

Taking a vacation: independent or escorted group travel?

TALES FROM THE ROAD



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Which is best, travelling on your own or taking a group tour? The answer is: it depends — on a lot of things.

An important factor is whether you enjoy planning an independent trip, and are willing to invest the time and effort. The good news is that in recent years, the proliferation of online resources such as Trip Advisor and travel blogs has made it much easier to get information, especially from other travellers who relate first-hand experiences and pass along recommendations.

Some places are easier than others to go on your own, such as to well-travelled destinations in Europe or southeastern Asia. Generally, the farther you get off the beaten track, the more sense it makes to take an organized excursion.

Organized group travel has a lot of advantages. Someone else worries about where to stay, communicating in foreign languages, and other details. A tour guide not only provides information on the places you visit, but can help sort out glitches that may arise. Many prefer the social aspect of group travel, and it's ideal for single people who don't want to travel alone.

Although group travel is easier, it's important to do your homework before booking, since tour companies are not all created equal.

Ideally, ask for feedback from friends who have used a company you are considering. Or search for tour companies on online travel forums to see what other travellers say. Some tour operators specialize

in smaller groups, while others take such large groups that people are practically herded like cattle, so compare options before choosing.

With group travel, everything is scheduled, leaving little or no room for flexibility. You can't stay longer when you find somewhere you really like, or skip places that don't interest you. Forget about sleeping in. Some people like the certainty of knowing exactly what will happen when, while others consider it too rigid.

When it comes to independent travel, flexibility and spontaneity are the greatest advantages. You decide exactly where to go, how long to stay, where to eat and how to travel.

We like the option of making changes to our travels as we go. On our trip through Vietnam last winter, we arrived at the historic city of Hoi An with the intention of staying three days, but liked it so much that we stayed a week. That wouldn't be possible on an organized trip.

However, spontaneity isn't always possible, especially when you travel to a popular tourist area in high season where accommodations are booked well in advance.

If you have limited time, a guided tour can pack a lot into a short period. Going on your own takes longer because you have to find your way around; there's no tour bus waiting at your hotel every morning. On the other hand, it allows you to travel at a more leisurely pace. Sleep in if you like, spend all day sight-seeing or loafing on the beach — it's all up to you.

Our personal preference is to travel independently for the most part, but to supplement it with organized excursions along the way. As an example, we travelled to Bolivia and around parts of the country on our own. But we also took an organized four-day excursion through the wild and remote southwest of the country, which was the highlight the trip. We often take guided day tours on our travels



A willingness to plan is part of the decision on whether to travel on your own or go with an escorted group. | REUTERS/MARIANA BAZO PHOTO

as well. This mix and match approach seems to suit our style, but it may not be for everyone.

When it comes to cost, we find we can travel to many parts of the world independently for less money than taking organized tours, but that isn't the case everywhere. On your own, you can take advantage of airfare sales, use frequent flyer points or choose places to stay and eat that are less pricey

than tour group haunts. Wandering around independently through much of southeastern Asia, for example, can be remarkably inexpensive. But for pricey parts of the world or where the tourism infrastructure isn't well developed, it may be more costly to do things on your own.

The bottom line is that one style of travel isn't inherently better than another. If you like the freedom and

adventure of going your own way and are willing to put the effort into planning, then independent travel is worth considering. However, if you prefer to have everything laid out in advance and leave the details to others, then guided tours are likely better.

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