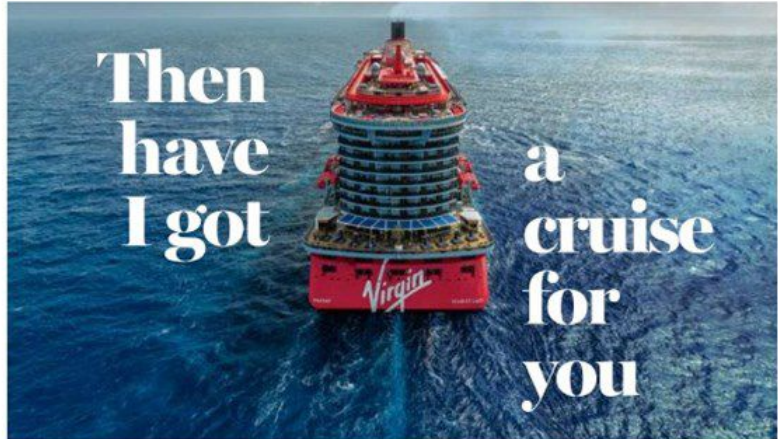


SundayTravel

WITH: NEW ENGLAND DESTINATIONS

BOSTON SUNDAY GLOBE AUGUST 11, 2024 | BOSTONGLOBE.COM/TRAVEL

Psst. Hey, sailor.
Are you looking for a good time?



Then
have
I got
a
cruise
for
you

The Scarlet Lady, one of the ships in the Virgin Voyages fleet.

WE FLY AERIAL MEDIA

Virgin Voyages has created a wholly new experience on the seas. Or perhaps it's an unholy new experience.



CHRISTOPHER MUTHER



Passengers on the Scarlet Lady party near a giant inflatable octopus off the coast of Spain.

CHRISTOPHER MUTHER, GLOBE STAFF

BARCELONA — I knew my week aboard the Virgin Voyages ship Scarlet Lady would be different. Still, I had no idea how absolutely, mind-blowingly different the experience would be from other cruises I'd taken. And I'm not simply referring to the giant inflatable octopus that spewed fog or the frisky couple that invited me to join them in their cabin for a nightcap.

Before I boarded the Scarlet Lady, here's what I knew about Virgin Voyages: It was adults only — sorry, kiddos. I was told it catered to young travelers who liked to party (more on this later). There's also an onboard tattoo parlor. There was a food hall instead of a buffet, no cruise director, and tips and Wi-Fi were included in the price tag. Also, the striking design of the vessel looked more like a hotel or apartment building than a traditional ship.

Once we sailed out of Barcelona for an eight-day cruise to southern France, Palma de Mallorca, and Ibiza, it didn't take long to notice some key differences between Vir-

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City Hall in Cannes, France, decked out for the Cannes Film Festival.

CHRISTOPHER MUTHER, GLOBE STAFF



Another view of the Scarlet Lady.

You + group tours: How to find the perfect match

By Diane Bair and Pamela Wright

GLOBE CORRESPONDENTS

Swiping on a dating app can be a risky move. Does this person even exist? Does he or she want to scam me out of all of my money? You might ask the same questions when it comes to booking a group tour. Who's legit?

A good first step: Look for tour companies that are members of USTOA (United States Tour Operators Association; ustoa.com), says Terry Dale, president and CEO of the association. Members must meet strict requirements of ethics and integrity; plus, travelers' investments are protected in case the company goes out of business. Similar organizations include ETOA (www.etoa.org) in Europe and CATO (cato.ca) in Canada.

When choosing a tour, think about your travel personality. Do you like an action-packed agenda, or lots of free time to explore? Ready to splurge, or aiming for a budget-friendly journey? Want a culinary extravaganza? Looking for a gay-friendly excursion, or an alcohol-free band of travel buddies? There's a group tour for that.

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The opportunity to interact with local residents is a benefit of a smaller group. These guests with G Adventures are visiting with weavers in Peru.

Inside

THE VIPLOUNGE
A TASTE OF SUMMER STOCK THEATER

'Waitress' actor John Riddle finds respite from Broadway on the Cape
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NEW ENGLAND
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From the coast to the mountains, where to go with out-of-town friends and family
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OVERSEAS ADVENTURE TRAVEL

Experts agree that there are pros and cons of every tour company. It's important to find a match to your own personal travel style and goals.

How to pick the right tour company

By Diane Bair and Pamela Wright

GLOBE CORRESPONDENTS

It's complicated. There are nearly 6,000 tour operators in the United States alone, and group tour options — literally thousands of choices to destinations around the world — are dizzying (and dazzling). You've decided to join a group tour (let the experts handle the details!), but which tour company is right for you?

"Besides choosing where you want to go, choosing the right tour company may be the most important decision to make in the travel planning process," says Brian FitzGerald, CEO, Grand Circle Corporation, a family of travel brands including Overseas Adventure Travel (O.A.T.), O.A.T. Small Ships, and Grand Circle Cruise Line. "The company you choose can significantly enhance your travel experience, making it both enjoyable and memorable."

Where do you begin? We talked to industry experts for tips and advice.

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There's a group for every kind of traveler

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Here's a look at some well-regarded options.

Fab for foodies: Table Less Traveled

Want to spend nine days in Italy tasting the regional dishes of the Amalfi Coast, Florence, and Emilia-Romagna, dining in local homes, sampling ingredients from farms, factories, and wineries, and learning recipes in cooking classes? Or visiting the Emilia-Romagna and Piedmont regions to meet the local makers of Parmigiano Reggiano cheese, balsamic vinegar, and Lambrusco wine? For an epicurean, it doesn't get better than that.

Founded by Annie Sim in 2015, these food-focused small group tours lean toward intimate cultural experiences that wouldn't be possible with a larger party. Groups have a maximum size of 12; beyond Italy, these very filling tours visit Japan, Peru, France, Portugal, Malaysia, and the United Kingdom. Sample pricing: 9-Day Best of Peru Tour, \$9,835 per person, double occupancy. www.thetablestraveled.com

Time-honored classic: Tauck

The Tauck family launched their first tour in 1925 in New England. Their loyal fan base includes over a dozen guests who have traveled with this Connecticut-based company more than 50 times. On the Tauck Forum, guests rave about their excellent TDs (tour directors), exquisite hotels ("the same ones Abercrombie & Kent uses, but at a lower price point," one traveler commented) and great service. Tauck's guests skew a bit older (semi-retired or retirees), with the time and money to travel extensively, and an interest in connecting more deeply with the destinations they visit.

The company offers journeys to seven continents and 70+ countries, and has earned a place on Travel + Leisure's "World's Best" list for 27 consecutive years. Small group tours (averaging 24 guests), smaller group trips (up to 15 guests), and river cruising are among their strengths. Their best-selling 12-day "Blue Danube" cruise starts at \$6,790 per person, double occupancy; the eight-day version starts at \$4,990. www.tauck.com

The curated experience:

Naya Traveler

For those who are looking for cultural immersion, this small-group tour operator is worth considering. Naya Traveler works with a roster of local artists, authors, ethnographers, and field experts, to offer a deep dive into the destinations they visit, with a goal of making



connections. Trips are customized to each guest's preferences and interests.

Their "Special Trips" get even more specific, with themes of Art & Ateliers, Wellness Wanders, Adventure & Nature, and so on. Destinations include some less-visited places, such as Myanmar, Kashmir and Ladakh, Oman, and Ethiopia. Depending on destination and choice of arrangements, prices start at \$700 per person per day, based on a party of two people in shared occupancy. www.nayatraveler.com

Super for solo travelers:

G Adventures

Looking for a flexible itinerary with



Clockwise (from left): Wheel the World is a tour company devoted to travel without limits; among the sites it visits is Arenal Volcano in Costa Rica. Gay-focused Out Adventures offers safe, fun tours worldwide, including a Croatia Gay Dalmatia cruise. G Adventures also travels the world (including Morocco, shown here) and offers some tours geared to younger travelers.



the freedom to explore, but the security of having a tour group watch your back? Pick a destination and see where you fit within their unique Travel Styles, including "Active" and "18-to-thirty-something" tours. Average group size is eight to 12 people. This allows G Adventures to stay at smaller hotels and eat at smaller local restaurants (using local service providers is part of their community tourism focus). They allow some free time in the itineraries for adventuring on your own, or adding an optional activity — say a hike, cooking class, or helicopter ride.

G Adventures offers trips all over the world; we're currently eyeing the 21-day

Best of New Zealand Mountain Biking & Black Sand Beaches tour (\$2,773 per person). They'll pair you up with a roommate of the same gender (or book you in a single room for a slightly higher fee). www.gadventures.com

LGBTQ+ travel: OUT Adventures

Since 2009, this gay-focused small-group tour company has been offering fun, safe journeys for the community, exploring countries from A (Albania) to V (Vietnam). Based in Toronto, they also support the queer communities they visit, even in less-than-gay-friendly countries, to "enrich local lives and learn about their experiences," they say.

Out Adventures sleuths out the best local restaurants, authentic experiences, boutique hotels, and travel partners that go beyond "friendly" and are truly welcoming to the LGBT community. Want to go to India for the Holi festival, see the cultural side of Cuba, or take a gay Croatia cruise? Their core market is gay men, but they welcome all LGBTQ+ folks on their departures, as well as friends and family. As an example of pricing, the eight-night Croatia Gay Dalmatia cruise, with up to 34 sailors, is \$5,095 per person, double occupancy. www.outadventures.com

Alcohol-free travel: Hooked

Sober living is gaining traction, so it makes sense that alcohol-free vacations would follow. Darci Murray launched Hooked in 2021, with the concept of getting hooked on healthy habits while discovering wonderful places. "Being alcohol-free heightens your awareness: Colors are brighter, food tastes better, touch is more intense," Murray says. In this full sensory state, travelers are more open to new experiences and self-discovery, she notes.

These aren't recovery trips — you don't have to be an alcoholic to not drink alcohol. Maybe you drink now and then (but want to travel without that element in the mix) but these trips are booze-free. Options include a "Boozeless Cruise" in Alaska, "Serenity in the Serengeti" (Tanzania), plus Las Vegas, Nashville, New York City, Italy, and more. A seven-night trip to Sayulita, Mexico (\$2,395 per person, double occupancy) includes ziplining, hiking, dancing, painting, snorkeling, boating, paddle boarding, diving, and a hot sauce challenge — now that's a sensory experience! hookedontravel.com

Travel for people with disabilities:

Wheel the World

"Explore the world without limits." That's the goal of Wheel the World, a group tour company and online travel platform founded in 2018 by Alvaro Silberstein, a wheelchair user since the age of 18. "Group trips are a fantastic way for travelers with disabilities to forge lifetime friendships, travel with like-minded individuals, and have peace of mind regarding accessibility," says Andrés Villagrán, head of marketing.

Since the company's inception, 8,000 disabled travelers and their companions have booked trips with Wheel the World, to destinations including Cancun, Costa Rica, Greece, New York, and South Africa. (Coming soon: Iceland and more US locales.) For DIY travel planners who don't want to go the group tour route, they offer vetted hotels and activities on their platform. The most popular destination is Costa Rica; a seven-night trip is \$2,750 per person, based on double occupancy. wheelltheworld.com

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Factors to consider in a tour company

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Know thyself

Experts agree that there are pros and cons with every tour company. It's important to find a match to your own personal travel style and goals.

"Understanding what kind of traveler you are is a good first step to choosing a tour company," says Terry Dale, president and CEO, United States Tour Operators Association.

Consider basic factors first. Where do you want to go?

"Begin by dreaming big and researching your ideal destinations," advises Katy Rockett, regional director for North America at Explore Worldwide, specializing in small-group adventure travel with more than 350 trips in around 100 countries. "Whether you're drawn to remote trails or bustling city streets, start by pinpointing where you want to go and how you want to explore — by bike, foot, or bus."

Decide when do you want to go and how much time you have. Next, what's your budget and what are your expectations when it comes to inclusions?

"Meals, transfers, and excursions can all add up quickly," Rockett says, "Although the 'starting from' price might be low, when you factor in these other expenses it can vastly change your trip price."

What are your expectations in terms of accommodations?

"It's important to research the type of hotels and accommodations each company offers — and to decide if these accommodations align with your travel style," says FitzGerald. "Is luxury and a 5-star experience important to you? Or are you a minimalist? Are you looking for large hotels, or smaller inns?"

Travelers should find details about accommodations — types of hotels, lev-



EXPLORE WORLDWIDE PHOTOS

els of service, location and more — on tour operator websites. "While it may not be the primary reason for choosing a certain company, it can be a deciding factor," says Dale.

And then consider other factors. Do you want to travel with a group that's exclusive to Americans or also open to international travelers? Do you want to focus on one region or include a variety of destinations? Is the age demographics of the group important to you? Do you want to relax and unwind, explore new cultures and connect with locals, or learn something new? And do the tour operation and style of travel align with your values?

"You're investing valuable time and money into the experience, so it's important to know how that will be spent in the destination," says Rockett. "Responsibility towards the world around us — both at home and abroad — varies from company to company and person to person, so be sure to choose one that aligns with you."

Transparency before booking is critical. "A reputable company will provide detailed information about your itinerary, excursions, and meals prior to booking," says Rockett. "This often comes in the form of detailed trip notes and day-by-day breakdowns."

Size matters

Preferred group size is a personal

choice. "There are tour companies that have thrived for decades in bringing groups of 40 people to places around the world and have a loyal clientele who love the camaraderie of traveling with a community of new friends," says Dale.

But the growing trend is toward small group touring, in groups of eight, 12, or 20 passengers.

"In general, the smaller the group, the easier time you'll have getting around a country, making it easier to access remote areas or engage in activities that might not be possible in larger groups," says Rockett.

FitzGerald agrees. "It's hard to pinpoint a specific group size and it depends on an individual's preference, but I recommend you find a group size that provides the ability to blend in unobtrusively with local life; connect with locals; access off-the-beaten-path locations and ports; and form connections with fellow travelers."

FitzGerald also believes that smaller groups often allow for more personalized service.

Let them be your guide

The right guide can make or break a trip, transforming a tour from good to unforgettable. "Tour guides play a pivotal role in shaping your travel experience, often turning a good trip into an unforgettable one," says FitzGerald. "The best tour guides — we refer to our



guides as trip experience leaders — not only share their local knowledge and expertise, but they are excellent problem solvers and planners. They predict needs before they are even realized. They provide personalized attention to their travelers, and recommendations for free time. They will take you beyond the touristy sites and immerse you in the culture. They are enthusiastic, passionate, and bring the group together."

Not only can guides ensure that a trip goes smoothly and safely, but they can significantly enhance your travel experience. "Our guides are chosen for their expertise and passion for sharing their knowledge," says Rockett. "They are not just tour leaders but ambassadors of culture and history, eager to introduce you to local customs, hidden spots, and insider tips."

When selecting a tour company, ask about the guide(s) who will be leading the trip. Are they local? What's their background and experience? What do past tour participants say about them?

Flexibility is key

All companies are different when it comes to organized activities, so if you like a mix of included tours and free time, research that in advance, advises FitzGerald. "Many companies offer included tours and activities, but you aren't forced to participate in everything," FitzGerald says. "The best itineraries of

Consider group size and activity level when picking a group tour. In general, the smaller the group, the easier time you'll have getting around a country, making it easier to access remote areas or engage in activities that might not be possible in larger groups.

for a blend of included features, and time to pursue your own interests."

While you should feel confident of knowing where you're going and when, and most companies strive to stick with the original plan, a trend toward more open-ended itineraries is emerging in group travel.

"Tour operators today are increasingly adding more flexibility and free time to itineraries to better accommodate individual traveler's different needs," says Dale. "This could come in the form of choice activities, fewer group meals, or added free time for guests to explore on their own."

Going solo

Group tours are a great option for solo travelers, providing detailed plans, a guide for support, and the freedom to join the group or spend time on your own. It's often an ideal way for solos to travel, without going it alone.

"Look for a tour that is designed to foster a sense of community among travelers," advises FitzGerald. "Many of our solo travelers at O.A.T. share that they have formed lasting friendships with others in their group, often traveling with people they meet on future trips."

Rockett advises asking tour operators ahead of time to share details on the breakdown of the group — the number of couples versus solo travelers, for example, and the age range of the group.

Also beware of companies charging extra for solo supplements and single rooms. Look for companies that waive the solo supplement or provide shared rooms.

In summary: dream big, ask questions, look for a company that aligns with your travel goals and values — and have fun!

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