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The Group Trip for People Who Hate Group Trips

As independent-minded Gen Xers and baby boomers take more guided trips, tour companies are trying to make the experiences feel less like group travel



A Classic Journeys trip to Iceland. The company unveiled a 'Choose Your Own Adventure' program last year that allows for greater personalization on group trips.

PHOTO: CLASSIC JOURNEYS

By Andrea Petersen

Guided group travel has some obvious appeal: Someone else makes all the plans, handles logistics and offers expert commentary at tourist sites.

But there's also a potential downside: The group itself.

Traveling in a group of people—many of whom start out as strangers—can mean waiting: to get on the van, to check into a hotel. Pre-set itineraries might offer fewer options than you'd like. And what if there's a jerk on your trip?

Now, travel companies are trying to make their group trips less group-like—particularly at high-end firms that limit their groups to less than 20 participants. They are offering more choices of activities and finding ways to cut down on wait times. They are stepping up efforts to handle tricky group dynamics by adding new training for guides and eliminating some situations that are ripe for conflict—like deciding who pays for wine at a group dinner.

Many luxury travel companies say interest in group trips is up as older Gen Xers and younger baby boomers age into the prime target market for guided tours: active adults between 50 and 70. It's a cohort that wore out Eurail passes in their youth and is used to independent travel. As they get older, they often have the money and the desire for someone else to take care of the details. But the group setting can create tensions for travelers used to being independent.



Christine Twiehaus traveled to Paris on an Abercrombie & Kent trip. ‘The smaller the group, the better my chances of striking up a friendship,’ she says.

PHOTO: CHRISTINE TWIEHAUS

Abercrombie & Kent, which operates high-end guided trips and safaris, says sales are up by “double digits” year over year in the last two years. Tauck, a family-owned firm that caters to travelers over 50, says it has seen “record revenues” in the last several years. And Butterfield & Robinson says sales are also up in the last few years, fueled by growth in its private tours that are booked by family and friends traveling together.

Companies are also seeing a wider range of travelers in terms of age, interests and health status: They need to cater to the grandmother who loves modern art, the daughter who loves biking and the granddaughter who loves her iPhone. Social media is at play, too. With more information at guests’ fingertips, they have particular ideas about which restaurants they want to visit or hikes they want to do.

As a result, travel companies say they are incorporating more personalization. Abercrombie & Kent is launching a “Design Your Day” feature for all of its “luxury small group journeys” beginning in 2020. These trips cost about \$500 to \$750 per person per day. At least one day per trip, guests will have the option of several different activities. In Dubrovnik, Croatia, for example, they can go sea kayaking, take a cooking class or join a walking tour of “Game of Thrones” shooting locations led by

a guide who worked as an extra on the show. Classic Journeys unveiled a similar “Choose Your Own Adventure” program in 2018. At least twice during a week-long trip, guests have a choice of activities: In Iceland, they can pick a hiking outing or snorkeling in a glacial lake. Backroads, Tauck and TCS World Travel have also added more options to their group trips in recent years.

Tour companies are tackling a particularly loathsome aspect of group travel: Having to wait—and wait—in a long line with your fellow travelers to check into your hotel. In 2018, Classic Journeys began what it calls Invisible Check-In. Staffers in the company’s California headquarters check guests into their hotels remotely and in advance. So when travelers arrive, they’re given their room keys immediately.

Travelers on Classic Journeys trips used to have to buy their own wine during group dinners. (Food was included.) But guides were noticing that the whole negotiation—collectively deciding what wine to order, how much to spend and who would pay—was causing bruised feelings. “If you think that guy wasn’t equitable or was domineering [about the wine], then maybe you start to pick at any other little peccadilloes the person may have,” says Edward Piegza, founder and president of Classic Journeys, where trips cost about \$800 per person per day. So in 2018, Classic Journeys began offering complimentary wine with group dinners. “When you remove things that might annoy each other, you give people a better chance to bond as a group,” he says.



Classic Journeys began offering complimentary wine at group dinners in 2018, a move the company says has improved group dynamics.

PHOTO: CLASSIC JOURNEYS

It's the chronic dawdlers that annoy Christine Twiehaus, a 64-year-old retired systems analyst from Lake Bluff, Ill. She has been on five trips with Abercrombie & Kent and usually enjoys her fellow travelers. But on a trip to the Canadian Rockies last July, two women—sisters who were traveling with their mother and two other sisters—were late to nearly every activity and departure, Ms. Twiehaus says, forcing everyone else to wait while the guides tried to track the sisters down. The women “seemed to take turns going missing,” she says. “People would moan and groan,” about the delays. (Abercrombie & Kent says when problems like constant tardiness arise, the trip's resident tour director “meets privately with guests to address the issue,” says spokeswoman Pamela Lassers.)

The divisive political climate has infiltrated group tours, too. Richard Turen, a travel adviser in Naples, Fla., says he's recently had clients say, “I love the idea of a group tour but I don't want to spend two weeks with people who are ‘blank blank’ supporters,” he says. Butterfield & Robinson, which runs biking and walking trips that

cost about \$1,000 per person per day, has dossiers on all its travelers that include their hobbies, likes and dislikes—and their political leanings. This way guides can be prepared to defuse contentious political discussions—and even separate guests with divergent and passionate views, says Scott McEwen, Butterfield & Robinson’s manager of traveler experience. Guides also try to direct the conversation. “We don’t talk about God. We don’t talk about politics. And we don’t talk about money,” he says. If conversations do get heated, “I’ll fill up the wine glasses, turn on the music, open the windows. It’s a way to change the atmosphere in the room,” he says.

Before Paul and Phyllis Suckow took their first trip with Abercrombie & Kent, they were worried about traveling with strangers. “We were originally very concerned about getting stuck with people that we wouldn’t enjoy. I think that’s everyone’s greatest fear about these things and that’s why a lot of people don’t ever do it,” says Ms. Suckow, 72, of Ardmore, Pa. But the couple was pleasantly surprised: They’ve now taken seven trips with the company. “We found almost universally that the people are congenial and fairly like-minded,” Ms. Suckow says. They appreciate the special access to cultural sites, like a before-public-opening-hours visit to the Hermitage Museum in St. Petersburg and an after-hours visit to a palace in Vienna. “We’re kind of sold on the group trip thing,” says Ms. Suckow.



Paul and Phyllis Suckow on an Abercrombie & Kent group trip in St. Petersburg, Russia.

PHOTO: PAUL AND PHYLLIS SUCKOW

Travel companies say they've seen a surge in groups of families and friends booking tours, something that can create a "group within a group" phenomenon that can make other travelers feel left out. There can be other issues, too. A big group may demand changes to the itinerary or departure times, and think that, because of their numbers, other travelers should bend to their will, says Jo Zulaica, director of leader development at Backroads, which operates biking and hiking trips around the world. "I think that the larger the group, the more the tendency to believe that it is a private or custom departure," she says. So, in 2016, Backroads added new training for its

guides on how to handle a “group within a group.” First, the company encourages large groups to book a private trip. (Most high-end travel companies offer private guided trips for families and groups of friends, and this is a growing part of their business.) But, if the group is on a regular tour, guides are taught to gently but firmly remind them that “the leaders have to take care of everyone,” says Ms. Zulaica. Guides also encourage groups to split up and sit with other travelers during at least one dinner.



Tara Hitchcock and Kenn Francis (here in Croatia) have taken multiple biking trips with Backroads.

PHOTO: TARA HITCHCOCK

Tara Hitchcock, 49, who has taken eight cycling trips with Backroads, says there’s an underappreciated upside to traveling with a group: It can make it easier—and more fun—to vacation with your spouse. (Indeed, it can be harder to fight when there’s an audience.) Ms. Hitchcock’s husband, Kenn Francis, 58, is a faster biker. Traveling with a group means they can each ride at their own pace without feeling like they’re abandoning each other. There are other benefits, too. “It is fun to look over at your husband holding court telling a funny story you’ve heard a million times,” says Ms.

Hitchcock, a television personality in Scottsdale, Ariz. “It reminds you of what you loved about the person when you first met.” And the admiration flows both ways. “It’s a reminder to your spouse. I’m great. In case you forgot, people think I’m really fun.”

Write to Andrea Petersen at andrea.petersen@wsj.com