

Choosing a Tour Company

Deciding how best to spend a considerable sum of other people's money is no trivial matter for directors and administrators. It can be difficult to compare one tour company with another. We hope we may help the process with this list of questions:

Is each company's quotation based on the same specifications?

When making a price comparison, it is vital that you know the basis on which each tour company is quoting. This information should include:

- Total group size
- Number of free places
- Number of nights
- Standard of accommodation
- Number of meals
- Sightseeing and excursions
- Number of performances
- Air fare, with all current taxes and surcharges

The last item, air fare, is very important. Airlines are a business like any other, and advertising plays a crucial part in winning consumers over. Many airlines now advertise super-cheap fares; some even offer seats for nothing, or for nominal sums such as 1p.

Sadly these offers invariably only apply for individual travellers and are on a first come-first served basis. Once the seats on a particular flight sold at these loss-leading prices are taken, other seats on the aircraft will become incrementally more expensive. Add to this some of the hidden costs that may apply, and seats on a budget airline flight may actually work out more expensive for a group than flying with a national airline.

Furthermore, budget airlines may require full payment of the total balance, and final passenger number and names at the time of booking. With national airlines it is usually only necessary to pay a deposit to secure seats, and that number of seats can be reduced by a certain percentage without penalty up to a few weeks prior to travel. Names and payment of the final balance need only be given at this time. Such flexible terms and conditions on national airlines are a huge advantage to groups.

Are you getting good value for money?

It is surprising to us how often decisions are made on price alone. Of course price is important but, after the tour, are your participants going to begrudge an extra £50 if the tour was a success, or feel better if the tour was not successful but they saved that amount? A higher-priced tour may offer much better value for money than a lower-priced one.

Does the company have musicians on its staff?

Members of our team are not only travel experts but also musicians who are able to discuss repertoire, venues, acoustics and instruments knowledgeably. Depth of musical knowledge is essential in this extremely specialised business.

Does the company have offices or representatives in the countries you are planning to visit?

Many companies simply subcontract all on-site logistics to another business or individual. We have an established and growing network of representatives worldwide. Local knowledge is essential in finding and promoting the best possible performance opportunities for your group.

How long has the company been in existence? Can they provide reliable references?

Most tour companies can produce a list of glowing references. Make a point of following them up by talking with Directors who have used the company many times and have travelled to the areas you are planning to visit.

Does the company have IATA, ATOL and ABTA licences?

In addition to being a registered IATA, ATOL and ABTA licensed and bonded travel agency we provide your group with the quality assurance that comes from being part of the Association of Independent Tour Operators (AITO).

Does the company have experience of transporting instruments?

Reliable companies will be able to advise and arrange the safe transport of instruments in all modes of transport if they have the necessary experience. A youth symphony's instrument load needs to be handled with the same care as their professional counterparts. As part of a company that frequently arranges travel for professional orchestras and choirs we are experienced at getting both people and instruments to their destination effectively and safely.

Does the company have a verifiable risk assessment programme and are its staff trained in disaster management?

Thinking the unthinkable is important both for you and for those in your charge. Ask for details of the company's policy on risk assessment and how it trains and briefs its staff. Does it have disaster management procedures in place?

Above all... try to get to know the company, before you make the choice. Planning a concert tour requires an enormous interchange of information and ideas over several months. Try to choose the company with which you would most like to work.