

FAM TRIPS: EDUCATIONAL OR WASTE OF TIME & MONEY?

By Viviane Vogels

Over the past 12 months I have been on my fair share of fam trips, some of them excellent (thank you Singapore & Montreal!), others debatable, some – unfortunately – quite bad.

So, what makes a good fam trip or educational? There are two sides to each coin and in this case there is the side of the organizer and the side of the participant.

Let's start by looking at the organizer

Organizers have to ask themselves first and foremost if they have anything new or newsworthy to show before even thinking of inviting busy corporate buyers or even press.

Make clear from the start what the purpose of the trip is so there can be no misunderstandings.

Send out your invitation in plenty of time, we all have busy agendas, the earlier we can block the dates, the more chance the organizer has to get the right participants.

Communicate clearly on programs, travel details etc. There is nothing worse than not having your program details until just before departure. We appreciate putting a program together in detail takes time, but surely organizers have checked with partners/suppliers before issuing the invitation as to availability and possibilities, so it should not be a major feat to fill in the blanks.

The program should be adapted to the participants' needs and interests. Basic, I hear you say; well I could make you a long list of destinations I visited this year where quite an important part of the program was dedicated to visiting venues and hotels that were not specifically of interest to MICE operators. Small hotels with little or no meeting space, convention centers without proper hotel accommodation in the neighborhood, venues of local interest but with little appeal to an international group, venues with difficult access...the list is long and unfortunately time and time again we are taken on a hike through hotels, etc of little or no interest.

A word to the wise: it will not convince us to book your hotel/town/venue just because you insist on showing it to us. As was the case with a recent trip, by the end of the 2nd day the destination had little or no appeal anymore and as I heard recently only convinced organizers NOT to go there...

Budgets are tight everywhere but do not start savings in the wrong place. On a recent daytrip on a coach with early departure, we suffered three hours in a coach with not even a glass of water, let alone coffee or anything else. Full marks to the NBTC who this summer took us on a train to The Hague and who organized a selection of croissants for the train ride: a small, non-expensive effort

which was appreciated by those who had to get up very early to catch the train. Upgradings are nice and appreciated but not always necessary, however when you are flown especially to an international airport to sample a new business seat and you are put in economy when business is totally empty.. that I call bad PR!

Host: on a recent trip I had to find a bus for the trip by myself, very little details were given, nobody welcomed us and it took until arrival at the destination (3hours later!) before I realized that the young lady who had been sitting in the back at this time was the host for the group...

I feel that the importance of the person accompanying a group is underrated and is often given to a junior member of staff as a sort of thank you ..Not good, let me tell you as they often do not know the business well enough to be a good conversation partner for the level of people traveling in the group. They can also take no decisions when needed and that will not be appreciated. Participants of a fam trip (should be) are decision makers, they expect to relate to sales people who understand their needs and are more than just the person who counts if all participants are on board and talks to the driver...

Avoid endless visits to hotels unless they have something really special to offer. Yes, they are partners of the local convention bureau, yes they want exposure, but is it really necessary to show us 7 hotels in 1 morning and 5 different room types in each? Why not be original and organize a drink with all affiliated hotels so they can meet with the participants in an informal way. This gives them the opportunity to figure out which of the participants are of interest to them (and vice-versa). Then ensure that the program allows for individual visits so that the participants can visit the hotels or other venues that they really want to include in their itinerary. A formula I have seen and tried before ...and it works...

This brings me to another point: free time. No, not for shopping, nor for sunbathing, but for visits to the places that you have identified during the visit and want to know more about. I find it very useful to have first an 'overview' visit after which I can better decide what I would like to see in more detail. Although all participants are in the same business, we do not all have the same clients and therefore we have other interests. Like this we can focus in an optimal way on the points that are of real interest to us!

Last but definitely not least: be original! Ensure that your participants enjoy themselves and make them feel special! Again, that does not necessarily mean mega budgets, it means using your imagination, after all...that is our business, not?...I for one will definitely not forget the bike trip I took in Montreal ...on the F1 track!

Now as far as the participants are concerned:

Fam trips are no holidays! When you get an invite for a great destination ask yourself the question if this is a destination or venue that your clients would want, if not leave space for others. I have been on too many trips where some of the

participants are only there to do their own thing and that is unacceptable!
As a rule decision makers only are invited. If you want to pass on the trip to a member of your staff, choose somebody who will benefit from the trip from a professional point of view and check it with the organizers. Account managers with program responsibility are an excellent choice. Really junior employees will probably not feel at ease with the more senior – and usually older- participants. Do not do “the diva” act. We know your time is precious, but you have chosen to be on this trip so do the organizers the courtesy of giving them your undivided attention. Any deviations from the official program should be discussed prior to departure to avoid awkward situations. If you do not agree with something speak to the host first before endlessly complaining to all participants. Discover the team player in you; do not expect others to take second place to you!
Be on time! Simple you say...well I am astounded sometimes by the number of times that I have been waiting for departures, meals etc.. because one or other participant has another timing going for himself. Other than being totally impolite, it is a simple courtesy to all fellow travelers to stick to the timing of the program. I find it amazing that people who organize meetings & incentives for a living are sometimes the worst timekeepers of them all. How do they get their clients organized is an interesting question?....

Give feedback. We all want to learn form mistakes so if you, as a participant, feel you have something to say – also good things of course ! – give the organizers feedback, the same constructive criticism you would want to get from your clients at the end of a program.

I am a great believer in educational visits, when they are well organized they are a great sales tool. Educational can be both business-like and fun and give all a good reason for going back to the venue or destination in question ...with clients!

But let's be clear, I'd rather stay home than going on a trip where either the needs of the participants are not addressed properly or the quality of the organization is so poor that it has the opposite effect.... I am in the business of discovering new ideas, exciting destinations, unusual venues and special people, that is what I am looking for when I go on a fam trip...and yes, I like to have fun, that has never meant a trip cannot be professionally organized! Bon voyage!