



STUDENT GROUP TRAVEL PLANNING GUIDE

A RESOURCE FOR SCHOOL LEADERS



Congratulations on your decision to create lasting memories and meaningful connections through a student travel experience! Coordinating a trip for a large group of students, teachers, parent chaperones, and administrators can be daunting. Unlike planning a family vacation or getaway, the logistics and cost of large group travel introduce a substantial and complex set of considerations and expectations to manage.

Because of all the moving pieces involved, you will likely employ a tour operator or group travel company to book your group's transportation, attractions, reservations, experiences, and guides. Although many options are available in the marketplace, not all tour companies offer the same level of service. This can be confusing to navigate, especially if you're unsure about what questions to ask or how to determine the value you'll receive on such a significant investment of time and money.

This helpful guide was created to inform and equip you and your group on the nuances of large group travel that, when properly considered and measured, could make the difference between a positive and impactful experience or one that does not live up to anyone's expectations.



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Gates C1-C22

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Baggage Claim



Ground Transport

Gate C24

Restrooms 



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TRANSPORTATION

By far, the costliest expense of any large group travel is the means of transportation to, during, and returning from the destination. Whether flying by airplane, taking motorcoaches over the road, or combining both, there are vital aspects to consider when evaluating group transportation options.

TRAVEL BY AIR

Traveling by airplane, in many scenarios, extends the reach of destinations you might consider and may provide more time for your group to enjoy them. When choosing a flight schedule, always opt for early morning inbound flights and late afternoon or early evening return flights to gain maximum time at your destination. You may lose up to a full day of touring with other less expensive flight time options.

TRAVEL BY MOTORCOACH

Bus travel is less expensive than airfare in most scenarios, but with the right motorcoach provider, it can also be just as comfortable and provide a simpler way to travel. Some tour operators maximize available space and reduce expenses by combining one or more tour groups on the same coach. Although this may allow the tour operator to charge less per passenger, you will want to consider the risk associated with sharing the content, accountability, and oversight of traveling with a group other than your own, even if only for a short city or sightseeing tour within your destination city. If this type of arrangement causes concern, confirm the exclusivity of your motorcoach experience with your tour operator.



Insider Tip

Ensure the price per passenger your tour company provides includes airfare or at least an estimated cost. Tour operators often default trip proposals to only include bus travel to far away destinations and include a disclaimer in the small print that airfare will be extra.

Inquire about the age and seating capacity of the charter buses or motorcoaches. Late-model coaches typically have more seating and updated safety features and are less prone to breakdowns or malfunctions. Ask for the motorcoach specifications (year/make/model) to be included in your proposal and travel contract.

HOTEL ACCOMMODATIONS

The second largest expense and booking challenge in group travel is hotel accommodations. There are many variables in hotel reservations and arrangements to consider as this is a common area in which expectations are not met on a trip. Before you agree to a price, you will want to know the exact hotel brand and location as well as the hotel's distance from the heart of the city or activity. In many popular tour destinations, hotel rates well outside the city may be 25%-40% lower than those within a short drive or walk, but you may be sacrificing hours of valuable attraction and tour time spent traveling into the city or sitting in traffic in return.

Consider the occupancy ratio your group will prefer as you evaluate

proposals. Some accommodations may include double occupancy, which means one person per bed in a two-bed hotel room. However, another way tour operators may reduce trip costs is to place 4-5 students or chaperones in a room with only two double beds and a pull-out couch. This is indicated in what is called quad or quad+ occupancy on a proposal.

Most tour operators can also arrange for their group to eat breakfast at the hotel to save time and cost. This is a beneficial option to get the day started off right without wasting valuable trip time on additional meal stops. Each hotel may offer different breakfast service levels, so confirm which one is arranged for your group in advance.

GRAB AND GO

Designed for convenience, this prepackaged option is often limited to a granola or protein bar, a carton of milk or juice, and possibly a piece of portable fruit such as a banana, orange, or apple.

CONTINENTAL BREAKFAST

Standard in many 3+ star hotels, this type of breakfast typically includes cereals, bread, pastries, cut fruit, yogurt, and an assortment of coffee, juice, milk, and/or tea.

FULL BUFFET BREAKFAST

Buffets are a heartier and energy-fueled meal option to prepare your group for a long tour day. Served hot and fresh, it usually includes the same items in a Continental Breakfast but also offers additional items including proteins such as bacon, sausage, and eggs as well as breakfast potatoes, pancakes, and/or waffles.



MEALS AND DINING

Sometimes, a simple meal is necessary to accommodate an already packed itinerary. However, depending on the type of trip or tour you will be taking, incorporating meaningful dining experiences are a simple and cost-effective way to enhance the overall trip enjoyment.

Before you commit to an itinerary, it is essential to note what meals are included in the trip's price and which are the participants' responsibilities. With so many variables, you will want to calculate those expenses and include them in the overall price of the trip. If not, it may add as much as \$300-\$500 more per person to the total cost. To eliminate financial surprises just before or while on tour, we encourage you to fully understand your complete meal and dining plan in advance and ask your tour operator to provide a good mix of fun and function.



Below are the various dining options typically offered in a trip's meal and dining plan:

FOOD COURT

Typically located in a mall or shopping center, a food court is a dining option with a variety of food choices for your participants in a location that is equipped to accommodate large groups. Although a food court does not do anything to enhance the trip experience, it is a convenient and relatively inexpensive choice for feeding a large group.

FAST FOOD/QUICK SERVICE

Although inexpensive, most stand-alone fast food or quick service restaurants are not equipped to handle a large group descending on them simultaneously. With large tours of more than 100 people, splitting the group between neighboring restaurants can also be risky, especially if the restaurant choice is up to the participants, as a large percentage of the group will likely still choose the more popular dining options. Fast food stops with larger tours can easily remove hours from your itinerary, not to mention having to deal with scenarios where those who have finished eating are sitting while a large portion of the group may still be in line ordering food.

TABLE SERVICE

With advance reservations and arrangements, your tour operator can provide a quality dining experience at a sit-down restaurant with historical or cultural significance in your destination city. Most tour operators will work with the restaurateur to negotiate a fixed menu, price, and gratuity and include the discounted cost in the trip. Your group will always want to avoid paying individually or by table off the menu, as most restaurants are not equipped to do so for large groups seated simultaneously. This will likely add delays and unpredictable costs to your plans.

DINNER SHOW/ENTERTAINMENT

Most quality tour operators have vendor relationships with various dinner shows or fun dining experiences in destination cities. It may not be realistic or cost-effective to book these experiences for every meal, but you should consider including at least one or two as part of your group's itinerary. Whether it's a theatrical or action-based performance or a cruise or excursion with dinner included, the cost difference between a typical restaurant and these enhanced experiences is often negligible and well worth the value they provide.



Insider Tip

Ask the tour operator if the restaurants they include in their dining plan are those that provide a kickback or commission in return for their patronage. Tour operators or guides often will only present options in which this arrangement is in place.

If your tour operator is utilizing meal vouchers, coupons, or cash as part of your dining plan, verify the amounts to be distributed for each meal and whether there are any restrictions on the type of food or locations. Also, confirm that unspent amounts are returned to your group or credited after the trip's conclusion.

A woman with short dark hair, wearing a yellow short-sleeved shirt and jeans, is standing in a city street. She has a large black backpack and a 'TOUR GUIDE' badge hanging from her neck. She is looking towards the camera with a slight smile. The background is a blurred city street with buildings and other people. The entire image has a blue tint.

TOUR GUIDES AND HOSTS

Navigating an unfamiliar city, landmark, or attraction can be intimidating, especially with a large group in tow. It is helpful to have an experienced and knowledgeable tour company representative as a resource for your group should you encounter delays, changing circumstances, or unexpected events. Different levels of support and guidance are available through reputable tour operators, but it is essential to know your options and evaluate each as part of your overall trip cost.

TRIP LEADER OR DIRECTOR

A tour operator representative providing 24/7 on-site support with access and authority to make changes to the itinerary and reservations or to negotiate alternative solutions on the spot. Their primary role is to ensure the group receives the value and experience level they paid for as part of the trip contract and serves as the primary point of contact on the trip.

SITE REPRESENTATIVE OR GROUP LIAISON

A local person representing the tour operator who typically greets the tour upon arrival in the city or destination. This person or another designee is typically on call during the trip and will be available by phone or email during regular business hours or in case of an extreme emergency. They will usually hand over all tickets and reservation details to the group and provide a briefing of information to self-guide the city or attraction. This arrangement is not recommended for groups traveling to an unfamiliar city or destination.

TOUR GUIDE(S)

An expert companion for either a portion or the entirety of the trip itinerary. A great tour guide is knowledgeable, engaging, and can relate to all age groups providing important context to the sights and landmarks. For smaller groups, you may only require one person or an entire team of guides for larger tours. These professionals may be an employee of the tour operator or contracted guides with the knowledge and communication skills required to properly feature the attractions and sights in the destination city.



SHOW, PERFORMANCE, AND EVENT SEATING

A theater show, fine arts performance, or comedy show can offer a memorable experience that enhances any educational or sightseeing tour. Your tour operator can negotiate group rates that make attending a professional performance surprisingly affordable. However, not every show offers the same quality of content or presentation. Some may not even be appropriate for your school group, so confirm with your tour operator the name of the specific show you will be attending in advance and research the content of that show before committing.

Where your group is seated in the venue can either improve or detract from your group's enjoyment, so you should also confirm with your tour operator the level of seating your reservations offer. The difference in ticket levels is often nominal, and a slight upgrade can vastly improve the overall experience.

BALCONY LEVEL

The least expensive of all ticket options, balcony seating, is at the extreme upper level of a venue. Seats in the very rear of the balcony or those on the sides can offer a limited view of the stage. Even in standard balcony seating and depending on the size of the theater or venue, binoculars may be required to see the faces or expressions of the performers, and to hear spoken or sung words clearly may be difficult.

MEZZANINE LEVEL

A venue with a mezzanine level offers seats that are lower and closer to the performance. The several front rows of the mezzanine can provide a clear panoramic view of the stage and, in some theaters, are more intimate to the performance than the rear orchestra seating options.

ORCHESTRA LEVEL

Orchestra seating offers the closest vantage point to the stage and performers. Although orchestra seats right up front may put you amongst the action with the most intimate viewing experience, the visibility for shorter patrons may be impeded as the orchestra level is usually somewhat flat until it rises several rows back from the stage.



Insider Tip

Confirm your seats are all together and not in areas of the venue where the view of the stage is blocked by structural supports, curtains, or other seating levels. These are usually the least expensive tickets in the venue but are not an optimal viewing experience.

FESTIVALS OR GROUP PERFORMANCE EVENTS

Many schools or groups incorporate a performance or exhibition from their band, choir, or theater group while on tour when appropriate. This can be a fun and memorable way to arrange a once-in-a-lifetime experience. Many cities and venues offer performance festivals where their event staff manages the arrangements and schedule. Some of the more prominent festivals will also include hotels, a few meals, and even tickets to local attractions. However, most do not include ground or air transportation to and from the event. You will want to confirm exactly what the festival or venue's participation agreement covers and what your group is responsible for.



Insider Tip

Build in enough flex time in your travel schedule before the start of the festival. If flight delays or motorcoach issues occur and you miss a part or all of the festival, the event company will rarely offer refunds or provide alternate accommodations.

A man in a white shirt is speaking into a microphone on a bus. The background shows the interior of the bus with seats and a digital clock displaying 2:17. The entire image has a blue tint.

SAFETY AND SECURITY PROTOCOLS

Every tour operator's most important priority should be the safety and security of the students, chaperones, faculty, and administrators under their watch on a trip or tour. Unfortunately, this is often one area in travel planning where perceived cost savings can introduce risk and threats to the equation.

PROFESSIONAL SECURITY PERSONNEL

Most tour destinations do not necessarily require full-time security detail to accompany the group for the entirety of the trip. However, a common addition to the travel safety plan is employing night security at the group's hotel. Some hotels and resorts will provide security services as part of the group rate, but others leave it up to the group to hire guards.

If you decide to hire security guards or the hotel provides these services, verify the vetting requirements for the applicants. Some companies require complete background checks and oversight of the qualifications. In contrast, others can be less stringent in their minimum criteria and place untrained and underqualified people in low-traffic areas around the premises.

HOTEL SAFETY CONSIDERATIONS

Regardless of the discipline of your students, the “away-from-home” experience of student group travel may encourage the testing of normal boundaries and rules. This is especially true for students traveling for the first time. Even the best-behaved students can get caught up in the excitement and camaraderie of trying to test the limits of what is acceptable behavior. You can mitigate students' temptation to participate in unsafe or damaging activities while on the trip by choosing hotels with inner hallways and doors and those without balconies or windows that open to the outside. Confirm with the tour operator that the hotel allows additional security measures such as taping doors and chaperones monitoring the halls and common areas.



Insider Tip

Ask your tour operator if they monitor protests before and during the trip. In many cities, protesters can gain permit approval less than 24 hours before the rally. A tour operator can change the itinerary with protest monitoring protocols in place to avoid unfortunate disruptions and potentially unsafe scenarios.

It is vital to know the exact address of the hotels included in the travel package. Hotel rates in high-crime areas will typically be less expensive but can introduce unnecessary risk, especially traveling to and from the hotel at night.

TRAVEL PROTECTION PLANS

Travel protection plans can provide significant peace of mind before and during a trip. Once trip deposits and commitments are made, various issues that prohibit travel may surface. Most well-established tour operators either offer plans themselves or partner with reputable companies to offer plans that allow for sudden or unexpected changes, even if cancellation is required. If a passenger falls ill or a trip is interrupted for any reason, protection plans may ensure a portion of the trip investment is refunded. It is essential to read the policy plan documents and determine what the policy covers, especially concerning cancellations.

CANCEL FOR ANY REASON POLICIES

You will want to check for a Cancel for Any Reason (CFAR) clause. Without this in place, the tour company or protection plan provider will often not offer any reimbursement unless under stringent conditions such as direct sickness/hospitalization of the traveler.

CFAR plans also have a short list of approved reasons for 100% refunds but can be more forgiving when it includes a “for any reason” allowance.

REFUNDS THROUGH VOUCHERS

Some larger tour operators may also offer 100% refunds if a trip is canceled or participation is prohibited, but it may be in voucher form that must be redeemed with their company on future travel. You will want to ensure that any refund is a cash or credit card reimbursement.



Insider Tip

CFAR policies are the only ones that cover pandemic-related cancellations or government shutdowns.

A woman with dark hair in a bun, wearing glasses and a floral scarf, is sitting at a desk, looking at a laptop. She is holding a white mug. The background is a blurred office environment with bookshelves.

PRICING COMPARISONS

The group travel and tour operator industry is highly competitive. Often, an inexperienced trip coordinator representing the school may decide on a provider based solely on the lowest per-passenger price of the trip. Knowing this, tour or travel companies will intentionally be vague or conceal critical information that might affect the school's financial decision. The fine print or lack of clarification may hide details that could make or break a trip. So, here are a few of the most common tricks and pitfalls to be on the lookout for when evaluating trip proposals and contracts.

LOCKED IN PRICING

On the proposal, ensure the rate quoted per paying passenger does not include a statement such as, “Based on 20__ pricing” or “Price may change due to increased costs at or near the time of trip” You will want to make sure the price quote you receive is locked in for the dates you are traveling so your group cannot be charged additional fees after deposits and contracts are executed.

LOW-COST INTRODUCTORY RATES

Similar to a marketing tactic used by grocery chains or big box electronics stores, some tour operators heavily discount the first trip proposal and get the group or school to commit to a multi-year contract for travel services. In these types of arrangements, the pricing of subsequent trips will increase while the quality and level of service of the trips will almost certainly decrease.



Insider Tip

Ask about the minimum number of paying passengers required to secure your per-person price and prevent increases as you get closer to the trip dates. For example, if pricing is based on 105 paying passengers (two busloads), but you only anticipate or secure 75 commitments, the cost of the remaining 30 participants will be split between everyone else.



MEMORIES THAT LAST A LIFETIME!

Student travel and tours can create remarkable memories, make impactful experiences accessible, and facilitate timeless bonds shared among students, faculty, parents, and administrators. Hopefully, the information and insights shared in this guide will help you make decisions that will ultimately create an exceptional trip that people will talk about for years to come!



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