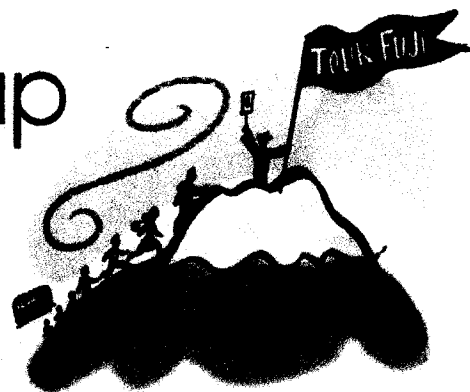


Going With the Group

When to consider taking an escorted tour

BY PAUL LASLEY AND ELIZABETH HARRYMAN • ILLUSTRATION BY STEVEN SALERNO



Q: I'm an independent-minded traveler. But are there times when an escorted tour might be a good idea?

A: Before taking an escorted tour of Ireland, we were skeptical of the tour idea. But an experience in County Galway changed our minds.

A peat fire burned in the fireplace of the 220-year-old thatched-roof farmhouse. "I was born in a pub," said Frances, the woman who greeted us at the front door. She had green eyes that expressed gentleness. "Maybe that's why I like meeting people," she said. After she served us Irish soda bread and a soup of leeks, potatoes, and carrots, our group went to the barn to see—and feed—a new lamb. We wouldn't have thought that this kind of simple, intimate experience could be part of an escorted tour. But this encounter made us realize that escorted, or group, tours aren't what they used to be.

This year marks the 40th anniversary of the film *If It's Tuesday, This Must Be Belgium*, which embedded in public consciousness the traditional image of the group tour: jet-lagged tourists piling on and off motorcoaches, following an itinerary that crams so many foreign capitals into a week that people forget what country they're in.

What a difference 40 years makes. "Today, people on escorted tours are sight-doing instead of sightseeing,"

says Bob Whitley, president of the United States Tour Operators Association (USTOA). "They're climbing Mount Fuji instead of just looking at it.

"They're visiting local residents in their homes. And many tours visit just one or two countries; they take in a lot of villages and explore back roads. Today's tours have more free time built into them, so people can pursue their own interests or go shopping."

Our experience taught us that there are times when it pays to take an escorted tour. Here are some examples.

When you want to save money. Escorted tours can save you as much as 50 percent of the cost of paying for the trip components separately, according to the USTOA. "The cost of meals and attractions are typically included," says Whitley. "That can add up to big savings."

When you want to avoid hassle. On an escorted tour, you don't have to find your way around unfamiliar places. And if you have a problem with a hotel room, it's the tour escort who sorts it out, not you.

When you want to go to a special event. If you want to attend the Passion Play in Oberammergau, Germany, for example, which occurs every 10

years (the next performances will be in 2010), a tour will ensure that you have tickets and transportation to the event.

When you want to travel to less-developed countries. You might feel comfortable navigating western Europe on your own. But if you're heading to a destination that has a less-developed infrastructure, a group tour can ease the way.

When you want to pursue a special interest. Many tours allow you to focus on one theme, such as cooking or history or art, as you travel through a place. Being with people who share similar interests can also add to the experience, as Bill Green discovered. The Los Angeles-based human resources consultant's recent tour exploring the nature and history of Northern California was enhanced by the companionship of like-minded fellow travelers. "It made for stimulating conversation," he says.

When you want to make friends. Stimulating conversation can lead to lasting friendships. "My wife and I still keep in touch with people we met on that tour," says Green.

We know how he feels. When we return to Ireland, we plan to look up a gentle woman named Frances. **W**

HAVE A QUESTION FOR PAUL AND ELIZABETH? E-mail westways@aaa.com or write to TravelSmart, San Diego Westways, PO Box 25222, Santa Ana, CA 92799-5222. You can also tune in to their daily podcasts at ontravel.com.