

Southern Wales Tourism Group Travel Tool Kit

Your guide to attracting more group visits





SECTION 1

Introduction

Group travel is an important sector for Southern Wales, even post Covid-19. It's hard to think of a business within the public, private or voluntary sectors that couldn't benefit from welcoming group visits.

THE PARKWAY HOTEL & SPA



TREDEGAR HOUSE

The group travel and coach tourism sector represents a useful and reliable income stream for tourism businesses. Groups of spending visitors are potentially valuable customers for hotels, attractions and destinations. They're of value to heritage attractions; meal stops; retail establishments; accommodation providers; transport providers; tourist guides; art & craft galleries and theatres. Although less high yield than the business events market, they help alleviate the problems associated with seasonality; provide income streams that are more predictable than for some other customer groups and, once booked, always turn up, irrespective of the weather. Coach travel also beats all other forms of transportation in terms of its impact on the environment.

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Who are the main players?

Tour planners come in many forms but here are the main ones:

Coach Tour Operators

There are many of these across the UK as well as overseas. They usually develop their own tours and use their own vehicles (although some use other company's coaches). They may arrange tours (some of which may be fully inclusive) which include overnight accommodation and trips out to see and experience a variety of attractions, scenic trips and activities. They may also run a day excursion programme, which as the name suggests, does not include any accommodation – although some operators use hotels for meal stops, lunches and dinners without using the overnight accommodation.

There are not as many coach tour operators as there once were; many coach companies purely offer coach-hire and do not run their own tour programmes. Other people may hire them to run a bespoke tour and they may do school runs. *Here are some examples of active coach tour companies:*

- Barnes Coaches
- Deirdre Brown Travels
- Edwards Coaches
- Ellen Smith Travel
- Lockett's Coaches
- Motts Travel
- Richmond's Coaches
- Roadmark Travel

TINTERN ABBEY



Tour Operators

They generally do not operate their own coach fleets but instead work with other providers. Again, they offer a mixture of tours, holidays and excursions to UK attractions and resorts, as well as to overseas destinations. They will sell their tours both to members of the public and to Group Travel Operators (GTOs) and other tour planners, such as coach companies. *Examples include:*

- Airedale Travel
- Crusader Holidays
- Daish's Holidays
- Saga Holidays
- Shearings Coach Holidays
- Success Tours
- Warner Holidays

Group Travel Organisers [GTOs]

Group Travel Organisers (GTOs) continue to grow in number and expand across the country. A typical GTO is an individual who has a group of friends, work colleagues, associates or fellow members of a particular group – and they try to arrange day excursions and holidays (using accommodation) for their particular group. *GTOs come from a huge number of different organisations and these include:*

- The University of the Third Age (U3A)
- Probus Clubs (Retired Professional and Business People)
- National Trust (NT) Members
- Retirement Clubs
- Ramblers, art and other special interest groups
- Employment Clubs – provided for the employees of a company or organisation

GTOs, like the coach and tour operators, are required to be insured and aware of the legalities and responsibilities of looking after large groups of people, as well as handling their money.

BLAENAVON'S HERITAGE RAILWAY



Inbound Tour Companies

As the name implies, these are companies that focus on bringing overseas customers to the UK to partake in a multiplicity of experiences. They may be based in the UK or overseas. The inbound market has grown massively over the last ten years (and will recover post Covid-19) and represents a vital segment for the tourism economy. However, it is quite vast, diverse and difficult to pigeon-hole as an easily identifiable and coherent set of customers. It changes in response to economic conditions and the ebb and flow of exchange rates. Asian visitors have grown massively over recent years and in particular Chinese visitors.

These companies like other tour operators, arrange fully inclusive tours (FITS), tailor made packages and bespoke products. Like some tour operators, they may also call themselves a DMC or destination management company.

Examples include:

- Abbey Ireland and UK
- AC Group
- Active England
- All in One Tours
- Angela Shanley Associates Ltd (ASA)
- Axis and Globe
- Back Roads Touring
- JAC Travel
- Miramar Travel
- Scancoming

Tour Wholesalers

These are companies that provide a service to coach companies and to GTOs – providing ideas for fully researched tours. Typically they will offer a range of products – holidays, mini breaks, excursions etc. – that include UK destinations, hotels and attractions. They may specialise in the over 50's market, and may also work with the inbound tour market. *Examples include:*

- Albatross Travel
- Alfa Travel
- Ashley and Newey
- Dunwood Travel
- Great Days Travel Group
- Norman Allen Group Travel

Is your business set up for groups?

Maximise the potential of your operation by developing a group offer that reflects your USPs and appeals to the travel trade.

NATIONAL MUSEUM OF WALES, CARDIFF



CYFARTHFA CASTLE

Could your group offer include the following?

Whether you have a hotel, attraction, meal stop or a large destination facility, group customers and tour planners tend to require:

- Nearby coach parking and somewhere to drop off and pick up.
- Accessible toilet facilities for perhaps up to 50 people.
- If more than one floor, a lift.
- Someone within your business who understands groups and their needs – the contact for the tour planner concerned. Many group enquiries are lost at front of house through inexperienced and un-briefed staff.

- A 'meet and greet' service on arrival.
- If food is provided, a menu with choices that can be pre-ordered if necessary.
- Do the group passengers feel as welcome in your establishment as other users?
- Somewhere for the coach driver and tour guide/escort to rest and dine.
- Group rates for admission to attractions and for hotel stays.
- If a hotel with no lift, has it ground floor rooms?
- Do you ask for a deposit when taking a group booking, in case they cancel?
- Dedicated promotional material that reflects your group USPs and helps sell your product.
- A local or regional group offer which signposts to other businesses and attractions in the area – things to see and do for groups.

What to do to get groups

Assuming that you have in place a coherent, joined up and realistic group offer for your business, there are effective ways to help you stand out from the crowd and generate sustainable group bookings.

Launch and unveil your business to the travel trade. It is vital to get on the radar of the various tour buying players – GTOs, coach and tour operators etc. There are many ways to do this:

WELSH MINING EXPERIENCE — RHONDDA HERITAGE PARK



Use group images and messages

Ensure your marketing communications use images of typical group customers and coaches, and that promotional messages are developed specifically for groups across all relevant marketing channels. For example, website (have a group section and booking option); printed leaflets; e-newsletters; letters; social media posts; mail solicitations; exhibition pop up boards and so on.



Develop dedicated databases

From the early planning stage, start to develop dedicated databases of the various tour planners, ideally with named individuals and organisation/company names – and ensure that these databases are GDPR compliant. The data underpins your group offer and without it, it will be very difficult to attract group bookings.



Invite tour planners (and partners) to sample your group product

This could be a combined group of GTO's, tour operators, etc or an individual visit; make sure that their business is likely to fit well with what you offer. Is it UK or overseas tour planners you are most interested in?

You can offer a complimentary visit or short stay (if you are a hotel) **but it is important to include either a refundable deposit and/or a cancellation charge for non-attendance.**

This is something rare but vital in our experience as 'FAMS' or familiarisation trips sometimes attract the wrong sort of people. (There exists unfortunately a small minority of individuals – mainly GTOs – who are attracted by the prospect of free-stays, complimentary admission, free theatre tickets and so on. It is a nation-wide problem for the industry and one that affects all areas of the UK.) If you do decide to arrange such an activity – perhaps in conjunction with your local Council – it is best to showcase not just your own product but also a variety of other sites and places to visit in the area – as long as they are complementary to your business and not in direct competition.



Construct a simple yet compelling tour itinerary for the tour planner

This would have your business as a key element but would include other elements that add something to the offer and make it more appealing to tour buyers. GTOs and tour operators rarely arrange a tour based upon just a hotel or a single attraction, it has to be a joined up tour product.

This could be already in existence or perhaps your business may fit well within a particular tour schedule or itinerary suggested by another organisation. This is the basis of what you would effectively unveil to the tour planner if you do a 'FAM' or a launch event. It's important to recognise that although groups can be quite diverse in their requirements, in terms of what they want to do and see, generally they do not particularly have an interest in sites that are geared to the needs of small children, team builders, golfers, weddings, corporate customers and so on. That's not to say that in the rural parts of Southern Wales that walking, outdoor activities, cycling etc. would not be of interest to certain more niche groups – such as walking groups and other GTOs. It's good to give customers the opportunity to at least try out and experience activities that are slightly different from the more traditional coach party trip. This could be anything from abseiling, water sports or cycling, through to foraging, gin making or dark-skies watching. Horses for courses!

> You can see some regional group itineraries at www.southernwales.com/en/groups/itineraries



Put together a Group Action Plan

Identify the actions you will undertake with relevant partners over the next 36 months. Include your proposed budget and costings of the various activities you feel comfortable and confident in delivering. *These could include:*

- A group launch or showcase for tour planners.
- The development of tour itineraries.
- Attendance at selected group travel and coach tourism exhibitions.
- A costed advertising campaign in the travel trade media.
- A regular PR campaign.
- A social media presence targeting travel trade.
- Membership of trade associations that could assist you gain high quality group business e.g.

Travel World Association (TWA)
info@travelworldassociation.com

Coach Tourism Association (CTA)
admin@coachtourismassociation.co.uk

UKinbound
info@ukinbound.org

www.coachbuddy.org.uk

Consider attaining the Confederation of Passenger Transport's Coach Friendly status, to show that you have the relevant facilities.
www.coachfriendly.co.uk

Other Ways to Get Group Bookings

Key Account Meetings

Depending on your resources of time and the availability of personnel, visit tour companies in their offices for pre-arranged meetings where you can explain to them how compelling your group offering is – and maybe mention incentives you offer to encourage inclusion of your product in their tours, holidays, excursion programme and so on. Face to face meetings may also be set up online nowadays.

Showcase Visits to your Business

As mentioned in respect of launching your group offering, this method is, along with key account meetings, the best and most cost effective way of persuading tour buyers to include your site in their respective tour plans. A typical Showcase or FAM would:

- Offer accommodation for one or two nights.
- Take place during a shoulder period.
- Focus on a carefully constructed and dedicated tour itinerary covering many aspects of the overall area group offering.
- Include meals and refreshments.
- Utilise the service of a Professional Blue Badge Tour Guide.
- Take in short visits to the complementary sites, attractions and activities.
- Include photo-calls for the travel trade media (who would be invited to attend).
- Incorporate a 'meet the group buyer' face to face workshop session where the main players can meet and talk business directly with the tour buyers.

Contact Southern Wales Tourism or your local authority's tourism team to find out when the next Group Buyer Showcase event and regional FAM trip is set to take place and how you can be involved.

Whichever activity you plan, it is essential that you are targeting bone fide tour buyers and in respect of GTOs, that they have provided a touring history as part of a registration form they complete when booking onto the event. Again, a cancellation charge is vital. This puts off time wasters and helps ensure that you have a much more successful event. It is also useful and perhaps more achievable resource-wise [particularly hotels] for businesses to arrange single company FAM trips which include pre-arranged and repeatable elements whereby they can for instance, invite one such company per month. The same criteria of eligibility for attendees applies but this formula would not be suitable for GTOs, only for individual companies [whereas a mix of GTOs and operators would normally attend a bigger showcase event].

Incentivise your offer for coach and tour companies including inbound companies. There are three layers of incentives that can, if properly constructed, help you achieve more group spend from the visiting coaches and groups:

1

The Tour Manager

When you talk to the tour manager at a particular company [maybe during a key account meeting, a FAM or at a trade show] try to encourage them to include your product by giving them a trial offer or discount. This can be the difference between getting the company to include your product in their digital and print marketing or not.

2

The Coach Driver

If your group is to arrive on a coach then the coach driver (and any guide/courier) they use, can be very valuable to you. Whilst most coach drivers don't book hotel accommodation (unless they are owner-drivers) they nonetheless have the potential to act as ambassadors for attractions, retail outlets and meal stops they may visit. If they've been incentivised by you then they may well have the discretion to choose your site as opposed to competitor sites.

The retail sector (shopping sites, large meal stops, garden centres, service stations etc) have become experts in capitalising on drivers' discretion. These operations know that group visits are very big business and therefore have in place a number of enticements to secure this trade. Coach drivers and their couriers/guides usually receive complimentary meals or refreshments, but this is regarded as an expectation rather than an incentive. The main incentive focuses on retail commission paid (perhaps annually) to a registered driver, based on the number of purchasing passengers he/she has brought to that business over a given year. Such a service needs to be well-thought out and deliverable and is best avoided if the business concerned has doubts about being able to deliver. Food and meals are never included in this incentive where commission is concerned. Each establishment is different and where it is seen to work effectively, it is because appropriate accounting systems are in place.

This type of incentive is usually provided by private sector businesses and is less common across the public sector. But it is certainly worth exploring as the potential benefits are considerable. Some sites also encourage group visits by asking coach drivers to mention a particular product whereby the driver gains an agreed percentage figure on leaving the attraction. These items can be anything that is desirable and repeatable. Mill Shops in the Scottish Borders have for many years enticed drivers to promote tins of shortbread and bottles of mead. It is also possible to have a variety of offers covering not just one site but a number of attractions and this could form the basis of any future 'Southern Wales Group Incentive Club' or card. But that is best looked at under the heading of 'potential for the future'. Perhaps too the idea of providing a dedicated 'Driver's Room' at attractions is worthy of consideration.

3

Coach Passengers

The last but not least category of the three layers of incentives would be for the group/coach passenger. If a business has a 'meet and greet' service in place then this is the opportunity for coach stops, retail outlets, attractions and other facilities to give the passengers discount vouchers to encourage spend, perhaps on certain key products. It is also best to have a suitable food and refreshment offering in place so hungry passengers are able to eat whilst on site [if that is possible] and one that understands the tight schedules that coaches – and typically oversees groups have to adhere to. Discount vouchers are already produced for some towns, e.g. Chepstow, so contact your local authority's tourism department to find out about relevant opportunities in your area.



CARDIFF CASTLE

Attendance at Trade Shows and Workshops

Exhibitions and workshops are held across the country (and some online), some arranged by magazines, some by associations and others by travel trade specialists. These events are a really useful way to meet a wide range of tour buyers.

The British Tourism and Travel Show, Birmingham attracts coach and tour operators. www.tourismshow.co.uk

The Group Leisure and Travel Show, Milton Keynes focusses on GTOs www.grouptravelshow.com

World Travel Market, London attracts international buyers www.wtm.com

The Group Buyer Forum Workshops North and South each year attract coach and tour operators as well as GTOs www.stevereedtourism.co.uk

There are other smaller and more regional events across the UK. Some are very good and ask attendees for touring histories but others focus on numbers rather than quality.

Businesses should always send knowledgeable staff with a good understanding of their group offer to these shows and they should follow up after each event by contacting the tour buyers.

Accompanying your local or national tourism organisation as a stand partner will help keep costs down. Attendance at shows is a great way to grow your tour planner databases.

Advertising, Advertorial and Press Coverage

An important element of your group marketing will be gaining coverage in the travel trade media. There are not many travel trade publications with print and digital platforms extant now. Over recent years several have closed down including high profile titles such as Coach Monthly and Travel GBI. This has left some that still do give value for money, have a reasonable and honest reach to real and active tour buyers and offer a reliable service. As a rule of thumb, if you purchase advertising space with any of the competing magazines currently operating then you should always gain 'free' advertorial coverage (your story, feature and copy with pictures) – ideally on the right hand page but elsewhere, if need be. Magazines are desperate for your custom and once you've bought an advert in one they will all tread a path to your door. *So be sure to ask them salient questions:*

- How many 'tour buyers' does their magazine go out to and how often? Some are bi-monthly. Some publications make claims that they are distributed to more GTOs and tour operators than actually exist!
- Can you have advertorial with every group travel advert you place with them?
- Will your advert be included on their digital platform?
- Can they put your story out on their social media?

- What other services do they offer to help you gain new groups?
- Are their readers all active tour planners and not retired?

Examples of magazines:

- Coach and Bus Week magazine (Coach operators)
- Coach Tours UK magazine – Peterborough (Coach Update operators)
- Group Leisure Magazine – Milton Keynes (GTOs)
- Group Travel World magazine – Peterborough (GTOs and coach operators)
- GTO magazine – London (GTOs)
- Route One magazine (Coach operators)
- Travel Weekly – London (Travel agents, tour operators)

Some of these titles are adept at getting a group message over to the buyer. One or two are mainly concerned with the technical side of the industry rather than reaching the actual tour buyers, so it's best to ask for a sample copy before booking space.

PENARTH PIER



CHEPSTOW CASTLE



Working with Southern Wales Tourism and your local Destination Partnership

Southern Wales Tourism is a collective campaign involving all the local authorities from Monmouthshire to Bridgend, Merthyr Tydfil to Cardiff. The Group Sector is recognised as a key part of the areas tourism economy and the Southern Wales team focus considerable effort on keeping tour operators and GTO's up to date with what is on offer. An annual group familiarisation visit and "Meet the Buyer" event is held (usually in March), and the Group section on the website holds suggested itineraries, themed visits and much more to help Group organisers. Southern Wales is a member of various trade bodies and attends various shows.

The local authorities drive the Southern Wales Tourism plans, and many also undertake additional activities with the Group Sector on behalf of their area. All local authorities operate a system of destination management groups to gather the views and feedback of the tourism operators in their area. All are there to help tourism businesses, to involve them in developing local initiatives and to link businesses with available support or development schemes.

PORTHCAWL



Useful Contacts

Southern Wales Tourism
Visit@southernwales.com

Bridgend County Borough Council
Tourism@bridgend.gov.uk

Blaenau Gwent County Borough Council
Alyson.tippings@blaenau-gwent.gov.uk

Caerphilly County Borough Council
Tourism@caerphilly.gov.uk

Cardiff City Council
hello@visitcardiff.com

Merthyr Tydfil County Borough Council
Visit@merthyr.gov.uk

Monmouthshire County Council
Tourism@monmouthshire.gov.uk

Newport City Council
Tourism@newport.gov.uk

Rhondda Cynon Taf County Borough Council
TourismEnquiry@rctcbc.gov.uk

Torfaen Tourism Association
TorfaenTA@gmail.com

Vale of Glamorgan Council
Tourism@valeofglamorgan.gov.uk

Working with the Group Sector as we recover from Covid-19

Recognising the importance of groups to the economy, Southern Wales Tourism decided to ask operators how they see the next 2 years. (Research undertaken February 2021 – to see the full report visit www.southernwales.com/en/groups)

Key points about Covid-19 impact upon the sector:

- Most operators think there will be much more domestic travel.
- Many group customers want to try new destinations and experiences.
- Day Trips/excursions will be the first group tours.
- Vaccines seen to be the key for this sector.
- Doomsday scenario could see coach industry eventually shrink by one third.
- Many surviving operators likely to concentrate on improved quality of offering.
- International groups will take longer to build back up.

Challenges for sector

- Destinations, attractions and hotels not ready to receive groups.
- Fear that hotels will increase their group rates significantly.
- Many attractions risk-averse to groups and are/will refuse groups.
- Average group sizes will be much smaller due to coach distancing.
- Poor communication and response from some attractions/hotels re group enquiries.

What can be done to attract groups

- Businesses need to work together for a joined up approach to 'prepare for groups'.
- Destinations to actively pull together their joined-up group offering.
- Hotels, attractions, venues, support services [guides/transport] included.
- Key partners to re-launch group offerings to UK travel trade.
- Regular updates to the sector are key to reassure and inform.

Many operators are already booking tours, from July onwards, although some are holding back until 2022 or 2023.

Southern Wales is seen as a destination with a great landscape, good selection of places to visit and things to do; overall, good value for money.

Give your customers confidence

As we open up for visitors, some people will be nervous so it will be good to find ways reassuring them. In Wales we have the Addo (pronounced Ath-o) meaning to promise. To pledge. To vow. During these unprecedented times people need confident reassurance. Careful, responsible and empathetic communications.

www.visitwales.com/promise

There's also 'We're Good To Go' to demonstrate that you are adhering to the respective Government and public health guidance, have carried out a COVID-19 risk assessment and checked that you have all the required processes in place. Apply at www.visitbritain.org/were-good-go-industry-standard-all-sectors-tourism-industry

Addo.



Ensuring successful online meetings

Online meetings have replaced face to face sales meetings for the time being. So how can you ensure the best possible chance of success?

Top Tips

- 1 Know who you are speaking to; do your research and make sure that you tailor your presentation to what they will want to know.
- 2 Adjust your computer/notepad settings to include name, business, website and e mail details.
- 3 Keep any online presentation simple. Clear graphics, succinct messages, great photos, easily read contact information.
- 4 Engage your audience rather than "talk at them".
- 5 Make sure that your backdrop for your meeting is engaging, tidy, professional, and gives an insight into your business.
- 6 Set the screen/camera so that you are looking straight, and you can have "eye contact" with the other participants.
- 7 Make sure the lighting works well.
- 8 If using a phone or notepad, then set it up landscape.
- 9 Check everything works. Test your internet connection, check that you know how to share screen, make sure your IT equipment is plugged in or has a full battery, etc. Ideally, have a trial run with a colleague.
- 10 Put a "do not disturb" sign on the door.
- 11 Position notes/reminders where you can easily see them without your eyes moving away from the camera.
- 12 Rehearse and ensure that you stick to the available time – whether that's 5 minutes at a webinar, or an hour for a 1 to 1 meeting.

SOUTHERN WALES GROUP BUYER SHOWCASE EVENT 2020



Tips from last Covid-19 reopening 2020

We all know that there are legal requirements to opening up; here are a few extra tips from the research and from businesses across the region that might give you some ideas.

HOTELS

- Make sure your reception team are well briefed about your Group offer and know who to direct calls to.
- Prepare suggested itineraries around your area featuring facilities that are open – adapt and change as things open up.
- Keep in touch with your Group contacts – let them know what is happening.
- Invite some new Group contacts to experience what you offer – FAM visits are still top of the list as to how to generate new business.

PARKWAY HOTEL & SPA

Parkway Hotel and Spa Top Tips

- Being flexible. When all our groups cancelled we offered transfers and honoured the agreed rates where ever possible.
- Keeping the relationship. It is really important to keep in touch and keep the relationship alive, almost like a friend. This will make you memorable and they will think of you for future groups.
- Value the group when they arrive. Welcome them and show how much their stay means to you.
- Under Covid, show flexibility as much as you can. For instance providing more single rooms because they can't double up or offering private dining as well as restaurant options. This gives the group confidence in your Covid measures and they will appreciate and value you considering their safety. Trust is very important.
- Lastly, communication. Now even more important than ever. Contact groups pre arrival, to explain the new procedures upon arrival, during their stay and housekeeping measures.

As we open up again it is important that we appreciate that for the majority of guests it will be the first time in over a year that they have met new people, let alone travelled or visited new parts of the country.

ATTRACTIONS

- Plan your visitor flow and work out capacity.
- Organise your booking system and ensure that all front of house staff are fully briefed.
- Make sure that Group Organisers are kept up to date of changes in the length of time to allow for visits, booking procedures, refreshment availability, etc.

National Museum of Wales Top Tips

- Communication. Make it absolutely clear what you are offering and what isn't available.
- Send a document to the tour company just before the visit which can be handed to the coach driver, including up to date information such as if the café is closed, toilets are open, etc. to reduce disappointment and frustration upon arrival.

BIG PIT NATIONAL COAL MUSEUM

Royal Mint Experience Top Tips

- All bookings managed individually on a phone/email basis to avoid confusion and misunderstandings.
- Only opened 3 days a week to start with, but reserved a 4th day exclusively for groups so they could enjoy their trip without the concern of venue capacity.
- We froze our group rates at the 2019 prices.





www.southernwales.com/en/groups/



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