

TRAVEL | INTELLIGENT TRAVEL

So You Want to Be a Tour Guide

Here's how to travel for a living.

4 MINUTE READ

BY ANNIE FITZSIMMONS

When people say “I wish I could travel for a living!” I start talking about the sheer number of opportunities out there.

Before settling into travel blogging and journalism (I’m actually using my college major!), I spent some time as an international tour director and guide, learning firsthand what goes into leading groups of people through some of the world’s most famous sights. It can be a dream job if you know what you’re getting into. I felt like I earned my master’s degree in European history from everything I learned, and often served as a makeshift therapist for travelers. We’d even come up with nicknames, like “QNE” for Questions Never End.

The truth is there’s no one way to go about landing your dream job. But it does help to pick as many brains as possible.

I sat down and chatted with [Carrie Fitchett](#), a sought-after tour director working with [Educational Travel Adventures](#), about what to know if you’re thinking about pursuing her line of work. “When I researched jobs that said ‘TRAVEL FOR A LIVING!,’ they

were all things where people go, stay in the hotel, drink bad coffee all day, and wear heels,” she said. “I didn’t want to do that or sit in an office with a headset and sell places I’ve never been to. That’s why this job made sense,” she said.

Know the Lingo: Tour Director vs. Tour Guide

A tour director is the one responsible for logistics, confirmations, planning, damage control, and group dynamics. They also give commentary on history and culture. A tour guide gives specific narration in a place, often joining the tour group for just a couple of hours. If you want to dip into this world, local guiding is great, and perfect if you want to go home each night. There is also long-term contract work available on cruises, from big ships to smaller river cruises.

Know the Pros

If you’re in a rut at your current job, here’s a chance to do something different each and every day. This is a job that can take you all over the world to events like the Olympics and the World Cup. “It’s the ridiculous things I get to do every single day — whether it’s museums, shows, or eating dinner in the Eiffel Tower — but it’s also the dynamic of people,” Fitchett said. “When someone waits their whole life to go to Paris, I get to take them. It’s the look on their face as they experience it for the first time, and I’m a part of that memory.”

Know the Cons

Most tour directors are freelance, which brings its own set of challenges, like needing independent health insurance and struggling to cobble together enough work — especially at the beginning. You’ll also be getting very little sleep when you’re confirming the next day’s activities and studying commentary. “True colors come out on tour,” Fitchett said. “Sometimes people are ungrateful or bossy or think they know more about a place than you...But even if I think it’s the silliest question I’ve ever heard in my life, I have to answer it so they feel good about it.” Scheduling may keep you away from home for weeks or month at a time, so you might have to skip important events, like weddings or funerals.

Consider Training

The International Tour Management Institute (ITMI) is a well-known guide program, offering two-week trainings in San Francisco and an annual symposium to connect tour companies with guides. The high price tag (around \$3,500 for tuition) doesn't include housing or meals, but the pay off can be well worth it. "The money will come back to you in your first couple of tours," Fitchett said. "Plus, I made amazing friends and priceless contacts." There is also the International Guide Academy in Colorado, as well as many online options.

Adults vs. Students

Most tour directors choose to work a mix of adult and student tours. Student tours provide a way to make money in the spring in places like Boston, New York, and D.C., when adult tours run less frequently. Adult tours, usually clustered in summer and fall, can take you all over the world. But there's a difference: "With kids, you affect and change lives. Maybe they've never traveled and you show them what's out there," Fitchett said. On the other hand, with adults, "the whole trip is more chill, but in the downtime you might be freaking out over what question they'll ask next."

Going Off Road

You may burn out or get tired of always being on the road. That doesn't mean your career in the tour business is over. There are behind-the-scenes roles to be played at tour companies — like developing product, which involves choosing the right hotel, transportation, and activity partners, as well as sales, event planning, and social media.

Bottom Line: Is It Right for You?

"For this job, you have to love every part of travel, and know you will be living out of a suitcase and never sleeping," Fitchett said. "But I absolutely love what I do, and I don't need the stability right now." But, like anything, timing is everything. "In the meantime, love the job you have!" she said. "Try a class, start locally, and talk to as many people as possible who have done it or are doing it."

Annie Fitzsimmons is Intelligent Travel's Urban Insider, giving you the dish on the

*best things to see and do in cities all over the world. Follow her travels on
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