

# how to select a tour or vacation package

*Dear Traveler:*

*A vacation is an important investment. It deserves the same careful consideration and research you give to the purchase of a car, a television set, stereo equipment or any other major expenditure.*

*Knowing what to expect, a familiarity with how your money is being spent—and with whom—can help to avoid problems and disappointments and make your holiday a pleasure.*

*The following information will acquaint you with the scope and benefits of tours and vacation packages and offer shopping tips to ensure you select the tour or vacation package that's right for you.*

*We hope this will be of help in planning your next vacation.*

*Sincerely,*



*Terry Dale*

*President  
United States Tour Operators  
Association*

## **What is a tour and a vacation package?**

A *tour* can be defined as a trip taken by a group of people who travel together and follow a pre-planned itinerary. Most tours include accommodations, a number of meals, sightseeing, land transportation, and/or other transportation, plus the services of a professional tour manager or escort who accompanies the group.

*Vacation packages* are designed for those traveling independently. They include a combination of two or more travel services (e.g. hotel accommodations, car rental, air transportation) that are offered at a "package price." Many vacation packages offer a choice of components and options, thereby enabling you to customize the package to your tastes, interests and/or budget.

Some people think tours and vacation packages are overly regimented or lack adventure or sophistication. The fact is they encompass a tremendous spectrum of tastes, interests and travel styles—from a multi-country tour to a wine-tasting tour of a particular region to an adventure combining cruising and land-touring. In short, tours and vacation packages are as varied and individual as the millions of Americans who purchase them each year for travel in the U.S. and throughout the world.

## **The Advantages of Tours and Vacation Packages**

Tours and vacation packages offer many important benefits.

Key among these is savings. By contracting in bulk for hotels, accommodations, ground transportation, sightseeing tours, meals and other services, tour operators achieve substantial economies. The resulting savings from this volume purchasing are passed on to the traveler.

### *Volume Purchasing*

In addition, the tour operators' volume purchasing often enables them to secure accommodations, airline space and other arrangements that would be virtually impossible to obtain from any other source.

### *Peace of Mind*

Purchasing a tour or package also means peace of mind. Since you pre-pay for your trip, you know what the cost will be in advance and can budget for your vacation with greater certainty.

You'll also have the assurance that your vacation has been planned by professionals; and in the event that an unforeseen problem does arise, a tour escort, local host or some other representative of the tour operator is generally available to assist you.

## **Shopping Guide**

In most instances, the brochures provided by the tour operators will contain all the information you need in order to know exactly what you're getting for your money, to compare one tour or vacation package with another and to avoid unpleasant surprises.

Before you begin to

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collect and read the brochures, you should make a list of your vacation goals. This will help to keep in focus the things that are most important to you as you compare the options. And don't hesitate to turn to your travel agent when questions arise - there's no such thing as a silly question when your hard-earned vacation dollars are involved.

The following "checklist" will help you select the tour or vacation package that's right for you:

*Tour/Vacation Package Price* Be sure to check carefully what's included in the price and what's not. For example, does the price include air fare, or is it for land arrangements only? If air fare is included in the price, is the stated price from your home city or will there be an additional cost for an "add-on" fare? If air fare is not included, are you free to fly the airline of your choice?

Several other factors may add to the price, such as optional excursions, service charges and/or taxes, weekend air surcharges and high season supplements. And, if you're traveling alone, there is often a supplement fee for single accommodations.

#### *Tour Itinerary*

The day-to-day itinerary described in the brochure is a guide for what you can expect to see and do while on a tour. Make note of the cities and sites that you'll actually be visiting, as opposed to those places

that you'll simply be driving through (often indicated by terms such as "see" or "view" in the brochure). There's a big difference, and you should be aware of these distinctions to avoid disappointment.

Other important questions to consider when comparing tour itineraries include:

- Are you comfortable with the amount of time spent traveling by bus, rail or other transportation during the tour?
- Is there a great deal of walking involved?
- Does there seem to be enough free time for shopping or exploring on your own, or is there too much leisure time for your taste?

Everyone has their own level of energy and sense of adventure, and there are enough choices of tours on the market so that you can come as close as possible to your preferences without making a lot of compromises.

#### *Hotels*

No question about it, accommodations play a key role in the success of a trip. Many travelers say the most important one. You should pay close attention to the descriptions and ratings of the hotels featured.

Keep in mind that hotel ratings in other countries may not always reflect American standards, and that every country has its own hotel rating system. In other words, a "deluxe" hotel in one country could differ in size, amenities

and degree of luxury from a similarly rated hotel in another country.

Also be aware of location of the hotels. Hotels situated just outside the center of a city shouldn't be inconvenient if you'll be sightseeing by tour bus or if you have a rental car. On the other hand, if you are going to have a lot of free time in the cities you'll be visiting, you may prefer hotels that are centrally located.

If you still have questions about the hotels after reading the brochure, by all means check with your travel agent.

#### *Meals*

Dining is one of the most enjoyable parts of the travel experience. Read the brochure carefully to determine how much regional "flavor" you can look forward to on each program.

How many and what kind of meals are included each day? Will you have a choice of the menu or will you be limited to a smaller group of selections? Be sure you understand the terms often used in connection with meal information, such as "Continental Breakfast," "Full Board" and "MAP."

#### *Conditions*

Found at the end of most brochures, this information deserves a lot more attention than it usually receives.

Many important points are covered, including details about reservations, cancellations, refunds and availability of insurance.



Be sure you understand the policy in regard to cancellations, changes in departure date and refunds, and any cancellation and/or modification penalties that may apply, both to land and air travel portions of the trip. Remember, while this is a pleasure trip for you, it is a business for the tour operator.

The Conditions page may also specify the Ground Operators, if any, who are participating in the program. These are local travel companies, selected for their reliability and expertise, who usually provide motorcoaches, sightseeing tours and other services arranged by the tour operator.

Other important items usually covered by the Conditions page include: Meals, Accommodations, Air Transportation, Sightseeing, Baggage Allowance, Health Information and the items Not Included in the price. Remember, the Conditions page may not be as colorful as the rest of the brochure, but it's every bit as important in helping you reach the most informed decision.

### Your Responsibility

As you can see, choosing a tour or vacation package that will meet your expectations requires more homework on your part. In fact, even before you begin to collect and read the brochures, you should make a list of your vacation goals. This will help to keep in focus the things that are most important to you as you compare the options. And don't hesitate to

turn to your travel agent when questions arise—there's no such thing as a silly question when your hard-earned vacation dollars are involved.

### What If?

What if a problem occurs? The vast majority of tours and vacation packages go off like clockwork; but should a legitimate complaint arise during your trip, such as a service not provided or severe disappointment in quality or performance, the matter usually can be resolved with the assistance of your travel agent and/or tour operator. Remember, it is in their best interest to resolve all legitimate complaints as quickly and fairly as possible, because a satisfied customer comes back for more, and refers others.

### Travel Agents: Your Best Bet

You are the only one who should decide what you want in a vacation package or tour; however, with a myriad of alternatives in destinations, prices, levels of service and facilities, you need the assistance of a travel agent to help select the package or tour that's right for you.

An experienced travel professional can advise you impartially on what is best suited to your requirements and recommend the programs from which you can make a selection with confidence.

Agents are travel information experts, eminently qualified to pinpoint your dreams, present your choices, and help

pick the package that's best for you.

Here's a primer to help you prepare for a productive meeting with your travel agent:

- 1 What's your budget? It needn't be hard and fast, but the options are too vast to approach without a figure or a price range in mind.
- 2 What kind of experience do you want? Domestic or foreign? A city or the countryside? The mountains or the beach?
- 3 What is the focus of the trip? Is it a family trip, where diversions for the children are needed? Is your goal to relax or do you want lots of activity? Do you want to stay put or move around? Would you like to pursue any hobbies?
- 4 When do you want to travel? Plan dates-but with some flexibility. Prices change as a destination moves from its high season to a "shoulder" season and then low season.
- 5 What type of tour do you want? Are you interested in the comfort of a fully escorted motorcoach tour or cruise? Would you prefer an all-inclusive package with air, or do you lean toward the greater independence of a modular approach?

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### A Reassuring Symbol

There's something else that can aid you in the selection of a tour or vacation package.

The members of the United States Tour Operators Association (USTOA) are required to adhere to a Code of Professional Conduct, which necessitates that their tour brochures be as clear and accurate as possible. USTOA members must also meet and maintain the highest standards of reliability and financial stability in the travel industry.

USTOA's \$1 Million Travelers Assistance Program requires each USTOA Active Member company to post \$1 million in security in the form of a bond or letter of credit. The security, to be held by USTOA Tour Depositors Trust, is solely for use

in reimbursing consumers for tour payments or deposits lost in the event of:

- A USTOA Active Member bankruptcy
- A USTOA Active Member insolvency
- A USTOA Active Member cessation of business
- Failure of a USTOA Active member to refund consumer deposits or payments within 120 days following its cancellation of a tour(s) or vacation packages(s) or its material failure to complete performance of a tours(s) or vacation packages(s).

In some cases—such as one of the larger tour operators becoming insolvent—the \$1 million may not cover all losses. Also, some tour operator

brands share coverage under their corporate owner's \$1 million bond.

### How to Find a USTOA Member Company

To identify a member company, look for the USTOA logo on the company's tour literature and in their ads. For a current list of USTOA members, the destinations they serve, and their variety of vacation offerings, visit the online USTOA Membership Directory at [www.ustoa.com](http://www.ustoa.com).