



WHITE PAPER : PLANNING THE BIG TRIP

It is becoming increasingly popular for music groups to take a long-distance trip or tour every 3 to 4 years. While planning a large group trip is a major project, it is almost always a positive experience for the director, the students, and the organization as a whole.

Over the last decade, we have had the opportunity to assist hundreds of directors with travel planning. In that time, we have seen many examples of what to do, and more importantly, what not to do. In an effort to help directors plan and implement a positive group travel experience, I have assembled a list of elements common to success. Hopefully, these ideas and suggestions will help you plan your best group travel experience ever!

Work With An Experienced Group Travel Operator

While the local travel agency is a great place to start planning a vacation, it is not necessarily the right choice for group travel. Look for a tour operator that is a member of the National Tour Association (NTA) or the Student Youth Travel Association (SYTA). These operators understand the unique needs associated with group travel. Additionally, members of these organizations carry the insurance needed to protect you and your group.

Work With Someone That You Like And Trust

It is imperative that you have an open line of communication with your tour operator. Your trip is much more likely to be successful if you find an operator that you enjoy working with. If the person or company that you trust happens to be the lowest bid, great. If not, remember that the lowest price is not always the best value. What price do you place on trust, communication, and customer service?

Start Planning Early

One of the best ways to increase the value of your trip is to start planning at least 12 months prior to departure. This will allow you to secure the best rates, flight schedules, and hotels. In addition, it will give your students and their families an adequate amount of time to plan for the expense. For example, a \$1500.00 trip paid in 12 monthly installments costs only \$125.00 per month. By keeping the monthly cost down, you are sure to increase participation.

If you have students or parents that are interested in participating, but unable to meet your initial deposit deadline, start a waiting list. This will allow you to refund money when a participant cancels and offer the trip to move-ins and other new students.

Know What You Are Buying

If you are planning a long-distance trip for a group of 100 participants, it may cost anywhere from \$50,000 to \$200,000. Considering the size of this purchase, it is important that you know what you will be getting for your money. If you are going to have several tour operators bid on your package, make sure that you are comparing "apples-to-apples". Major pricing factors include hotel quality, number of meals, and performance options. If the company that you feel most comfortable with has



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designed a package that is out of your budget, let them know. It is often possible to make minor changes to package inclusions to meet budgetary constraints.

Plan For Unforeseen Expenses

This is one of the great secrets of successful group travel. It is important to always add a small "cushion" to the price to pay for unexpected expenses. Most directors seem to add about 10% of the trip cost up to \$50.00 per participant. This extra money will afford you the resources necessary to ensure a trouble-free trip experience. If there is excess money left over at the time of travel, purchase an additional meal or attraction for the participants; or if district policy allows, refund spending money to each participant.

Get Approval

Check your district policies for group travel. If school board or administrative approval is required for your group to take a trip, ask early. Submit your package price, a sample itinerary, and any other materials that will help with a positive decision. Your tour operator should be able to help you find or create the resources that you will need.

Sell The Event To Potential Participants

Participant "buy-in" is a major factor in successful group travel. Instead of sending a flyer home to promote the trip, have an event. Invite all potential participants (current students, families, incoming students, administrators, teachers, etc.) to a fun and informative evening meeting. Review the itinerary, the price, and the payment terms; then pass-around a sign-up form. In many cases, your tour operator should be able to provide you with marketing materials for your trip. For added impact, have your tour operator come to the meeting to present the trip.

Take Advantage Of Recruiting Potential

If you are going to do all of the work necessary to have a successful trip, take advantage of the recruiting and retention opportunities that it creates. Let every student in your district know that your group is taking this trip! At the very least, you are sure to cause a district-wide "buzz" about your organization. Many directors invite recently graduated seniors and potential students on the trip, provided that they travel with a parent or guardian.

Market Your Organization

Your trip is a big deal to your school district and your community. Send press releases to your school paper and your local newspaper. Many directors send releases at the time of trip approval, a few weeks before departure, and immediately upon return. Increased community awareness will be good for your organization, your school, and the arts in general. Again, your tour operator should be able to help you take advantage of opportunity for free publicity.

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Hopefully, these suggestions will help you improve the overall quality of your next group trip, and provide your students with an educational experience that can not be achieved in the classroom. If you ever have questions regarding any aspect of group travel, please feel free to call contact our office.