

Are tours really so bad?

I've always been all for independent travel and my friends often ask me: if tours are really so bad, why so many people do them?

Well, I wouldn't be so straightforward. First of all, tours provide higher quality at better value. I've always been trying to break down costs for independent travel in different cities around the world, so it might seem strange when I say that tours are actually a better value. The reality is that in most places, the absolute cheapest way to travel is independently, but that means hostel bunks and street food instead of hotels and restaurants. And in a country like China, the tours are much cheaper than independent travel at any standard.

Of course, the reason for this is that a tour provider can book 20 hotel rooms every week with one phone call, so they get amazing hotel rates that independent travellers couldn't dream of. The same is true with restaurants and even attractions, where large groups are much cheaper per person than singles. Even with a tour provider mark-up, you still get a better deal in most cases.

Another important thing for many of us is that there is little or no stress with language or culture barriers. Even in an English-speaking country, it can be confusing on your first visit, and things like finding hotels and even museums can be headaches. When in countries with other languages, the level of confusion gets multiplied, often further compounded by touts and other illegal sellers who make a living trying to steer you somewhere else. On a tour you'll always have an English speaker who knows the local area well between you and the potential obstacles. It's almost like having an old friend living in the area, who can tell you exactly where to go and whom to ignore.

That leads us to the next point. Tours provide security and accountability. No method of travel is 100% safe and secure, but at least when you are on a tour you know that people who know the risks are working on your behalf. Travelling on your own, if your hotel says it's fully booked, then you are out on the street. But with a tour, it's up to them to find you a new room nearby, which would be far easier even if it did happen.

If you get sick or injured on your own, you are on your own, while on a tour there will be an experienced person there to help get medicine or look after you. I had a large backpack stolen off a train because the luggage area works on the honour system. Had I been on a tour, someone would likely have put everything in a secure place because their reputation depends on clients making it home with all their gear.

And last but not least, itineraries on tours are designed by professionals. Everyone obviously has different tastes when sightseeing, but that doesn't mean that independent travellers always make the right decisions. The typical first-time visitor to a big city will try to schedule 18 hours worth of sightseeing into every day, which obviously doesn't work once you get there. These tour companies that have been around for a long time tend to do a great job maximising sightseeing time but also adding in leisure time, meal time, and sleep time. In the era of ubiquitous reviews not to mention social media, these tour companies can only survive if they provide a product that people feel good about when it's done. Not only can they get you between sights more quickly, but they also know when clients prefer to relax and slow down.

All said and done, I am not writing this to put you off independent travel but rather to make you look before you leap.

The author believes that a sightseeing programme on organised tours is...

1. ...undervalued.
2. ...more packed.
3. ...overrated.
4. ...less strained.