

Not your father's tour: group travel is less hectic and more exotic.

By *Lynn Woods*

Think "packaged tour" and what comes to mind is a dizzying blur of days and countries, endless hours on the road in a cramped bus, and mealtimes spent chowing down with the herd at a roadside tourist trap.

But when seasoned European travelers Rue and Paul Savage of Gulf Shores, Ala., decided to take a two-week Globus tour of England and France, they were pleasantly surprised. They had several free days in London, a whole afternoon at the D-day beaches in Normandy, and ample time to visit cathedrals and other attractions. Not all lunches were included, so they could mingle with the natives in English pubs and French cafes. Best of all, says Paul, "each morning we'd put our bags outside the door and wouldn't see them again until the next hotel."

Tours have always been noted for convenience and economy; if your time and money are limited and you want to see a lot, a tour is probably the best way to go. But now they're also offering more freedom, a wider selection of destinations, and more exotic modes of transportation. Tours in the photos above, for example, include cycling in France and a trip aboard the Eastern & Oriental Express from Singapore to Bangkok, both organized by Abercrombie & Kent; and an elephant interlude on an eight-day tour of Thailand, sponsored by Backroads tours of Berkeley, Cal.

They're attracting a younger clientele as well. Contiki Holidays, for instance, caters exclusively to the under-35 set with reasonably priced packages to southern Africa, Australia, Europe, New Zealand and the U.S. Optional activities on its 20-day Kiwi Magic tour to New Zealand (prices start at \$1,705 per person, excluding airfare) include bungee jumping, whitewater rafting, sea kayaking and whale watching. Backroads specializes in cycling and hiking trips, with an option to save by camping out; a six-day bike trip through the Canadian Rockies costs \$1,395 if you stay at inns, \$749 if you camp.

Shorter tours are also becoming popular, as travelers divvy up two or three weeks of vacation time into several small trips rather than one big one. "We're getting more four- and five-day packages to Mexico and Canada arranged over a long weekend," says Mary Louise Seifert of Welcome Aboard Travel, in Scottsdale, Ariz.

Last-minute travelers heading for popular destinations such as national parks sometimes find tours are the only way to go because accommodations fill up fast. And deluxe tours offer access to regions or attractions that are otherwise inaccessible to casual travelers. Barbara and Robert Ochs of Livingston, NJ., recently took a Tauck tour to Banff, Jasper and Lake Louise in the Canadian Rockies that included a side trip by helicopter to the Cariboo Mountains. They had the option of eating by themselves at their choice of restaurants in the luxury hotels they stayed at, and they never had to worry about tabs or tips because all the extras were included in the tour price.

The Ochsens paid \$2,030 each for the nine-day tour, plus \$350 per person for round-trip airline tickets between Newark and Calgary and \$75 in tips to their tour guides. "It's a chance for a regular person to live like a CEO," says Barbara.

HOW TO BOOK AT THE BEST PRICE

In 1995 more than 32 million of the pleasure trips taken by Americans--4% of the total--were packaged tours, a small increase over the year before. But many packaged tours are in such demand that early booking--sometimes as much as nine months in advance--is a must. Globus tours and TWA's Getaway Vacations sell out fast, says Marcketta Carpenter of Gulistream Travel, in Gulf Shores, Ala.

Most tour operators work through travel agents rather than selling direct to the public. Unlike cruises, packaged tours are usually sold at list price, with little discounting. But the price is often much lower if you travel in the off-season--in the fall, winter and early spring for European tours, for example.

Tour companies typically offer air transportation at favorable rates, but you might do better on your own, especially if you cash in frequent-flier miles. On their Globus tour, the Savages ended up on a wearying nine-and-a-half-hour plane ride in coach between Pensacola and London with an out-of-the-way stop in Houston. "The next time, we'd pay for business class," says Paul.

England and Italy are among the top destinations for tour travelers. But you can find a tour that will take you just about anywhere you want to go, for just about any price. Say you want to go to Italy for ten days. The lowest price (excluding airfare) for an escorted tour is about \$1,200, travel agents estimate. For another \$300 to \$500, you'll get more centrally located accommodations, longer and more in-depth visits at each stop, and more meals and sightseeing jaunts. Pay \$3,000 or more and you'll travel with a smaller group, stay in deluxe hotels, have specialists as tour guides, visit sites that are off the beaten path, and have most, if not all, of your expenses included.

At the low end, for example, the ten-day Reflections of Italy from Collette Tours takes in not only the major attractions of Florence, Rome and Venice, but also makes stops in Assisi, Lake Como, Perugia, Ravenna, San Gimignano, San Marino and (whew) Siena--all for \$1,099 to \$1,299, depending on the time of year (not including airfare, lunches and some dinners).

If you'd rather not travel at the if-it's-Tuesday-this-must-be-Belgium pace, you might choose Maupintour's ten-day Italy's Famous Places tour, which includes fewer stops and more leisure time, as well as tours of eight cities, full American breakfasts and the services of a guide--but costs \$2,940, excluding airfare. You could cover the same ground on your own for about \$1,885 if you made do with continental breakfasts and lugged your own bags from the hotel to the tram station.

Tours marketed by airlines offer some of the best deals around. The seven-night Roman Holiday from TWA Getaway Vacations, for example, includes round-trip airfare between New York City and Rome, accommodations at the deluxe, centrally located Bernini Bristol Hotel, airport transportation in Rome and a half-day tour of the city--all for \$1,375 from November through mid March. If you made such arrangements independently, you'd pay about \$270 more.

WHAT YOUR MONEY BUYS

Make sure you know exactly what features are included in any package you consider. Instead of providing a single guide who accompanies the group on the entire trip, some budget tours use local, or "step-on," guides who don't hang around to oversee hotel check-in or book theater tickets. On occasion, one group may be combined with another from a different country, which would require conducting the tour in two or more

languages. "You'll notice this particularly in spring and fall on European tours," says Gerry Jung of Vacations Plus, in New Berlin, Wis.

Find out how much sightseeing is included in the deal and whether you visit an attraction or just stop for a photo opportunity. Sightseeing options listed in tour brochures almost always carry an extra charge. The Savages, for example, paid \$125 each for a dinner option in Paris which they considered an excellent value because it included wine or beer and a cabaret-style show.

Meals are another variable. Some tours let you order a la carte, but others provide a fixed menu that gives you little or no choice. Less expensive tours may not include tax or other surcharges. One cost that many people don't plan for is tips for the tour escort, bus driver or local guides--\$3 to \$4 per traveler for each guide is appropriate.

Most companies will guarantee the tour price once they receive a deposit; others guarantee it unconditionally. A few operators, such as Abercrombie & Kent, will also guarantee the tour's departure, even if only a handful of people sign up.

Tour operators often require payment by check rather than by credit card. To protect yourself, try to book with a company that's a member of the U.S. Tour Operators Association. USTOA requires all of its members to post a \$1-million bond. Members must also be in business under the same ownership or management for at least three years.

ON YOUR OWN

If you like the cost savings of a tour but prefer traveling on your own, consider a fly-drive package, which typically includes airfare, a weekly rental car and prepaid lodging vouchers good at many locations. For example, Brian Moore International Tours sells fly-drive packages to Ireland for \$1,039 per person for May, including round-trip airfare from New York City or Boston and accommodations for seven nights at any of 150 hotels (during the summer you can book hotel rooms in advance for an additional charge of \$45). A bed-and-breakfast option costs \$907.

Travel agents will sometimes put together customized tours--you travel on your own but follow a prearranged itinerary for which all transportation, lodging and other expenses have been paid in advance. One couple in Phoenix paid \$1,771 per person, excluding round-trip airfare between Phoenix and Seattle, for a ten-day trip to the Canadian Rockies that included rooms at luxury hotels, a four-day rental car and airfare between Calgary and Vancouver. Booked separately, the elements of the trip would have cost just under \$1,600. But the work involved in planning such an itinerary might be worth an extra \$170 to a time-pressed traveler. .

Guided

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1. What are the advantages and disadvantages of group travel?
2. How are package tours and their buyers changing over time and why?
3. How should firms market and price package tours in order to raise sales and/or maximize profit?

Please type your answers and turn in your report at the beginning of class. (*Report is worth up to 15 points*)