

How to pick the right adventure travel provider

by [Erica Silverstein](#), *SmarterTravel.com Staff* - August 14, 2006



When you first start planning an adventure trip, you may have no idea which provider to use. As you sort through the scores of providers you find online, the sheer number of tour companies can be intimidating. How do you know which companies are reputable and reliable and which consist of a few opportunists and some gear hoping to take your money?

If you're willing to do some homework, you can easily determine which adventure travel providers will deliver quality service both before and during your trip. All you need to do is ask the right questions and research the right topics.

Assess the qualifications of the company

When you find an outfitter that interests you, your first task is to get a better sense of the company, its qualifications, and its experience. "Ask how long the company has been in business," says Timothy E. Gordon, publisher and founder of [Gordon's Guide](#). "If it's only been in business for a short time, inquire about the experience of the owners and guides." You'll also want to find out how long the company has been running trips where you're going and how long the guides have been leading tours. Ask if a company contracts with a local provider in the tour destination, and if so, what that company's experience is.

When you have a sense of the company's history and staff, you can make a good guess about the quality of a trip. An experienced company or guide will run very smooth trips and can provide exceptional leadership in terms of activity instruction and educational opportunities during the tour. An inexperienced company may still be working the kinks out of its itineraries, and a new guide might not be knowledgeable about the region.

In addition to questioning the tour operator about its history, you should look up what affiliations the company has, what awards it has won, and what certifications the guides have. You can find this information in the "About Us" page on the company's website or by asking a company representative. You can also do a search on that provider to see if it's been in the news recently and whether those reviews have been positive or negative.

Some affiliations to look for are membership with the [Adventure Travel Trade Association](#), [United States Tour Operators Association \(USTOA\)](#), and [National Tour Association](#). For particular adventure activities, look for sport-specific affiliations or certifications; for example, you want your white-water rafting guide to be trained in swift-water rescue.

"Look at affiliations, but don't solely rely on them," warns Gordon. "Be cautious because not all affiliations are reputable." For instance, a company that is a USTOA member must adhere to a strict code of ethics, be in business with the same management for at least three years, provide references, and provide a one-million-dollar bond to protect travelers in the event of bankruptcy. However, some other organizations may accept any company that pays dues without vetting the operators, making such affiliations less meaningful.

Look for professionalism

"First impressions are very important," says Chris Doyle, director of the [Adventure Travel Trade Association](#). "Professionalism up front is often reflective of the trip experience." When you talk to the company, pay attention to how good its customer service is. You may want to request brochures or ask a rep to describe the trip. If the response is prompt, courteous, and informative, you're likely to get the same level of service on the tour. If company representatives are rude or indifferent, refuse to spend time answering your questions, or are slow to send you requested information, you may find the same poor service on your tour.

Another sign of excellent service is the tour provider's willingness to help you arrange your air travel, insurance, and gear purchase. Not all companies will have affiliated agents who can book these extras for you. But they should at least be able to give you advice about the best airline to use (especially for foreign travel), insurance providers that cover specific adventure activities, or good places to buy gear. If the representatives refuse to help you, it's a sign that professional service is not a priority with this company.

Talk to past guests

One of the most important ways to assess an adventure tour is to talk to the people who have recently taken the tour. Reputable tour providers should be willing and able to provide you with references, so you can contact recent clients. Gordon recommends that you ask for at least three to five references who have taken the tour in the past year and live in a variety of geographic locations. You can call or email these people and ask them about their travel experience and whether they would recommend the tour. You should also inquire about any problems they experienced or whether they were dissatisfied with any part of the trip.

Determine what protections are offered

Another way to determine if a tour provider is reputable is to see how willing it is to protect the financial investments of its clients. "Find out how your money is protected when you pay the operator," recommends Bob Whitley, president of the [USTOA](#). Ask if the company can guarantee that your money will be refunded if the tour operator goes out of business. Make sure you know about deposits, payments, and cancellation policies so you know what to expect should you need to cut short or cancel your trip.

A reliable operator will also have contingency plans should something go wrong on the trip, especially during an adventure activity. You can ask what safety procedures are in place and what the provider will do in the event of an emergency or injury. A comprehensive plan indicates the company is prepared to protect you.

Inquire about equipment

Adventure trips can have many technical elements. If you're concerned, you should ask the provider about how new its equipment is and who the manufacturers are. Don't forget to ask about transportation to and from the adventure activities.

Check that your company is a responsible operator

"A consumer should consider responsible tourism practices," says Doyle. "What does the provider do for the communities? How do they give back?" The best providers not only give you a fabulous adventure vacation but also help the communities in which they operate. Responsible tourism practices may include using local guides, locally owned accommodations, or locally grown food; embracing environmentally friendly products and practices; or otherwise becoming involved in the community. If a provider cares about the areas in which it runs its trips, it will certainly care about its guests.

Put it all together

Once you have done your research, step back and look at the picture it portrays of the tour provider. Has the company won you over with excellent service, evidence of experience, glowing reviews, best practices, and guest concern? If so, you can book with ease, knowing you'll get a first-rate trip. If some of your research has raised red flags, you might want to think twice about booking and choose to continue your search for a reliable tour operator. The time you spend now to investigate your potential vacation provider will pay off 10 times over when you have the adventure trip of a lifetime.