an area, then look for a mid-range tour company that uses the same hotels. We also like a tour that is has 16-20 or so people. More than 20 you're in a larger bus and will likely be in tourist-style restaurants. If you have at least 16, you'll no doubt find some compatible companions, and also be able to dodge some that might grate on your nerves.

And what about the exception I spoke about...luxury for less than \$5-9000/week? Monitor luxury tour websites for tours to areas of the world that might be unpopular. Bud and I had a spectacular Abercrombie and Kent tour of Egypt in 2012, a little more than a year after the Arab Spring. The price was incredible, and we figured they wouldn't be offering the trip if they didn't feel confident about keeping us safe. It was unforgettable and we never had a moment of nervousness.

Lastly, with today's internet access and social media, it's easier than ever to research tour companies. Don't forget—anyone can say they are luxury tour company, or say they provide best value for the money. Check them out on TripAdvisor (where you can directly email reviewers), ask friends who travel, Google the company name.

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