



FINDING COMFORT IN GROUP TRAVEL MAKING LASTING FRIENDSHIPS IS POWERFUL FORCE ON TOURS AND PACKAGES

Finding comfort in group travel -- or human encounters -- is a rarely-reported, but powerful phenomenon of escorted tours. The United States Tour Operators Association conducted a series of interviews with people who had taken repeat escorted tours to find out what motivated them. The interviewees represented singles, couples and families from various parts of the U.S.

"Our previous research with the general public revealed that exploring new places and learning about different cultures were major motivators for taking tours and packages. While that holds true for veteran tour-takers as well, there was another powerful phenomenon that each of our interviewees cited: human relationships and forming lasting friendships," says Bob Whitley, USTOA president.

Below are some examples.

Angela Pittman, 53 retired school teacher of Winston Salem, NC, who has visited more than 40 countries observes, "When people have curiosity about the world, what you can learn and give, it makes a full circle experience." Pittman also cites the one-on-one exchanges she has had with people from the different cultures she has visited as an important reason for her love of travel.

Trudy and Ken Thornton, 72 and 74, from Maryland, formed lasting friendships with a group on a Canadian tour, and now they regularly get together for reunions. "We keep in touch by email . . . we are keeping up the reunions, and are making plans for another trip together."

Carol Marasovich, 56, a retired teacher from Illinois, found a new circle of friends while heli-hiking in the Canadian Rockies. "It was not a huge group and that's what made it nice. You got to meet everybody in the group. We might even find another trip in common that we all would like to do."

Gay Gagnon, 64, from Lutz, Florida, has taken ten tours with the same company, half with her husband and two with women she met on tour. This year she is planning to go to Seville, Lisbon and Madrid with the same company.

Caroline Adams, 45, a military pilot director of personnel now living in the Virgin Islands has made lifelong friends through her travels. "I have a dear friend in California that I met in Costa Rica," she says. "We . . . share notes on trips. We can learn about what to do next from each other and we provide each other with a pre-briefing or post-briefing," Adams says.

Diana A., late 50's, from Wayzata, MN, finds that the learning experience really involves her fellow travelers as much as the destination. "It's just such an education, not only from the places you go, but also from the people who go with you.

As soon as she started going on tours on her own, she made friends with a group of single women also traveling solo. Soon they became traveling companions. A friend she met on a tour of the Greek islands has since joined her in South America, Egypt and Russia. Another fellow traveler accompanied her to Ireland, Alaska and Costa Rica, and a third to Thailand and Vietnam

“The discussions with the people I meet on trips are so interesting,” she continues. “I’ve met a pathologist who escaped from Siberia, an archaeologist who worked on the Big Dig in Boston, and an older gentleman who worked on the Manhattan Project.”

What the experts say

Dr. Jonathan Bricker, a University of Washington psychologist, observes that shared values are what lead people to form personal connections and lasting friendships on tours. “When we meet people who share our passions, such as discovering or giving to others, an important connection is taking place at a fundamental level. These relationships can get at the core of what travel is all about for people.” He believes that when people plan their travel they usually think about the sites and activities they will be enjoying. But people don’t usually think about another key part of touring: the connections they will be making with their traveling companions.

According to Whitley, touring provides an excellent opportunity to not only explore new destinations and learn about history and culture, but to travel with others. “People really get to know each other through sharing experiences, which leads to forming lasting bonds. Many tour operators offer special interest vacations, so that people who are passionate about the outdoors or wildlife, history, architecture, wines, culinary adventures, and more can easily find others with their same interests.” he concludes.

The USTOA web site – www.ustoa.com or www.ustoa.travel –provides drop-down lists where travelers can search for companies by activity and destination. USTOA member companies have met the travel industry’s strictest criteria, including participation in the USTOA Travelers Assistance Program, which, among other things, requires each member company to set aside \$1 million in security to protect consumer payments in case the company goes out of business.

For more information on USTOA, consult the web site or phone 1-800-GO-USTOA (468-7862).

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Media Note:

All above-quoted persons are available for interview.

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