



 MEMBERS ONLY TRAVEL

25 Great Questions to Select Your Ideal Group Travel Tour

Group tours can take a lot of the hassle out of traveling. Typically, the tour provider handles logistics such as booking hotels, arranging transportation and making reservations for some meals. Group tours also can be a great opportunity to make friends with like-minded travelers. In addition, tours can be an optimal choice for travelers over 50 who need extra support to accommodate disabilities, need guidance to reach a bucket-list destination or want to visit an off-the-beaten path destination. However, choosing the right group tour that fits your budget, style and abilities isn't easy.

Asking these 25 questions can help.

1. How much free time will I have? Some tours are action-packed, while others include plenty of scheduled downtime. It's important to select a tour that aligns with your preferences. Daniel Herszberg, cofounder of Travel Insider, who operates Fiery Hearts Tours, says his tours are "extremely fast-paced, with long 12-plus hour days" because "many people aren't returning to these destinations, and I want to pack everything in." Other tours are intentional about building in plenty of free time. Dig into your tour's schedule to ensure it's a good fit.

2. How large is the group size? Some tours have large groups, while others are limited to a small number of travelers. "There is no right answer here," Herszberg says. "Some travelers are looking for more social experiences, others are after a more bespoke boutique experience." However, knowing how many people will be on your tour "is crucial for managing expectations," he explains. They each have their pros and cons. "Small groups offer a more intimate, memorable experience," says Nicole Wilburn, senior brand and communications manager of The Tour Guy. However, "large groups aren't necessarily bad because they can mitigate a difficult person," and you give more options for socializing, says Diane Darling, a former tour leader who is now in her 50s.

3. What are the accommodations like? Accommodations vary greatly depending on the tour and location. They "can vary from charming boutique hotels, rustic eco-lodges or centrally located apartments," says Leigh Barnes, president for the Americas at Intrepid Travel. Ask about the type of accommodations on your tour before booking to ensure you will be comfortable. Some tour companies list the specific hotels they use on their websites. Others indicate if the hotels are premium or basic. Some tours include local accommodations, such as a historic riad in Morocco, a haveli in India or a homestay with a local family, which may appeal to some travelers. However, others may prefer a higher class of accommodations with all the comforts of home.

4. How accessible is the tour? Travelers who are concerned about accessibility should ask about accommodations in advance. That's especially important for tours outside of the United States, where the Americans with Disabilities Act generally does not apply, and the local equivalent may have fewer requirements. Barnes suggests asking detailed questions: "Are there elevators? Ground-floor rooms? Walk-in showers? Will staff be available to assist with luggage?" Another tip: research the accessibility of the destination. Asking, "Are there steep hills, cobblestone streets or long walks between activities?" can help ensure a tour is right for you, Barnes says.

5. What is the physical activity level? Activities in group tours run the gamut from gentle walks to hiking rugged terrain. It's important to "be honest with yourself about what you're comfortable with, especially if you have mobility issues or specific health needs," says Barnes . "Overestimating what you can handle might lead to exhaustion or even injury, so it's worth finding a tour that matches your personal comfort level," says John Gobbels, chief operating officer of MedjetAssist. If you are physically active and exercise daily, a tour that involves sitting for several hours a day might not be right for you either. Looking into the physical activity level of the tour is essential to finding one that is just right.

6. Can the tour handle my medical needs? Travelers with medical needs should ask if the tour company can handle their medical conditions. "If you have specific medical needs, let us know in advance so the company can provide guidance and help you prepare," Barnes says. It's essential to know whether the tour can accommodate your medical concerns before you book. It's also important to ask how medical emergencies will be handled. Tour companies should be able to "advise on the availability of pharmacies and medical facilities in the destinations" you are planning to visit, Barnes says, adding that most tour leaders are trained to handle emergencies.

7. What is the transportation like? Many tours involve long hours of travel between destinations. Herszberg says knowing what type of transportation you will be using is essential to managing expectations and ensuring that a tour fits your style. "Everyone has their own standards and requirements, but you want to be well aware up front," he says. Barnes also suggests asking whether longer journeys include stops to stretch and take in the scenery.

8. Will I meet like-minded travelers? "It's worth asking about the demographics" to see whether the group will include people in your age range, Barnes suggests. "Knowing this can help you feel more at ease and excited about the social side of the trip," he says. Some tour operators run tours specifically for older travelers. For example, Road Scholar gears all of its trips toward travelers over 50. Intrepid Travel and Explore Worldwide also offer tours specifically for travelers over 50.

9. Do you need travel insurance? Every traveler should consider travel insurance. “Unless you can easily afford to lose what you paid for your trip, the answer is always, ‘yes,’ especially for folks over 50,” says James Moses, president and CEO of Road Scholar. Some tours don’t provide insurance but require participants to obtain their own. Either way, Herszberg says you should “ask about pre-existing medical conditions,” which aren’t always covered.

10. How flexible is the itinerary? Some tours follow a rigid schedule, while others allow for some flexibility. However, even on jam-packed tours, you may have the flexibility to sleep in and skip morning activities or spend the day exploring on your own before meeting your group at night. On other tours, it may be challenging to break off from the group. However, Christina Ernst, president of VIP Southern Tours, cautions that it’s unlikely a group tour will alter the itinerary to suit your preferences. “Many groups have set schedules where you have an entry time confirmed. Sometimes you have to travel an hour or more to get there,” so it is imperative that tour participants are ready on time, she says. “Remember you are with a group, so you have to realize there will be more structure than traveling independently,” even on tours that have some flexibility, Ernst says.

11. What is the cancellation policy? Most people who book tours intend to go on their trip. However, you may need to cancel because of unforeseen circumstances. “Make sure you know the last possible day you can cancel the trip for a full refund so if you’re on the fence or something comes up, you won’t be completely out of pocket,” recommends Janine Pettit, founder of Girl Camper. If you have trip insurance, she suggests checking your coverage to see if it covers trip cancellation for any reason or only covers specific circumstances, such as illness.

12. Do you recommend any cultural preparation? When Herszberg travels, he wants “deep cultural immersion” that comes from preparing in advance. To familiarize yourself with the culture, Herszberg recommends asking the tour provider for book, documentary, movie or podcast recommendations. “This is a question I always ask before joining a tour myself,” he says. “On a recent trip to Uganda to go gorilla-trekking, I watched a selection of films. This truly changed how I experienced the country and its history.”

13. Are any add-ons available? Some tour companies can arrange additional services for guests, “including airport transfers and luggage assistance,” says Melissa DaSilva, interim CEO of Trafalgar Tours. These can help make your trip “as seamless and stress-free as possible,” she says. Some providers can book extra nights in a hotel or help you arrange additional activities before or after your tour if you want to extend your trip.

14. Are there extra charges for single travelers? Many tours base their occupancy on double occupancy. Kim Blumberg, a doctor in her 50s from California who has taken several group tours, shares that it’s important to know how the tour company handles single travelers in advance. Some companies offer single travelers the choice between booking a single room at an additional cost or sharing a room with another traveler of the same gender.

15. Can the tour handle my dietary restrictions? If you have dietary restrictions, it’s important to make sure the tour can handle them. “Food is such a highlight of travel, but it’s not always easy if you have specific dietary needs,” Barnes says. “Make sure to ask if they can cater to allergies, preferences or medical requirements,” he suggests. “You shouldn’t just presume that dietary restrictions, vegetarian, gluten-free, diabetic, low sodium and so on will be catered for,” Herszberg says. “It’s crucial to ask this beforehand, in case you need to bring some snacks or emergency meals with you.”

16. What isn’t included? Tour providers are often explicit about what is included on a tour, but they aren’t always as clear about what’s not included. To ensure you aren’t hit with any unexpected costs, ask what’s not covered. Some tours include all meals while others don’t. You may also be required to cover tips, transportation to and from the airport, and other associated costs. Get this information in advance so that you can budget appropriately. “Brochures can be beautiful at selling a trip and leave out the fine print about drinks, tips and other expenses that can add up,” Darling cautions.

17. Is there a recommended packing list? Knowing what to pack for a tour's location, weather and activities can help make a trip go more smoothly. A packing list "helps travelers feel comfortable, calm and prepared," says Dalia Feldman, marketing manager at Tourist Italy. "Forgetting a vital item can be the cause of a negative tour experience."

18. How much knowledge and experience does the tour guide have? A great tour guide is a key part of a successful group tour. "Instead of just getting you from one stop to the next, a knowledgeable guide will share cultural context, historical details and even practical tips to help you navigate the area," says Echo Wang, cofounder of Cool Travel Vibes.

19. Is baggage handling included? According to Richard Krieger, director of Sky Vacations, many group tours include limited baggage handling, such as taking bags off the tour bus into a hotel lobby. However, this may not be enough help for all travelers. Some travelers, especially those with mobility issues, may want to select a tour that includes comprehensive baggage handling. Krieger explains that this includes delivering bags to rooms and caring for bags when other forms of transportation are included in the tour, such as trains or ferries.

20. How much shopping is involved? Some tours involve several stops for shopping, while others don't make shopping a priority. Blumberg has been on group tours where she's gotten stuck waiting for hours while others shopped. She says these shopping trips are sometimes listed as "workshops" on travel itineraries because they often include a brief demonstration of how something is made, such as watching an artisan work at a rug loom or polish gemstones.

21. Is the tour operated sustainably? Travel can have a big environmental impact. "Supporting tours that invest in local communities, prioritize environmental conservation and promote responsible tourism helps ensure your travels leave a positive impact and benefit the places you visit," says Jason Gray, director of marketing at Exodus Adventure Travels. Checking whether a company is certified as a sustainable tour operator is a good way to start. B Corporation, Biosphere Sustainable and Business for Good are some sustainable certifying organizations. Intrepid Travel, Explore Worldwide and Exodus Adventure Travels are all B Corporation Certified.

22. Are you with the same guide the entire time? Some tours have an escort that stays with the tour group the entire time, while others have guides that meet the group for the day. “Asking if the tour has a single tour leader or just day guides is important,” says Yves Marceau, vice president of product for G Adventures. “A tour leader is with you all the time when you are out as a group, and they are there to help you plan your free time or a meal on [your] own,” to help you make the most of your time, Marceau says. A guide that meets a group for the day usually focuses on guiding the group through one or two attractions.

23. What do other travelers think? Before booking a tour, research feedback about the tour company you are considering as well as the specific itinerary. “Travelers should seek the insight provided by those who have traveled on group tours in the past,” says Steve Perillo, president and owner of Perillo Tours. “Seeking online reviews often provides unedited guest feedback regarding tour companies’ overall performance, attention to customer care and value,” he says.

24. What is your budget? Take a close look at your budget before booking a group tour. “Inclusions will vary from operator to operator and from trip to trip, so it’s important to take a look at the specific itinerary you’re interested in to learn more about what’s included,” says Katy Rockett, regional director for North America at Explore Worldwide. “While the ‘starting from’ price might be low, other expenses can add up and vastly change your trip price.” If you plan on venturing out for meals or additional excursions on your own, this can help create a more personalized trip, but it will add to the cost, Rockett explains. Also, keep in mind airfare, souvenirs, additional cell phone costs and other expenses when determining your budget.

25. Does the tour match my style and interests? Take all the information you gathered and ask yourself whether the tour matches your style before booking. “Make sure the activity level, group size, pace and content focus meet your needs and interests,” Moses suggests. He notes Road Scholar tours are “focused on education” and probably aren’t the best fit for travelers who want to primarily sit on the beach and go to the spa.

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