

How to choose the perfect adventure

by Erica Silverstein, SmarterTravel.com Staff - November 13, 2006

What's one of the worst things that can happen to you on an adventure trip that insurance won't cover? Paying a lot of money for a vacation that you end up hating. While most travelers don't feel the urge to bail on day one, I've heard stories about people who signed up for activities that were too strenuous or who ended up traveling with groups whose priorities differed from their own. The way to make your vacation fulfilling is to choose the trip that matches your goals, needs, and abilities. Selecting the right experience may take some advance planning, but the results are well worth it.

Know thyself

Before you start perusing catalogs and tour websites, you need to sit down and have a talk with yourself. The goal is to determine what you want out of a vacation so you can match your interests and needs with the services provided by a tour operator.

The first question you have to ask is "What do I really want out of my vacation?" Consider whether your first priority is to go to a specific destination, participate in a certain activity, try new things, or experience a different culture. You should also be realistic about what level of comfort you need, what size group you prefer, and how much money you're willing to shell out for the adventure.

The next step is to be realistic about your abilities. Think about what level of activity you can actually maintain and factor in your fitness level, experience, and any medical conditions that might affect you. For instance, if your home gym is gathering dust and your running shoes are a size too small, you should admit that you probably won't enjoy a trip that involves 10 hours of intensive activity each day.

You should also be honest about your comfort levels in foreign cultures. It's perfectly natural if squeezing through crowded markets or eating unidentifiable animal products makes you squeamish. Just admit that before you sign up for the trip that houses you in huts with native families.

The final thing to think about before you pick up the phone or get online is seasonality. Would you prefer to travel when the weather is best or when crowds are scarce? Can you be flexible with travel dates or are you locked into specific vacation weeks? These decisions may affect the price of your trip, but they'll also affect your enjoyment of the experience.

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Once you've established what you want in a trip, it's time to buckle down and do some research. Chris Doyle, director of the [Adventure Travel Trade Association](#), recommends that you research and compare at least three organizations. The more adventure tours you assess, the more confident you'll be when you make your purchase decision.

You can find [reputable tour providers](#) in many ways. Ask friends if they have recommendations or speak to a travel agent, especially one who focuses on the region or type of activity that interests you. If you choose to look up trips on the Internet, be as specific as possible about keywords. For example, when using a search engine, type "Colorado white-water rafting" rather than "rafting trip."

Dissect the pricing

The fun really begins when you've narrowed down your options to a few final candidates. Your first task is to understand the pricing so that you can figure out which trip offers the best value for money.

If similar tours have vastly different costs, Doyle encourages vacation shoppers to ask the tour operators point blank why their prices are so high or low. "It could be that the price difference is due to an extraordinary guide, or that there's one guide for four people. That kind of personal attention absolutely changes the experience," says Doyle. A high level of service could both raise the price and increase your enjoyment of the trip.

"Look for hidden factors," says Timothy E. Gordon, publisher and founder of [Gordon's Guide](#). Some itineraries may sound identical, but one might have nicer transportation or accommodations options or offer unique evening activities. You should also inquire about extra costs, such as pre-trip gear purchases, airfare, and transfers to the trip starting point. If one company provides all your equipment, but another requires you to purchase expensive waterproof jackets or climbing gear, those two trips are no longer equal in value.

Ultimately, whether you choose the cheaper or more expensive option depends on your needs. "Some people don't need first class because they're OK in coach," says Doyle. "If a tour operator is forthright about the fact that he's not serving you chardonnay every night, but he will get you out there and give you a firsthand experience, [that can be a great trip]." You should shop for the best pricing, but don't sacrifice the quality you need for a low rate.

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Understand the itinerary

Part of assessing the value of a trip is understanding the itinerary. It's not as straightforward as it seems. A brochure or website may list the places you'll visit, but to really get an idea of what your daily trip experience will be like, you'll want to go beyond a simple outline.

For instance, you should find out when the group will meet up each morning and approximately how long you'll spend at key sights. A tour that gets an early start and only includes a short lunch break will be quite different from a trip that starts late in the morning each day and takes a two-

hour lunch—even if the itineraries list the same number of sights visited each day. You might want to ask about evening activities not listed on the itinerary. A better provider will offer unique opportunities, such as visiting a local village or attending a religious ceremony. A lesser company might leave guests on their own at night.

"Ask if there's any flexibility in the schedule if you want more time or less time in one place," says Doyle. "What happens if you don't want to do something?" Although a group tour can't tailor-make a trip for each individual, certain alternative activities might be possible. If it's important to you to spend as much time as possible in a famous museum or to hike rather than ride on a bus to the site of an ancient ruin, you should be sure to inquire about the possibilities before you book.

Hunt for bargains

Low price doesn't always correlate with a lesser-quality experience. "Look for discounts from credible companies," says Gordon. Sometimes the best tour companies will offer specials during a slow season or at the last minute. One strategy Gordon offers is to determine when a provider's payment deadline is. If a company requires full payment 30 days prior to departure, cancellations are more likely to occur a few days before that. If you check back with the provider around this time, you might find some good deals as companies try to fill space on the trip at the last minute. Gordon's website, AdventureBargains.com, lists special offers and discounts from reputable providers.

Gordon also recommends asking about unlisted promotions or group discounts. You may be uncomfortable with the blunt discussion of price, but you'll regret not speaking up if you miss out on a discount.

Book that trip

When personal requirements, pricing, and itinerary options align, you've found the best trip for you. Congratulations. Book that trip before it sells out and prepare to have the vacation of a lifetime. After all your hard pre-trip work, you deserve it.