



CAREER AS A TOUR OPERATOR

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TOUR OPERATOR

IF YOU ENJOY TRAVEL HERE'S AN EXCELLENT BUSINESS OPPORTUNITY HELPING OTHERS SEE THE WORLD

THERE ARE VERY FEW PEOPLE WHO DON'T HARBOR A DESIRE TO SEE SOMETHING OF the world besides their own hometown. They may not wish to travel further than the capitol of their home state, or they may believe that no corner of the Earth is too remote to explore. While there are many travelers who are content to take their chances on roaming alone and unattended, there are millions of people around the world who prefer the assistance of an expert. These are people who look to tour operators to help them get the most out of their travel experience.

Tour operators cover most of the globe and exist in even some of the world's smallest communities. If there is a remote location that a tourist might want to visit, there is usually a tour operation that offers some kind of tour to that destination. Sometimes the tours are as small as two people, sometimes as large as hundreds or thousands. Tour operators provide both outbound services, such as arranging overseas tours for Americans, and they provide inbound services, such as local tour specialists meeting and escorting international groups through the tour operator's home city.

Careers in tour operations cover a wide range of options. Some positions involve no travel at all, while other positions will send the employee all over the world. Some are part time and others are seasonal; some are full time or on a limited-term contractual basis. But even the in-house positions offer the opportunity to travel for personal enjoyment and enrichment, and administrative work can seem much more interesting when it involves making arrangements in fun and unusual destinations.

Perhaps the most inviting aspect of a career as a tour operator is in being able to use a variety of skills. Tour operators need people who can negotiate contracts, perform sales calls, manage complex bookkeeping tasks, demonstrate organizational and administrative efficiency, continually

learn new aspects of remote destinations, and confidently (and often single-handedly) lead groups of people while providing education, entertainment, and occasionally resolving disputes.

Many people who are attracted to the world of tour operations are first intrigued by the idea of traveling. Yet a desire to travel is not, in and of itself, enough to guarantee a successful career. However, people who are not interested in traveling are probably not as likely to succeed as those who find travel a fascinating venture. People who develop expertise in specialty travel fields, such as specific destinations or types of travel, are often the employees who are most able to generate enthusiasm among their fellow employees and among the tour groups they assist.

So if learning more about the world of travel and possibly seeing more of it yourself is attractive to you, continue reading – there is an entire world of possibilities available for you in the tour operator career field.

YOU CAN START EXPLORING THIS CAREER TODAY

IT'S NEVER TOO SOON TO START LEARNING ABOUT THIS CAREER PATH. FIRST, ASSESS your own interests and skills, perhaps with the help of a guidance counselor and a personality inventory. Do you like to travel? Are you interested in other parts of the world, or are you an expert on your own home town? Maybe you like to travel, but don't think you'd like to do so as part of your work. Tour operators need many employees who are based out of headquarter offices, and those employees usually only travel on their own vacations for fun, so not wanting to travel for work does not rule out your involvement in the travel field.

A thorough personality inventory, such as the one provided on the Web site www.careers-internet.org, can help determine if you have the necessary people skills to work as a tour guide or if you have the organizational skills to work behind the scenes. Combining such an inventory with your own personal interests can help you narrow your choices when thinking about the world of tour operators.

Once you've decided that this is the field for you, spend time at the library and on the Internet, researching the different kinds of tour operators that exist. If possible, call and schedule informational interviews of tour operators that appeal to you. See if you can speak with someone in the kind of position that appeals to you the most.

Investigate travel-related education through community colleges or vocational schools, and take any opportunity you can to learn about the world of tourism. Apply for entry-level, summer or internship positions with local tour operators or tourism bureaus. When possible, take advantage of opportunities to travel. The more you know about the experience of traveling, the better prepared you'll be to pursue a career in this field.

HISTORY OF THIS CAREER

THE HISTORY OF THE TOUR OPERATION INDUSTRY IS ONE OF ENTREPRENEURIAL SPIRIT; it's a matter of filling a need at the right moment.

It could be said that this industry is rooted far back in the past, as far back as the first paying passenger to set foot on a sailing ship or the first weary traveler to ask for assistance upon reaching a large city. It's impossible to pinpoint the first time a company formally introduced itself as a tour operator willing to provide help to beleaguered travelers in search of entertainment and enrichment while visiting away from home.

The most likely scenario is that in ancient cities (possibly Greek or Roman, but certainly in most major European cities), enterprising individuals realized that visitors to the city needed help. Perhaps they were owners of inns or shops, or young people who earned the occasional coin or food by helping a visitor in need. Whatever the case, the beginnings of today's highly sophisticated tour operators surely began with demand creating opportunity.

Local operators, often working alone or with a handful of others, began as a basic traveler's aid: taking visitors new to the city and pointing them in the direction of places to stay and eat as well as guiding them to the places they needed to go, whether for business, worship, or education. Initially the pay was negotiated on the spot, if at all; many operators had to trust the visitor to offer something more than heartfelt thanks. Of course, if the visitor was unkind enough not to offer more concrete thanks, they might find themselves being robbed or assaulted. The early days of tour operators were not necessarily the most ethical or humanitarian.

By the mid-19th century, some of these operations had formalized into more respectable organizations. The more enterprising of these street side tour guides realized that creating a regular business, with published services and fees, would not only gain them more visibility and

respectability, but a chance at making a steady living that was an improvement over the hard labor of the farm and factory work of those days. These entrepreneurs also realized the value of offering not just “meet and greet” kinds of services, but of putting together a package that would offer the wary traveler a way to visit other cities – indeed, other countries – without worrying about finding adequate housing and transportation. Inns and hotels were receptive to the idea of having business directed their way; the money that was initially paid under the table by innkeepers to entice tour guides to direct business their way became a preset commission. The tour guide would earn a percentage or set dollar portion of the guest’s stay in that hotel for bringing the guest to the hotel in the first place.

Thomas Cook: A Pioneer One of the earliest records of a tour operator involved Thomas Cook. In 1841, the 32-year old Cook walked from his home in a small English town to the nearby town of Leicester to attend a temperance meeting. A former Baptist preacher, Cook was a religious man who believed that most Victorian social problems were related to alcohol, and that the lives of working people would be greatly improved if they drank less and became better educated. As he walked along the road to Leicester, he later recalled, “the thought suddenly flashed across my mind as to the practicability of employing the great powers of railways and locomotion for the furtherance of this social reform.”

At the meeting, Cook suggested that a special train be engaged to carry the temperance supporters of Leicester to a quarterly delegate meeting in Loughborough about four weeks later. The proposal was received with such enthusiasm that, on the following day, Cook submitted his idea to the secretary of the Midland Railway Company. A train was subsequently arranged and, on July 5, 1841, about 500 passengers were conveyed in open carriages the enormous distance of 12 miles and back for a shilling.

The day was a great success and, as Cook later recorded: “thus was struck the keynote of my excursions, and the social idea grew upon me.”

The first excursion for Thomas Cook’s own profit came in 1845, when he organized a trip to Liverpool. As the port from which steamers sailed to the New World, Liverpool was an attractive location. It was also near the beautiful scenery of the Welsh mountains with their historic castles, and Cook was quickly learning that to get people to travel he had to offer a variety of attractions.

In 1855 an International exhibition was held in Paris for the first time and Cook seized this opportunity by trying to persuade the companies commanding the Channel traffic to allow him concessions. They refused to work with him, however, and the only route he was able to use was the one between Harwich and Antwerp. This opened up the way for a grand circular tour to include Brussels, Cologne, the Rhine, Heidelberg, Baden-Baden, Strasbourg and Paris, returning to London via Le Havre or Dieppe. By this route, during the summer of 1855, Thomas escorted his first tourists to Europe.

Cook's travelers to Switzerland and Italy were from the growing middle classes and they expected better accommodation than his earlier working-class customers. He therefore set out to negotiate with innkeepers and hotel proprietors to provide rooms and meals at good prices. His friendship with hoteliers, who were pleased to get his customers, enabled Cook to develop two important travel systems: one was the Hotel Coupon, launched in 1868, which travelers could use to pay for hotel accommodations and meals instead of using money: the other was the Circular Note, first issued in 1874 and the forerunner of the travelers check, which enabled tourists to obtain local currency in exchange for a paper note issued by Thomas Cook.

In the early spring of 1869 Cook laid the foundations of subsequent tours to Egypt and the Bible Lands, when he took more than 30 travelers up the Nile by steamer and escorted a party roughly twice that size through Palestine. He returned to the Middle East in 1869, accompanied by a small party of friends, to attend the opening of the Suez Canal.

The company Cook founded is a major tour operator today serving over 20 million travelers every year.

Cook and the other larger tour operators, knowing the potential for success was strong, understood that it was better to have local contacts. Some tour operators opened branch offices that handled the incoming travelers, while others subcontracted to residents of those countries. Often these deals were conducted by letter or on the spot when the traveler arrived; not surprisingly, it was not the most reliable way to run a business. As the 20th century approached, more sophisticated operations developed that were more reliable.

Meanwhile, the continuing improvements in transoceanic travel, as well as the continued exploration of previously unknown parts of the world, opened up a world of possibilities. Most of the international travel done in the last part of the 19th century, as well as the first part of the 20th century, was done by the wealthy. The costs were high, and the

amount of time involved was considerable; both factors made it impractical for the middle and lower classes to travel.

But because the wealthy had both time and money, the idea of spending it to see exotic places grew in popularity. Even though there was strong interest in visiting remote areas, there was also a great deal of fear, and tour operators were able to present their services in the light of preventing unforeseen problems and protecting the traveler. Consequently, places like India and Africa began to receive an increased numbers of visitors.

Trans-oceanic ships opened up the world for travelers, but not the way air travel did. Even though it was dangerous and uncomfortable in the beginning, the amount of time it took to travel between cities was so significantly reduced that air travel became highly in demand. The speed of early airliners was nothing compared to today's flights, but at the time, it was very impressive. Some aircraft were fitted out as if they were flying hotels, which the wealthy used to tour the world. When the first airlines, like United, Pan American and TWA, came into existence, tour operators realized this was a new and valuable dimension to tour offerings. Tour companies rapidly began contracting with these new airlines, both by buying discounted seats on regularly-scheduled flights and by chartering aircraft for their own tours.

By the mid-20th century, bus tours were becoming tremendously popular as well. People could take day tours around a specific city, take longer tours between cities, or even traverse small countries like Great Britain. Tour companies bought or chartered these buses and built specific itineraries based on potential interest; tour offerings bloomed, with types of tours as varied as a general city tour of New York to fall foliage tours of New England to tours of movie stars' homes in Los Angeles. If there were customers who wanted it, an enterprising tour operator would arrange it, package it, and sell it.

Airline deregulation in the 1970s brought the tour operation business to its current chapter. With fares dropping, travel became more accessible to the average family. People suddenly had the means to travel places they'd always dreamed about, and travel they did. Today tour operators serve millions of people every year, in nearly every corner of the world. Tours visit Alaska, Antarctica, Australia, Argentina, Europe, Siberia, Mongolia – point to any spot on the globe, and there is probably a tour operator who can take you there.

WHERE YOU WILL WORK

WHERE YOU WILL ACTUALLY WORK WHEN EMPLOYED BY A TOUR OPERATOR VARIES greatly, depending on what type of position you hold. Tour operators generally have at least one headquarters location, an office suite or office building that accommodates all of their administrative functions. Employees who handle accounting, reservations, customer service, negotiations, brochures and marketing materials usually will spend most of their time in such an office setting. Management or executive level staff will be based out of the office, but are often traveling for work. Such offices also have training centers, where reservationists, sales reps and tour guides undergo preliminary training.

Sales reps will probably have a desk or an office within the headquarters, but will spend most of their time on the road. Depending on the market for the tour operator, the sales rep may travel regionally, nationally or even internationally, visiting potential clients and travel agencies to promote their company.

Travel is also the name of the game for tour guides, who spend the vast majority of their time away from the office. These front line employees will be leading tours for groups of tourists, and so their work will be done wherever the tour happens to go. Because the guide represents the company and is responsible for the well being and enjoyment of the group, the guide's work takes place on board planes, buses, ships or trains, in hotels and at many tourist locations.

Management staff responsible for negotiating supplier contracts will spend part of their time in the office handling administrative functions, but they will also spend part of their time on the road, visiting and inspecting hotels, ships and tourist attractions, as well as meeting with managers and owners of those operations to begin negotiating group contract rates.

Tour operators do not have corporate headquarters in every city they serve, so if your interest lies with any specific operator, chances are you will have to move to the city in which they're located. Some are headquartered in large cities, such as New York or Los Angeles, while others are based out of smaller communities. If you're looking for a position that will involve a great deal of travel, it may not matter to you where the headquarters is, because you won't be spending much time there. However, if your interest is more administrative or managerial, be sure to visit not only the company, but the community, to make sure it's someplace where you would be comfortable living.

THE WORK YOU WILL DO

THERE ARE BASICALLY TWO TYPES OF TOUR OPERATORS. THE FIRST MAKES arrangements to send people away; they offer tours all over the country or the world, usually escorted (meaning there is a guide with the group who handles arrangements and offers information and history during the tour). The other type handles inbound services, which means they meet and greet people who are arriving in a city, usually offering airport pickups and transfers to hotels and making simple arrangements for the travelers during their stay, much like a concierge. Inbound services are very popular for business and convention groups, where the travelers are spending most of their time at a meeting or conference rather than traveling for fun.

Regardless of which type of operator you work for, many of the duties will be the same. There are numerous types of positions within a tour operation, and frequently employees move about within one company (for example, a reservationist may move into tour production or a tour guide may go into marketing), so learning about all the different roles is useful. Here is a description of many of the positions tour operators offer. The job titles may vary from company to company, but the duties are consistent throughout.

Receptionist The receptionist is responsible for answering phones and properly directing calls, fielding questions, keeping track of the schedules of other employees in order to correctly inform callers of the employees' availability, and greeting visitors to the office. The receptionist is almost always the first line of contact for a visitor or caller, so it's important that this person be courteous and friendly, but in a professional manner, as this contact should be a reflection of the entire company. Receptionists are often expected to perform other administrative tasks, such as handling mailings, filing, proofreading, and coordinating deliveries. Some may even be assistant bookkeepers.

Bookkeeper The bookkeeper handles the company's finances. Depending on the size of the tour operator, this responsibility may fall to one person, or it may be spread across an accounting team of dozens or even hundreds of people. Bookkeepers are in charge of balancing the company's financial records, keeping track of money coming in and going out, paying bills and salaries on time, providing reports for management about the financial performance of the company.

If the operator handles international tours, the bookkeeper will be monitoring exchange rates and handling wire transfers and foreign

currency exchange. In a large company, where responsibilities are delegated among several people (one person handling payroll, one person handling accounts payable, etc.), the bookkeepers may also be expected to review each other's records as a method of checks and balances.

Reservationist Reservationists are the point of sale for a tour operator. The reservationist will take calls, either from the public or from travel agents, requesting information and availability for various tours. The reservationist should be thoroughly familiar with all the tour operator's products and be able to answer a variety of questions about those tours, anything from the primary language spoken at the destination and the comfort level of the hotels to the availability of vegetarian meals.

The reservationist will take orders for the tours, documenting the sale and processing the necessary paperwork (or working with the accounting staff to prepare that paperwork). Carefully monitoring all details of the initial reservation is part of the responsibility as well, such as verifying citizenship for an international tour and notifying the tour participants of the required documentation for travel. The reservationist should have a strong sense of customer service, as how they perform their tasks can affect the traveler's opinion of the company overall and can make a difference between selling a tour or not.

Tour Designer This position goes by many names, and it may fall under the marketing department, the reservations department, or it may even be handled by the owner. Whatever it's called and wherever it's located, this is the heart of the company. Without someone to design the tours, the tour operator would have nothing to sell. Tour designers or producers are responsible for brainstorming tour concepts. They not only need to come up with the ideas, but they need to sell them to management. They must be able to research the market and explain why their idea is a good one, who would be likely to buy it, how long it should be and roughly what it should cost.

Once approved, the designer must begin to put the actual tour together, studying the routes to understand the most efficient itinerary. Hotels and restaurants, if included in the tour, also need to be researched. Even when a tour is up and running, the tour designer must monitor the performance of the tour and be ready to make suggestions if part or all of the tour is not working well.

Contract Negotiator

The contract negotiator works with the tour designer to set the pricing for the trip. The negotiator works primarily with suppliers, such as hotels, airlines, restaurants, tourist attractions and ground transportation to arrange services at the destination and to secure the best possible price. The negotiator must be familiar with the destination and average prices there to understand if the contracts they're arranging are fair to both parties. They must also fully understand what's included in each contract. For example, most European hotels offer breakfast as part of their hotel rate, but if the negotiator gets a contract without breakfast and doesn't realize it, the tour operator may advertise "breakfast included" on its tours, then have to pay extra to cover that claim.

The negotiator sometimes works with sales reps in negotiating large group discounts for clients. Because the negotiators are so familiar with the pricing, they also know just how much of a discount they can realistically offer.

Tour Guide Tour guides are the most visible part of a tour operation. They are the ones who accompany the travelers as part of the tour. In some cases, the tour guide's role is simply to act as a troubleshooter, accompanying the group to check them in at hotels and at tourist sites; in other cases, their role is to explain the significance and history of the places they visit. Tour guides must be extensively educated on the destinations they visit in either case, as tour participants expect them to answer all kinds of questions.

Leading the group may involve being on call 24 hours a day when on tour and being prepared to handle any kind of emergency, from lost passports to stolen wallets to illness in the middle of the night. The tour guide must be able to stay calm under extreme pressure or when facing an irate passenger. As the most visible representative of the tour company, how the tour guide behaves will determine how the traveler perceives the company and whether or not they'd consider signing up for another tour.

Sales Rep Sales representatives, or reps, have the important task of making the tour operator known to the public and to the travel agency community. The sales rep travels regionally, nationally or internationally, carrying brochures and other written information about the company, distributing it in person to potential clients and travel agents. There are thousands of tour companies, so spreading awareness of one company can be a challenge, but it's a necessary role.

Additional duties may include customer service responsibilities, such as resolving disputes or assisting in contract negotiations with clients. In smaller tour operations, this role may be played by the owner or office manager on a part-time basis. In larger companies, this is a full-time position requiring considerable travel.

Office Manager

Smaller tour operators may not have an office manager, but larger companies usually have at least one, if not an entire team to share duties. Office managers are employees who are quite familiar with the operation of the entire company; they have probably worked at one or more of the other positions before being promoted to manager. Managers oversee the daily operation, making sure the different departments work smoothly together. Their duties include resolving disputes, both internal and from clients, hiring and training employees, monitoring tours that are on the road and overseeing production of upcoming tours. They provide advice and final decisions for all areas of the tour operator.

Office managers usually have access to the financial records provided by bookkeeping, and they study the reports, looking for anomalies or areas where more financial control needs to be exerted. If the owner of the company works in the office as well, the manager will consult with the owner on issues of policy, marketing and human resources, keeping the owner current on all pertinent information and carrying out the requests of the owner.

TOUR OPERATIONS PROFESSIONALS TELL ABOUT THEIR CAREERS

I Am a Tour Guide “I always loved to travel. When I was young, my parents loved to travel, so I don’t remember a year we didn’t go somewhere, sometimes two or three trips a year. Mostly we went to Europe, although for a couple of years we visited South America, and one year we went to Africa. My mother is Scottish, so we almost always started in Scotland for a long visit before heading off to mainland Europe. When I was older, I would go to Scotland for part of each summer to stay with my grandparents. My parents would meet me there a couple of weeks later, and we would head off to Europe.

When I graduated from high school, I wasn’t sure what I wanted to do. I figured I knew enough about travel to be able to succeed in that, so I signed up for a travel management program at my local community college. I knew most of the destination stuff from my own travels. But I was able to help some of the other students who hadn’t traveled like I had.

When I completed the two-year program, I got an entry-level job in a travel agency. I liked the work. It was fun selling trips to people who really wanted to travel, and they liked that I had traveled so much and could talk so knowledgeably about different places. But it made me really want to travel again. When the agency owner asked if I would accompany a senior citizen group to Scotland, I jumped at the chance.

It wasn’t the easiest thing I had ever done – the seniors moved pretty slowly, and I wanted to go fast – but it was great being on the road again. The people in the group really appreciated the help and knowledge I could give them, and I thought it was great to be able to use what I knew so directly. When the trip was over, almost everyone gave me a generous cash tip, which made the trip even better. Going back to the office to work at my desk seemed pretty boring in comparison.

I led a couple of other trips to Europe for the agency, which only confirmed what I suspected after the first trip: I really liked leading trips, and I was good at it. I began studying the brochures

at the office to see which tour operators offered destinations I could lead. Then I sent my resume off to five of them, three of whom called me for interviews, and two of which offered me a job.

I started out doing large bus groups to Europe. The one thing I hadn't experienced when doing just the occasional group was how exhausting the trips could be. Sometimes I would have two tours back to back, with only a day off in between, and being a tour guide is not a 9 to 5 job. On one tour, I had a married couple that was trying to save their marriage, and they fought all the time. I finally had to take them aside and ask them to try to keep their disagreements in private, as it was affecting the whole tour. On another trip, I had an elderly man who had a heart attack, right on the bus. Luckily we weren't far from the hospital. He ended up just fine, but I had to make special arrangements for him and his wife to return to the US once his hospital stay was over, something that was hard to do, since the flights were packed with summer travelers.

After I had worked with the company for three years, they asked if I would like to help in their new division, which was going to be more specialized, custom, tours. I said yes, and it has been perfect for me. The groups are smaller, so I get to know the people better (which isn't always a wonderful thing, but mostly it is), and since it is not just general touring, I get to see and learn about things even I didn't know about. I've led tours that go to see literary sights, religious tours, and genealogy tours.

Eventually touring will be too hard to do. I don't have that much of a personal life, except with the other tour guides and drivers, and I imagine one day I will want to settle down somewhere. Probably I'll move into a tour company office job designing tours. But for now, it's a great way of life."

I Own a Tour Company “I started in the travel business right after airline deregulation, which was an insane time. But it was very exciting. I worked for an airline, and it was very stressful, but I was able to travel quite a bit, and the travel bug really bit me. I figured out soon enough that I didn’t want to stay in the airline business, but I did want to stay in the travel business.

At that time, a large tour operator that sold bus tours throughout the US was headquartered in my city. I went to them and got an entry level reservations job, which was far less stressful than working for an airline at the time. Our company only sold tours through travel agents, so I didn’t deal with the general public, only travel professionals. The work wasn’t very exciting, but I did get to travel occasionally, and I was good at what I did. As time went on, I was promoted to reservations manager, then brought into the marketing and sales area. At one time, I was offered the chance to be a tour guide, but my wife had just had a baby, so being on the road for weeks at a time didn’t appeal to me then.

As the years went by, I developed a strong interest in golf. My wife and I both play, and we’re pretty good. Not quite professional, but close! Because of my travel connections, we traveled to many of the best golf resorts in the US and eventually branched out into Europe. Noticing how many other avid golfers also loved to travel, I approached the tour operator I worked for about starting a golf division. They weren’t interested, as they preferred to stay with general interest travel. My wife and I decided we would start putting money away for our own business.

It was scary at first. I had to do everything myself – create the tours, negotiate the contracts, design the brochures, and figure out how to market them. I had some serious failures at first and lost some money. Since our kids were in high school by then, my wife went back to work so that we could pay the bills while I tried to make the business work. I traveled all over the region, visiting travel agencies, corporate offices that sponsored golf tournaments, and tourism boards. Some cities sponsored golf

shows, like a convention for golfers, and I rented booth space and promoted my trips there.

Within a couple of years, all my hard work started to pay off. I was selling a few trips a year, some I'd designed myself, others that I customized for specific clients. By the time four years had passed, I was making a profit and was able to hire some staff. My wife quit her job and became my office manager at a very reasonable salary (free trips!). Even better, I was able to go on some of the trips myself.

There's a lot to learn when running a travel business. What I thought people would love, they hated; they'd suggest something I thought was stupid, but it would turn out to be the right thing. I had hurricanes ruin trips I booked to South Carolina; I had golfers whose golf clubs disappeared on international flights; I've had large groups cancel at the last minute and expect me to absorb all the cancellation costs. But I've also had golfers who have told me the trip I arranged for them was the dream of their lifetime; I've had couples celebrating silver anniversaries, I've had golfers achieve their personal bests.

I'm never going to be rich doing this. I'll probably have a pretty modest retirement, unless I win the lottery. But I love what I do; I love to travel, and I love to golf. It doesn't get any better than this."

PERSONAL QUALIFICATIONS

THERE ARE TWO MAJOR QUALIFICATIONS THAT ARE NEEDED BY EMPLOYEES OF TOUR operators, and it doesn't matter what position they hold within the company. Without both of these qualities, it will not be easy to succeed. While in most cases these qualities are developed naturally, they can, with some effort, also be learned.

Being a good people person is critical.

There is no part of the tour operator world that does not require an employee to be in frequent contact with other people. Tour guides have the most direct contact; tours that are lengthy, with extensive daily touring, will put the guide in front of a group of people who may not be at their best, and it is up to the guide to try to make their experience more enjoyable without causing additional conflict. However, even the in-house staff must exhibit personable people skills. Sales reps must be able to sell their company to potential clients and travel agents; reservationists must handle numerous phone calls; the accounting staff will be in frequent contact with reservationists, clients, tour guides, management and suppliers.

The second quality that is needed is the ability to be detail oriented.

Every aspect of a tour, from initial design to conducting the actual tour itself, requires careful forethought and precision. Since planning and conducting a tour, whether for two or 200, can involve literally thousands of details, this is not as simple as it may seem. A seemingly small error can cause a group of 100 tourists to be stranded without a hotel or to miss the last ferry of the day. Everyone within a tour company, from the receptionist to the head of the company, needs to keep a close eye on every detail involved in every tour. Mistakes can be costly and devastating.

Beyond those two key qualities, employees of tour operators should be good at managing stress, particularly tour guides who can face unexpected problems and crises while leading groups. Being able to stay calm and problem solve quickly are two aspects of the best tour guides.

Tour operator employees are often required continually to learn new aspects of the tour company itself as well as the destinations it offers, so it's important that people in these positions are able and willing to educate themselves. Tourist destinations rarely stay the same; political situations, changes in government, the closing or opening of new tourist

attractions, even the whereabouts of good cafes, are all things tour operators must keep on top of.

While an avid interest in travel is not required, especially for in-house positions, enjoying travel will make the work itself, as well as the people involved in the work, much more interesting and enjoyable.

ATTRACTIVE FEATURES OF THIS CAREER

THERE ARE NUMEROUS ATTRACTIVE FEATURES TO THIS CAREER PATH, WHICH IS ONE reason it's a growing career choice for many people. First and foremost is the opportunity to travel. Most people who pursue careers in this field are interested in travel and want to combine a career with an avocation. People who are interested in travel but don't want to travel full time also enjoy working in this industry, as they are surrounded by information about travel, and they are working with others who share that interest. Most positions offer some level of travel discounts to employees, so even those who work full time at the headquarters will have ample opportunity to explore the country or the world. Some tour companies will give employees free or greatly-reduced rates on their own tours; others will provide discounts for airfare, hotels and car rentals, allowing employees to create their own tours. Sometimes these discounts will be extended to immediate family members; in some situations the discounts are available to the employee's traveling companions, even if they're not a family member.

Working in a travel and tourism field affords the opportunity to meet people of all nationalities and interests. For people who like to learn about other cultures and countries, working for a tour operator that specializes in international travel will allow those people to experience other cultures in a way they might not be able to otherwise. In some companies, employees with the required experience level will be offered the chance to live abroad to represent the company in a remote location.

The skills learned by working for a tour operator can be used in different positions within the same company, transferred to a different company, or even used to start an entirely new career. Successful tour operator employees can bring valuable skills to many other industries, so any experience, even if not directly relevant, is still worthwhile. For example, tour guides may evolve into sales reps or supplier contractors; they may work their way into management, or even take the skills they've learned to begin a new career in sales or marketing, or even open their own company.

The work itself is often interesting and educational. Because the travel industry is in a constant state of change, even the most routine tasks – issuing airline tickets, reconfirming hotel bookings – can undergo changes in procedure on nearly an annual basis. For people involved in developing new tours, there is a long period of research and learning about a new destination before the tour is ready to launch. People who enjoy an environment of change and continual learning will thrive in a tour operator position.

UNATTRACTIVE FEATURES

NO CAREER IS COMPLETELY PERFECT. WHILE MOST CAREERS IN THE TRAVEL INDUSTRY carry an aura of glamour and fun, there are some less attractive features that should be taken into consideration before applying for that first job.

Pay and benefits, especially at the entry level, may be minimal. Companies that hire part time or seasonal employees may offer an hourly wage and no benefits. While most companies offer travel benefits, they may not apply to all employees, or they may charge the employee a large portion of the overall cost.

The work, while interesting, can be tremendously stressful. Front line tour guides must deal with problems and crises as they arise, as well as disgruntled tour participants. If a tour guide is halfway across the world,



the headquarters office may be closed for the night when the crisis occurs, and it's up to the guide to manage the situation with little or no input from the home office. People who negotiate and price the tours face pressure from both the suppliers and the tour operator management, who have opposite goals. Customer service representatives must deal with angry clients or suppliers who feel it's the tour company's fault when something goes wrong, whether it really is the company's fault or not. All employees face the possibility of dealing with disagreeable people, whether they're customers, suppliers or fellow employees.

Long hours, especially for tour guides, can be mandatory. Tour guides in international destinations must always be "on" for the tour participants, from being ready long before breakfast to guiding the last tourist back to the hotel after a night at the opera. There is little down time for the guide while on tour.

Working while traveling is not for everyone. Guides may be frustrated at their inability to strike out on their own, or they may tire of answering the same questions or visiting the same tourist spots over and over again. Sales reps and contract negotiators, while not having to answer to the public, may also find the travel wearying. Days or weeks on the road, with several sales calls per day, is not the same as traveling for pleasure; there is very little free time available for sightseeing. Sales reps may have to work through unpleasant sales calls, particularly if they're visiting a client or travel agency that has had a problem with their product.

Job security is not always strong. Employees for a tour company that has faced a devastating financial setback – such as forced cancellations of tours due to political unrest or dangerous weather at the location – may not be able to keep employees for those locations on staff. Disruptions like airline or bus company strikes can cause a smaller tour operator to cease operation. If a tour operator decides to discontinue service to a specific destination, employees handling that operation may be let go if they can't be moved to another department. Tour operators are so dependent on factors outside the company that even the most successful companies must be vigilant, or unforeseen problems can destroy the company.

PREPARATION YOU WILL NEED

BECAUSE CAREER OPPORTUNITIES VARY SIGNIFICANTLY WITHIN THE TOUR OPERATION industry, so do educational requirements. Currently there are no set standards within the industry, but generally the larger and more established the company, the more demanding the requirements. Most entry level positions have minimal requirements, but if someone hopes to be promoted into management positions, higher education will help.

Even as recently as 20 years ago, someone could join a tour company right out of high school with no relevant experience or education and participate in on-the-job training. In those days, computers were rarely, if ever, used. The world of travel was less complex, and most tours were more generic than what we see today, where customization and specialty requests have created more interesting (but more complex) offerings. With increasingly sophisticated technology, more demanding clientele and more unusual destinations and activities being offered, it's rarely sufficient to get only on-the-job training these days. Tour operators are looking for employees who have some level of education to bring to their job.

That education doesn't necessarily mean a four-year college degree. A receptionist who has taken courses at a business or vocational school, or who has comparable work experience elsewhere, can find work without a college degree. Someone who has excellent phone skills and a pleasant personality will be able to get a job without any college education. However, if that person is hoping to be promoted into management level positions, additional education is strongly recommended.

Reservationists should pursue travel-related education. There are independent travel schools in nearly every major city that offer courses ranging from three months to a year in length. Many vocational schools are offering two-year Associate degrees in travel management as well, and as the travel world continues to grow more and more complicated, the longer degrees are recommended.

Courses include training in destinations and computer systems. People who have been employed by airlines as reservationists have undergone extensive computer training through the airlines, and they frequently can be hired as reservationists at other companies, but they often find that their airline training is only a small portion of what a tour operator expects a reservationist to know. Supplementing airline training with at least a three-month destination course would be recommended.

Bookkeeping staff will also need training in these skills, whether through an Associate degree or full four-year accounting degree. Some

vocational schools will offer travel accounting, which can be different than standard accounting, and that kind of training is ideal.

Tour guides should have a travel education program completed as well, and a tour guide who has any special expertise (someone who lived in London for a year or is an expert river rafter, for example) will be given higher priority. That is not to say someone with less travel experience can't get a job leading tours, but since the tour operator will have to invest more time and money in training them, it will be more difficult. Many tour guides start out working in other travel-related jobs (reservationist, airline flight attendant) before becoming guides.

Contract negotiators and sales reps must have at least a two-year business-related Associate degree, although a four-year degree is preferable. Education in marketing and contracts is strongly recommended. Some employees can work their way up from other positions into these areas, but the larger companies will look not only for relevant experience, but for the education as well.

People working in tour development will need both relevant work experience and strong destination knowledge, as well as excellent writing skills. Travel coursework of the two-year variety is recommended, and additional courses in business writing would be useful.

Management and executive level positions are often filled by people who have at least four-year college degrees, and in some of the larger companies, executives also have MBAs (Master of Business Administration degrees). It is still possible to work your way up to management with lower levels of education, or to start your own tour company without advanced degrees, but if your goal is to reach the top ranks of one of the largest companies, a bachelor's degree in a business field is a must. Studies should include marketing and accounting, and a side area of travel-related study is recommended.

EARNINGS

THE TRAVEL INDUSTRY IN GENERAL IS NOT KNOWN FOR ITS HIGH PAY, UNLESS YOU reach the executive level of a large, prosperous company. Pay scales can vary wildly, depending on the experience level of the employee, the position, the size of the company, and the profit margins the company records. Nevertheless, it's not uncommon to see people staying at lower-paying jobs just because they love the work they do (especially for those in the specialty travel field) or because the travel benefits they receive more than make up for the lower income. Simply being able to work in a profession that involves travel, whether traveling themselves or assisting others in their travel plans, can be very rewarding itself. While there are opportunities to make above-average salaries, anyone considering the travel field should understand that the pay, especially in the beginning, is often not that good.

Receptionist Receptionists may be part time or full time, and they may be paid hourly or on salary. The pay can vary anywhere from \$15,000 per year to start on up to \$25,000 or more, if the company is large and the receptionist's duties include responsibilities other than answering the phone.

Bookkeeper If the tour operator is small, the bookkeeper may be a part-time or seasonal employee (brought in only for payroll or taxes, for example). Larger companies will have several bookkeepers, each with different responsibilities. Consequently, pay ranges can start anywhere from \$20,000 per year up to \$40,000 for a more experienced full-time bookkeeper with considerable responsibility.

Reservationist These positions can be part time or full time, and sometimes they're seasonal (additional reservations needed for the winter Caribbean or Mexican bookings, for example). Salaries can start at \$20,000 and move up to \$30,000 for an experienced, top-producing reservationist. Some companies offer incentive pay on top of salaries, allowing the reservationist to potentially add a few thousand dollars to the bottom line.

Tour Designer Because launching a new tour is costly, most tour operators will only use a tour designer on a part-time basis, or in conjunction with another role within the company (contract negotiator, reservationist). Tour designers may earn a contract fee, anywhere from

\$1000 to \$5000, or they may earn an additional 10 to 15 percent of their base salary.

Contract Negotiator These may be part-time or full-time positions, depending on the size of the company. Contract negotiators are either paid by salary or by the hour, and on average they will earn from \$20,000 to \$35,000 per year. On occasion there will be opportunity for profit sharing, which can boost their salary by a few thousand dollars.

Tour Guide Tour guides are often part-time or seasonal workers, as traveling full time year round would be very stressful. The salaries can be low, anywhere from \$15,000 to \$25,000 per year (more for highly experienced luxury tour guides), but a good guide can earn an additional 20 to 50 percent of that from tips. It's also helpful to note that a guide's expenses (food and lodging) are paid while on tour.

Sales Rep These positions can be full time or part time, and they can be paid by salary, commission, or a combination of both. A sales rep just starting out will earn approximately \$30,000 base salary, but that rate can increase to \$45,000 or more if the rep is particularly successful and is earning commissions.

Office Manager This is one position that is usually full-time salaried. Because office managers have more experience than any other employees would have, the pay may be better than average. Occasionally the pay is based on salary plus commission or profit sharing. The average salary would run from \$35,000 to \$50,000.

OUTLOOK FOR THIS CAREER

TRAVEL AND TOURISM HAVE NEVER BEEN AS POPULAR AND AS ACCESSIBLE AS THEY are today. Continued advances in aviation technology, the increasingly sophisticated knowledge of tour operators and a larger amount of discretionary income for consumers has led to unprecedented numbers of people traveling the world. But it's no longer a case of only the wealthy being able to travel for pleasure; today people from all walks of life have the opportunity to explore places far from home.

That paints a rosy picture of the prospects for careers in the tour industry. With more people traveling, it would seem possibilities for tour operators are unlimited. But the situation is not quite as simple as that.

Years ago, many travelers selected a tour out of ease, convenience and out of fear of the unknown. Travelers were not as knowledgeable and well-traveled as they are today; taking a tour was a safe way for them to see the world. But as travel has become a more common part of people's lifestyles, more and more people travel on their own, bypassing tour operators altogether. Some of those people reject tours based on the stereotype of busloads of hundreds of people being shepherded from spot to spot with no time to enjoy anything – the “If it's Tuesday, this must be Belgium” syndrome.

Tours like that do exist, and they are most popular with the elderly and the novice traveler. But as those travelers are reduced in number, those tours face the possibility of reduction in numbers.

Where the growth is likely to be is in specialty tours. Companies that offer something unusual, or something that should be handled by an expert, will continue to grow. People with discretionary income are willing to spend considerable money to have an experience they would be afraid to undertake on their own. Consequently, hiking tours in Nepal, African photo safaris, Outback expeditions in Australia, walking tours in Tuscany, and any kind of extreme sport or “theme” tour (literary, historical, etc.) is where the growth will be.

Companies that handle inbound travel should find their work remaining steady. Conventions and business travel will continue to use those services to ease the way for international travelers to visit cities with as little stress and confusion as possible.

GET STARTED TODAY

NOW THAT YOU'VE STUDIED VARIOUS ASPECTS OF TOUR OPERATION CAREERS, YOU'RE in a better position to know if this appeals to you. Even if you're not ready to jump into a job, now is the time to start planning for your career. Take time to consider which parts of the tour operator's life are best suited for you, and then begin thinking about how you can approach that line of work.

Above all, learn about the world of travel. If your public library has access to travel-related periodicals, whether consumer or trade, study them diligently. Surf the Internet, studying destination and tour operator sites to research destinations and tour operator programs. Learn everything you can about destinations that interest you, then make an appointment to visit a travel agency and find out which companies sell trips to those places. Be sure to make an appointment first and be honest about your intent; travel agents can be very busy, and they'll be less likely to help if you just show up or pretend you're going to travel. If you're clear about the information you need, many travel agents will be happy to share their information and experience with various tour operators.

If there are tour operators in your city, request an informational interview. If they have any kind of internship or summer program, apply for it. Even if there is no operator in your town, find out if there is a tourism board or Chamber of Commerce nearby that accepts people on an internship basis. Those are both good places to gain inbound service experience.

In school, take as many courses as possible in English, social and civic studies, business courses and geography-related topics. Determine as early as possible what kind of further education you will pursue, and work with your guidance counselor on applications and financial aid. There are numerous excellent travel programs across the US. Find the one that best suits your career goals.

Whenever possible, take the opportunity to travel, even if it's just to another city within your state. The experience of travel is, first and foremost, what tour operators are all about. Understanding what it's like to be a traveler in an unfamiliar place will give you insight into what it takes to plan and operate a tour, and if you have the opportunity to take a tour yourself (even a day bus tour), pay close attention to how the tour is run. If there is time during or after the tour, ask the tour guide to talk about the tour guide's life. They may even be able to offer you a tour of

the operator's office or give you the option of speaking with others there, who can tell you about their experiences.

There's no time like the present to begin planning your career as a tour operator, so why wait? There's a whole world to explore.

ASSOCIATIONS

- **American Society of Travel Agents**
- **Association of Destination Management Executives**
- **Association of Group Travel Executives**
- **Association of Travel Marketing Executives**
- **International Air Transport Association**
- **International Association of Tour Managers**
- **National Tour Association**
- **Travel Industry Association of America**
- **US Tour Operators Association**

PERIODICALS

- ***ADME Xpressions***
- ***The Professional Tour Manager***
- ***TravelAge***
- ***Travel Marketing Decisions***
- ***Travel Weekly***