

## **INSIDERS LOOK AT A PILGRIMAGE** **&** **WHAT ARE THE MAIN PITFALLS**

This short guide is designed for the tour leader/decision maker to know exactly what to ask for and what to look out for to ensure that their group receives value for money and has no surprises.

### **1. The Guaranteed minimum.**

This figure is used to reckon the cost per person when calculating the cost of your usage of coaches. For example if the coach costs \$1,000.00 in total and your guaranteed minimum was say 15 people – that makes the cost \$66.67 per person. However, if you had a guaranteed minimum of 30 people – the cost is halved to \$33.33. So the rule is the more people you commit to the cheaper it will be. One word of warning, if you fail to achieve your minimum guaranteed number you leave yourself liable to a shortfall surcharge.

### **2. Hotels**

A few leaders know exactly the hotels they want, to others to hotel names are just that – *names*.

The hotel grade you select will have an impact on the price, as well as the location and the duration you stay.

For example, one tour leader may like to stay for the entire duration at one hotel. The hotel would give an excellent rate. But this would impact the quality of the tour, in as much as the time on the coach would be increased going backwards and forwards and as a result, the number of sites that you could visit would be reduced in this module.

Hence, we strongly advise that in order to see the maximum number of sites you have a 2 or 3 centre pilgrimage.

With the emergence of [TRIP ADVISOR](#) you would be well advised to look at the reviews relating to the hotels that feature in your quote.

If your quote does not have named hotel accommodation, just the grade, you should ask for a list of hotels that the company uses.

Once you ask the company to go ahead and book your group and you have accepted their quote, you must insist to be advised of the names of the hotel accommodation that has been secured for your group. It is not unheard of that group's accommodation has been switched at the 11<sup>th</sup> hour for purely commercial reasons.

### **3. Entrance fees**

Some tour operators include all entrance fees – however, some do not. Whatever your preference, you should look out for this in the quote because you either pay for it in the price or when you are at the destination.

An example of this was, a group leader used to stay in one hotel for the duration of his itinerary and all the site seeing was optional. Therefore, the lead in price was very low indeed and the participants had to pay for their sightseeing & entrance fees at the destination. This is very misleading and can be embarrassing for members of the group who simply do not have sufficient cash to pay.

### **3. Rate of Exchange & Free places**

Very topical- especially since our referendum, when sterling lost 20% of its value overnight!

You should be aware that under the ABTA's Code of Conduct – member tour operators are expected to absorb the first 2% of any currency surcharge. A good reason to book with a member of ABTA!

Free places can vary – one for every 10-paying passengers -11<sup>th</sup> goes free- sharing a twin bedded room seems to be the norm; but higher or lower calculations can be delivered. All it does is either reduce or increase the price pro rata

### **4. Air Travel**

With the *open skies* policy, you have many options. In simplicity there are three options.

- (a) **Using a schedule or low cost in-direct service.** This is not recommended for a number of reasons. The airfare maybe cheaper, but you will be charged higher taxes for using two flights to reach your destination and your luggage will be handled twice, increasing the chances of lost baggage. Of course, you could miss your connection owing to a delay and last but by no means least you have most probably more than doubled the time a direct flight takes. Is it worth it? No!

An example of what can go wrong is that we had a group flying low cost from Tel Aviv to Luton. It was delayed, and they missed their onward low cost connection to Aberdeen. The group had to stay in a hotel in Luton airport at their own expense.

- (b) **Low Cost** – this mode of transport is now most probably the most popular, even though it may not necessarily be the cheapest. It depends how far in advance you secure your seats and you must pay for them in advance- hence your deposit will be higher. Some airlines are considering charging too for cabin bags; so when you add up all the incidental charges and compare the difference between low cost and scheduled airlines the margin becomes quite narrow. One important factor is that we are unable to hold a group allocation on low cost airlines and we can only book them once we have deposits from all the *guaranteed minimum* number of passengers.

- (c) **Scheduled flights** – most probably the easiest and simplest way to work for the tour operator. Seats can be held with a fixed price. Some airlines require non-refundable deposits up front. The key factor when working with a scheduled airline is that there is someone to talk to at the other end of a phone and this enables the tour operator to give an all round service. The acid test of any product is how they react when something goes wrong and I have to report that the schedule airline wins hands down every time.
5. **Who is representing your agent at the destination?** You maybe dealing with a company in the UK, but the company executing your agreed itinerary is normally a locally appointed one. Their understanding of your needs, professionalism and problem solving is paramount to ensuring your pilgrimage is a success. As a leader you should be given their contact details. Failing that you could find yourself calling the UK if there is a problem.
  6. **Gratuities to guides and drivers.** Some agencies include this in their cost. However, this is not popular, because, it is taxed and paid through their salary. We give a guideline and in honesty it is expected because the American tourists have spoilt them. Their employers, I think, calculate their salary in anticipation of a tax-free windfall when they work!
  7. **Lunches** – I have never been an advocate of prepaid lunches. They are expensive, time consuming, quite heavy, and force the guide to be at a fixed place at a fixed time. After such a large meal, many find the afternoon sightseeing a ‘dream’. The only lunch that is sometimes prepaid is a traditional fish lunch on the shores of the Sea of Galilee. Some groups enjoy a picnic on the shores of the Sea of Galilee and take hotel lunch boxes – a good idea.
  8. **Promoting your tour** We all have our own ways to get the word out. Whether it is on your tour operator’s web site, a dedicated brochure or a promotional event; or just a combinational of all three – your tour operator has a vested interest to ensure your tour is a success.
  9. **Benefits.** Besides free places, you received a contribution to your expenses and once in Israel they become multiple: - A ‘T’ shirt, baseball hat, backpacks, nutrition bar, map, diary and a selection of discount/gift vouchers at various tourist shops. We will also send to your pilgrims, individual personalised pilgrimage certificates

**GOOD LUCK!**