

EUROPEAN GROUP TOURISM BY COACH: DRIVING SENIORS' AND OUT OF SEASON TOURISM

Practical problems and solutions to bring seniors on board

The view from inside and outside: the customers' and business' perspectives

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Why seniors participate in coach tours?

From business' perspective it would be useful or even crucial to know the real motivators and expectations of coach tour participants. By knowing the strengths of coach tours we can develop our products to better satisfy the customers, and as we know, a satisfied customer is the best marketing tool. However, these questions have attracted only few researchers. As a part of my master's degree studies I conducted a survey in 2012 among Finnish coach tour participants. The aim of the research was not only to find out the coach tour participants' reasons for getting on board coach tours but also to research what are the most important factors when choosing a coach tour (destination, date, price, tour operator etc.) and the importance of different parts of coach tours (transportation, guiding, accommodation, restaurants, destinations).

The research indicated that coach tour participants find the coach tours an easy and carefree way of travelling. Coach tours have all the benefits of the other modes of group package tours (GPTs) such as price advantage compared to individual reservations, professionally planned itineraries etc. Beside all this coach tours have many benefits that no other mode of group travelling can provide. Normally the point of departure is easier to reach by a coach than if you're travelling e.g. by plane or by train. For many senior citizens airports and railway stations are too big and crowded and they rather use coaches because it's easier. Also the luggage follows a traveler much more easily on a coach tour; all you have to do is to give your bags to the driver in the morning and take them back in the evening at the hotel. In most of the destinations coaches can drive closer to the entrance/exit than private cars and also public transport stops are usually further away. Getting closer to a destination, hotel or restaurant is especially important for seniors because they might have some difficulties to walk longer distances. Accessibility is one of the main issues that should be taken into consideration when organizing coach tours for seniors. For the destinations it's important to understand that (in most cases) if there isn't any possibility to drive a coach close enough to the destination the coach tour group will not come at all. City authorities should also take this seriously and make sure that the main tourist attractions can be reached easily by coach. One coach (40-60 pax) takes approximately a same space than two or three cars (max 15 pax), so it's far more efficient to use some space near the tourist attraction for coach parking than for car parking.

The respondents expressed also that on a coach tour they get more value for money they've paid. Professional guiding, possibility to get to the destinations that are not open for individual tourists, dining at the restaurants that professionals have chosen, without any extra waiting and searching for free tables, and the fact that you see the sceneries better from the coach than from your own car or from the train are examples that show some positive aspects that the coach tour participants think the coach tours have.

The destination seems to be the most important factor for the Finnish coach tour participants when choosing a coach tour. This is mainly due to the fact that most of the coach tour participants in Finland are senior citizens and for example the date or the price is not so important for them as long as they get to the destination they want to get. This information can be used for soften the seasonality in the coach tour business and in the tourism business generally. In my company the high-season lasts from the late June to the beginning of August because it's the main holiday season in Finland. In July we have about three times more passengers than in the off-season months, and by organizing tours that attract seniors in spring (April-May) or in autumn (August-September) we've managed to get more stable business. Before and after the high-season is a perfect time to travel by coach and for seniors. Usually all the services are cheaper than during high-season, there's not so much traffic jams and the destinations are not so crowded.

For the seniors the service quality is important during the whole coach tour. They seem to like personal service and for them good service is far more important than some technical equipment for example in the coach or hotel. The tour guide and the coach driver are usually with the group during the whole tour and they are the people who create a feeling of safety for the passengers. All the other services during the tour are not less important; bad service at one part of the tour (hotel, restaurant etc.) can ruin the whole tour.

Needs and expectations are changing

Seniors have been an important group for the coach tourism business in Finland for decades and today it is clearly the largest group using coach tour services. Seniors of today have been young in the 60's when the coach tourism increased strongly and there were practically no other possibilities for group tourism, so they are familiar with coach travelling and participating in coach tours. During their life they have travelled actively, maybe only by plane or by car and not at all by coach. When getting older they don't want to take long flights or drive by themselves anymore but they still would like to travel. So, many seniors have made "a comeback" to coach tours. For some seniors the coach tourism is the only form of tourism they are involved in but most seniors are still active users of also other modes of travelling (cruises, golf-holidays etc.).

In Finland there are several seniors' associations and clubs which organize coach tours for their members regularly. Many of these clubs start their season in the autumn with a shorter coach tour and ends it in the spring again with a longer tour by coach. And during their season they might organize still one or more shorter tours. One of the main reasons for the members to participate in these tours is the social aspect of the coach tours. The coach tour is good place to meet friends and other people, especially for the seniors who live alone (in Finland quite many senior citizen lives alone).

During the last ten years in our region the members of these clubs and associations have got older and it's not easy to get younger people to join these clubs (and I think it is same problem in Finland generally, at least in the rural areas). Because the members are getting older it's more difficult to get enough members to join the tours, and also the organizing a coach tour has become more difficult for non-professionals. This is why many of these clubs doesn't organize coach tours anymore by themselves. This has increased demand for our company's coach tours; it's easier for these clubs to book places for 10 – 20 people to some of our coach tours than to try to collect the group and organize all by themself.

The seniors of today will live longer than the previous generations. They are also healthier and wealthier than their parents were as seniors. They are used to spending money for travelling and for leisure time activities. All these facts have had and will have positive influence in the coach tour business. But we should not take anything for granted. It's more and more difficult to compete with all leisure time activities that are meant for seniors. Senior citizens are not a homogeneous group of grey haired grandmas and grandfathers. They are very active and have many kinds of hobbies and activities. In a coach tour seniors usually want to visit destinations which are somehow related to their hobbies or areas of interest. That's why the destination is more and more important when planning a coach tour. Earlier the tour operators might have thought that the same destination would attract all the seniors, and tours were planned based on the age of the participants. Today, and in the future, I'd say that the tours should be planned based on the destination. All the other services during the tour must match with the destination. Example: if I organize a tour to opera festival, also the hotel and the restaurants should be above average, because people who like opera are most probably used to staying in better hotels and dining in better restaurants despite their age. And if the destination is e.g. Formula 1 race in Hungary, a passenger will more likely settle for simpler facilities.

The image of the coach tours?

As I mentioned earlier, the seniors of today (in Finland) are familiar with the coach tourism business because they have used coaches for all their lives. But are the seniors of tomorrow as familiar with this kind

of tourism as their parents? People who will be seniors in decades to come have lived their youth and adulthood when there have been much more alternatives to travel than in the 50's and 60's. They are familiar with using airplanes, private cars and trains when travelling but maybe haven't ever participated a coach tour. They might think coach tours are old-fashioned, slow and unattractive mode of tourism. This is the issue that the coach tour business should think seriously and try to do something to improve the image.

The population in Europe is getting older, and as mentioned before, seniors are healthier and wealthier than earlier. This is a huge opportunity for the coach tourism industry. We have a product that the users are very satisfied with but of which the most of people are not aware. If you take for example some travel magazine and look for articles concerning coach tours or coach tourism, you are very lucky to find one. There is practically no possibility for people who are not especially interested in coach tours to accidentally bump into coach tours in media. The reason why the coach tour industry is so invisible in media is maybe because the companies in the industry are quite small and have no resources and ability to promote the coach tourism generally. The coach tourism industry with all stakeholders should "speak louder" and try to promote the whole business. We are competing against cars, planes and trains, not against each other. It should be realized that all the publicity (positive!) the coach tours get is good for the business, even it's your colleague's company this time. By getting people to realize how easy, carefree and comfortable way of travelling the coach tours are, I believe we'll have a positive future ahead in the coach tourism business.