

What to Look for in a Guided Tour

by Jerry Soverinsky



Having led several thousand travelers on group cycling trips over the past 20 years, I can state definitely that few propositions offer more emotional and physical rewards — save for maybe attending pole-dancing classes with your significant other — than spending your annual vacation on a commercial group cycling tour.

However, I can also state definitely that few propositions carry more emotional, physical, and financial risks than spending your vacation on a commercial group cycling tour.

It doesn't, however, have to be a crapshoot. Although the three elements that significantly influence all group bicycle-tour experiences — group members, the tour company's execution, and the trip's logistics — fall outside your control, there are things you can research to minimize the risks and ensure you have an enjoyable and rewarding trip.

"My name is John, I'm from Redmond, Washington, I'm a structural engineer."

For some, the idea of traveling with a group of strangers is painful. Many say they'd rather bathe in lye. And let's face it, adapting to a group environment with personalities and timing demands that fall outside of your control is not easy. If you think your co-worker, Neil — you know, the guy who never flosses and always asks if you saw last night's episode of *Project Runway* ("Could you believe that hem?!") — is annoying, imagine living with him for 10 days: eating all your meals with him and having to think up a daily excuse as to why you'd prefer not to rub SPF 45 on his back. It's a possibility (and better than you think, too).

CHRIS GUBERT

By the Numbers

First, the good news: roughly 99 percent of the people who join group cycling tours are good people. Great people. They're fun. They'll laugh at your jokes. They'll share embarrassing stories. 99 percent, that's a pretty good number.

Now the bad news: The remaining one percent. That's the percentage of folks who join group cycling tours who are,

like them, probably even exchange email addresses with several when the trip is over, and maybe visit their summer homes in Nantucket or Mackinac next spring.

But take enough tours and you're going to meet that (non-clinical) nut job. The guy who comes down to the lobby naked, listening to his iPod, asking for two washcloths and some Q-Tips. Or the 50-something divorced father who joins a trip with

idea. They all exist (and I've met them).

But as annoying, or creepy, or disturbing as those people will be, they're a small minority of the people you'll meet.

Even so

Jack and Jill* (*their real names!) had been dating four years and had recently become engaged when they joined one of my company's camping tours in France. I felt particularly honored to think that the couple would be sharing such a memorable moment in their lives on one of my company's trips.

That feeling, of course, dissipated on Day 3 when Jack started (aggressively) flirting with Andrea (a single traveler) — which led to Jack and Jill breaking up. Not immediately, of course — there were two days of shouting and swearing and even throwing (Jill's aim with a water bottle was astonishingly accurate). All of which is pretty difficult to tune out when you're staying at unimaginably intimate municipal French campgrounds.

Jill left the trip on Day 6, although Jack continued his journey. And then his behavior turned really objectionable.

Thankfully, there weren't a lot of Jack and Jills on my company's trips, which is probably why I still love group bicycle tours. Get a good bunch of people together and there's no better way to share a self-propelled, two-wheeled travel experience.

Support

In addition to the interpersonal benefits, joining a group bicycle tour offers valuable support services. If you're single (or maybe dating or even married) — but don't know anyone who shares your cycle touring passion, group tours provide assistance that's unavailable when traveling independently. The idea of pre-planned itineraries, luggage transport, mechanical and medical assistance — they're worth the extra cost to many travelers.

The Bottom Line: Protecting Your Investment

Even if the stars are aligned against you, here are some things you can do to minimize the risk that "Barry the Boisterous Braggart" will spoil your group cycling experience.

1 *Single supplement:* If you're traveling alone, dish out a few extra bucks for a

single room. Not having to share a bathroom or endure nighttime acoustics with a stranger will eliminate most conflicts that single travelers encounter.

1 *Bring a friend or spouse:* When you're traveling with a companion, if a personality conflict becomes uncomfortable, you can separate yourself from the group (perhaps during a ride or sightseeing excursion) and always know that you have support. This is especially important if you're traveling internationally when your confidence to separate independently might be compromised.

1 *Demographics of travelers:* You're a 28-year-old single. Do you really want to join a trip comprised mostly of octogenarian couples? Before sending in your trip deposit, ask the tour operator very candidly the number of participants, their ages, and whether they're single or married.

1 *Group size:* If you're tentative about traveling en masse but willing to give it a try, I recommend joining a larger group first. Why? Problem personalities are typically less damaging among larger groups of people. If there's an uncomfortable



Riding free. For some cyclists, riding without baggage on scenic, predetermined routes is the ultimate.

personality on a 22-person tour, there are plenty of other people with whom to associate (and disassociate). But place the problem traveler on a 5-person group tour

and you'll be longing for the carefree days of proofreading PowerPoint presentations in your office cubicle back home.

Choosing a Tour Company



High-octane fuel. Quality vittles are a key ingredient in the best commercial tours.

well, not so good. Disturbingly eccentric. A-number-1 freakos. Remember Norman Bates from *Psycho*? Times a million!

Doing the math, though, on a 15-person trip, the odds are that you'll get along with most of your trip members. You'll really

his 24-year-old twin daughters and fiancée and ends up having a rather public affair with a 19-year-old fellow traveler (not his fiancée). Or the paranoid 40-something woman who insisted that her collection of rather foul-smelling ... well, you get the

Vacation for these guys is a little different from the norm.



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Listed below are the bicycle tour companies that advertise in Adventure Cyclist. Besides supporting this magazine and Adventure Cycling Association with advertising dollars, they're willing to invest money to be seen by Adventure Cyclist readers. We can't necessarily vouch for them, but feel their support makes them worthy of highlighting here. A comprehensive listing of tour operators, advertisers or not, is available at www.adventurecycling.org/cyp and will be printed in the upcoming 29th edition of The Cyclists' Yellow Pages.

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Without question, the travel company operating your tour will play the biggest role in shaping your group travel experience. There are hundreds of operators all over the globe who offer a variety of bicycle tours for every budget and travel specialty, so you have plenty of options. But the companies' capabilities and professional backgrounds are far from equal, which can yield significantly different travel experiences for you as a consumer.

As you browse the Internet and study your growing bookmarked collection of flash-animated websites and downloaded PDF travel brochures, it's important to look critically at the backgrounds and travel philosophies of the various outfitters before making your final selection. And before sending your hard-earned money to that P.O. box in Anytown, Anystate, be sure to ask prospective suppliers to address the following:

▫ *Curriculum vitae:* Do you really want to risk a 10-day Nepal ride with a first-year operator? Experience counts, both for general operational expertise as well as in efficiency leading specific tours.

Besides the obvious risks in working with a company new to the travel business, ask any prospective operator, regardless of the number of years in business, how many times they've hosted your favored itinerary. Although joining a brand new itinerary shouldn't be a de facto eyebrow raiser (most experienced operators spend considerable time and money researching new offerings), the increased likelihood of minor glitches — unpolished route maps and notes, restaurants or hotels that aren't quite up to par — greatly increases if the trip is a newbie. Staff

Does your outfitter hire and train its own guides? Or do they subcontract them through a foreign agency or other outfitter? This is not a far-fetched scenario; subcontracting itineraries and even tour guides — especially for international itineraries — is common. The risks are twofold:

First, you might be overpaying for your trip. Although the partner companies I know that provide these behind-the-scenes services are reputable and credible (wholesalers in this case), their programs are frequently resold at vastly different prices

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—Jason Smith, weekend road racer, **Flash-Point rider**

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among tour operators (resellers in this case). Which means that you might be paying 20 to 50 percent more than you would with another operator for the identical program (and more than that if you'd joined the supplier's program directly and not through a reseller).

Second, when a tour operator relies on an overseas third party to execute trip logistics, quality-control issues may come into play, no matter how competent the company is. Why?

Customer-service expectations are culturally distinct, and training methods used by these third-party foreign operators might not be 100 percent in sync with your travel needs. They may excel in every other tour management area — knowledge of the region, familiarity with routes — but if they don't understand your expectations and how to address periodic frustrations, your trip experience will be compromised. Be direct and ask a prospective operator to describe how staff is trained and supervised. It matters.

References

Ask to speak with some of the outfitter's previous participants. Firsthand travel accounts are far more reliable than fluffy travel brochure copy. A few points to consider in this regard:

- ▮ Recent travelers' accounts are far more reliable than dated ones.
- ▮ Consider the background — age, marital status, cycling experience — of the respondent. If possible, request to speak with people whose backgrounds align with yours. Their feedback will be more relevant.
- ▮ Ask to speak with someone who's ridden the itinerary that you're considering. It's



Daily map meetings. Keeping the group on the same page is of utmost importance.

important that you feel comfortable with the trip logistics.

Logistics that work for you

Finally, once you've determined that a group trip is for you and the tour operator you've emailed 27 times seems legit, it's time to select an itinerary. This is when you need to carefully assess your abilities, comfort standards, and service expectations.

Support: Do you need to carry your belongings each travel day, or will your

operator arrange for their safe transport? Cycling with bags saddled to your bicycle is far different from biking "luggage-free." Ask for support-level specifics before committing to an operator and make sure they're compatible with your comfort level. (Either that or grow accustomed to cycling with panniers *before* your 10-day Italy trip, not *during*. The transition can be difficult, and the learning curve might cut into your

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A. SITTING ON THE MOON

by Michael Deme

A. Tarma Designs If you're sweetie is a cyclist, or if you like to buy bicycle-related body ornamentation for yourself, you might want to check out Tarma Designs. They design necklaces, earrings, and bracelets and manufacture them out of recycled stainless steel so, not only can you sport your love of cycling, you can be green as well. And green is the new green, after all. You can get the jewelry for both road and mountain biking, and Tarma also produces their ornaments for other activities including climbing, hiking, kayaking, running, yoga, surf-



ing, snowboarding, and skiing, all for about \$25. For more information about Tarma Designs, call (800) 824-8201 or visit www.tarmadesigns.com.

B. Knog Gator As you can see from the letter on page five, lighting is a subject worth writing about, so we'll keep the reviews coming in "Geared Up." First up, the Knog Gator 105 (\$92). This light features a rechargeable 4-cell NiMH battery pack that provides 4.5 hours of burn time on its brightest setting. That's impressive. The light itself is 1 x 1 high-powered light emitting diode (LED) which provides a 32-degree light pattern that is very bright and uniformly round, and there's also a 600-meter visibility flasher. My favorite feature of the Gator,

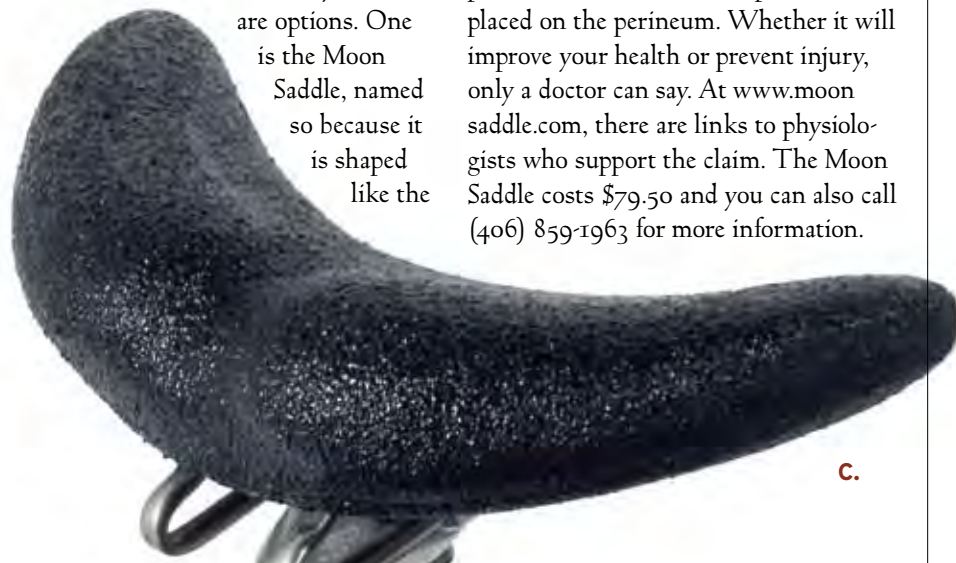
however, is its attachment system. The rubber universal fit system is quick and simple, you

just hook and unhook. It's a snap.

If you want more wattage, you can go brighter with the Gator 305 (\$160) or 605 (\$240). For more information about Knog lighting systems, call (800) 772-2453 or visit www.knogusa.com.

C. Moon Saddle Picking a saddle that suits your particular anatomical structure can be tricky. Most people are happy enough with a wedge-shaped traditional saddle, but if those don't seem

to work for you, there are options. One is the Moon Saddle, named so because it is shaped like the



if mounted correctly, its waning crescent phase, to be precise. The Moon Saddle is designed to relieve pressure on the perineum, the result of which is better health for both men and women, as has been claimed by many physiologists who have studied this area of the human body.

If you've been riding a traditional saddle, which most of us have, you'll find the Moon Saddle takes some time to get used to. There is no doubt that it does what it claims — there is no "horn" portion of the saddle so no pressure is placed on the perineum. Whether it will improve your health or prevent injury, only a doctor can say. At www.moon-saddle.com, there are links to physiologists who support the claim. The Moon Saddle costs \$79.50 and you can also call (406) 859-1963 for more information.



B.

moon during one of its crescent phases, and,

continued from page 16

enjoyment.)

Difficulty level: If you're selecting an operator with whom you haven't yet traveled, seek clarification about their usage of nondescript terms such as "moderate," "slightly challenging," and the like in their itinerary descriptions. Terms like these are not interchangeable among operators.

If you're a true novice with a low fitness level, joining an itinerary that's too difficult or long will seem cruel and masochistic. On the other hand, if you're an experienced athlete, a route that's too easy will leave you feeling cheated. Obtain daily distances and terrain descriptions and then consider how this fits with your personal abilities. If the mileage seems too long, ask if there are alternate shorter routes that are also supported. A significant point: if a company provides one support vehicle but two loop rides during each travel day, it is not possible to provide convenient access for all travelers throughout the day.

Difficulty level caveat: If you're joining a trip with a companion and you're of vastly different cycling abilities, choose a trip level appropriate for the weaker rider. Joining a trip that's too challenging

is far more problematic than one that is too easy. At least in the latter case, the stronger rider can usually cycle additional mileage; in the former, you're effectively resigning one traveler to ride in a support vehicle. I've hosted many couples who failed to consider this advice, and it invariably led to conflict between the partners (not quite a Jack and Jill scenario, but there was tangible resentment and frustration).

Food and lodging: What you eat and where you sleep are significant considerations; ask for clarifications. Are group meals at local restaurants, or are they generic fixed-menu offerings from hotel conference centers? Similarly, what exactly is a "charming" hotel? Ask for websites of your overnight accommodations; it provides reassurance that your expectations will be met.

Alas, even with your best efforts, there are no guarantees that your group bicycle tour will be a success. You can select a single supplement on a well-traveled itinerary with North American-trained guides, yet there are still many factors that are beyond your control, factors that might lead to a less than favorable trip experience. Because of that, you might just decide that a group



Got it? Support staff handle all the lifting.

bicycle tour isn't for you. The rewards, you decide, are too speculative.

In which case, might I recommend the pole-dancing classes with that significant other? **AC**

Jerry Soverinsky founded the bicycle-tour company CBT Tours. He is the author of Cycle Europe: 20 Tours, 12 Countries. For more information about Jerry, visit <http://jerrysoverinskycreative.com>.



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