

Finding focus for a tour can mean more reward

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Travel can be more than schlepping around on a tour bus, checking museums and cathedrals off a list.

Whether it's to the next-door state or halfway around

the world, a trip can be a lot more rewarding if you focus on learning something or doing something. And although much of the focus on educational and volunteer travel is on either student-age travelers or retired seniors, travelers of any age can find plenty of opportunity, too. Moreover, if you're looking for an educational trip, you can do it either through a group tour or on your own.

Lots of tour operators focus on educational and self-improvement travel. Here are just a few examples, which I've chosen to illustrate the wide range of possibilities:

-- A good place to start is Special Group Tours (www.specialgrouptours.com), an online agency representing special-interest tours with a wide range of focus. Among its specialties: garden tours, literary tours, art and wine lovers tours, rock 'n' roll tours and battlefield tours focused on both World War I and World War II sites in France. Of course, lots of operators feature literary tours, especially to London, the Shakespeare country, the lake country and Brontë and Jane Austen locales.

-- One of the best-known and most highly respected educational operators is Smithsonian Journeys (www.smithsonianjourneys.com), which operates educational tours in the United States and in many places around the world. Its main focus is running relatively conventional themed tours but featuring expert guides. Although its tours are generally upscale, the Web site lists several "value-priced" packages. And if you've ever attended so much as a summer course, the university or college alumni association will probably bombard you the rest of your life with brochures of tours that feature their learned professors as guides.

-- Religious touring is an important subset of the educational field, with tours specializing in visiting important sites - mainly Christian and Jewish - around the world. One place to start a search is Christian Travel Finder (www.christiantravelfinder.com), an agency representing several individual operators. Another organization offering a wide range of religious tours is Christian World Travel (www.christianworldtravel.com), operating programs as diverse as "Calvin Celebration," "Christian Heritage of England and Scotland" and tours to Israel and Egypt. Other places to look include America Israel Travel (www.americaisrael.us), Jewish Travel Worldwide (www.jhtours.com), Catholic Travel Centre (www.gocatholictravel.com), Regina Tours (www.regina-tours.com) and Pilgrim Tours (www.pilgrimtours.com). Also, many mainstream tour operators include religious tours among their



programs. For a sample, log onto Vacations to Go (www.vacationstogo.com) and click on "religious tours."

Although most of these operators focus on group tours, many are happy to arrange custom tours, especially if you can organize a small group of your own.

-- If you're interested in volunteering, you'll find various alternatives around the world. Start looking at www.idealists.org, where there are links to a wide range of volunteer organizations plus a searchable database. Among the major individual operators are Cross-Cultural Solutions (www.crossculturalsolutions.com), Global Citizens Network (www.globalcitizens.org), Heritage Conservation Network (www.heritageconservation.net) and Volunteers for Peace (www.vfp.org).

Typically, volunteers assist local educators, health caregivers, archaeologists and such; both short- and long-term postings are available. For many, the most interesting volunteer opportunities are those where you can employ one of your primary skills. However, no matter what your skill level, many organizations can put you to useful work.

Educational and volunteer travel needn't involve tour operators; you can easily do it yourself. For educational trips, you can research available short courses at educational institutions in places you want to visit and arrange your own enrollment, accommodations and transportation. Individual volunteers can often find opportunities through local churches or service organizations. And for regional cultural/educational touring, all you really need is a few good guidebooks, a car or and a willingness to explore.

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