



I'm here representing the Scottish Destination Management Association (SDMA) and will speak from personal experience ...

What tour operators look for

Scottish Tours and Guiding Services (STAGS) was founded in 1993 by two pioneering women; one English, one Scottish who as friends had identified a gap in the tourism market in the Stirling area. As forerunners of the 'hop-on hop-off' sightseeing tour they successfully operated this in Stirling for a number of years. The business evolved from that early start into a specialist tour guiding company, training and supplying guides to the Travel Trade. Alongside this developed an expertise in event management working with international companies in events such as the European Premiere of the Oscar winning film, "Braveheart" (3 September 1995)

Much has happened since those early days. As a mature student at the University of Stirling I had the opportunity to work part-time with STAGS and gain some insight into the dynamic world of tourism in Scotland. On the premature death of one of the original partners, I was offered the chance to acquire the company when the remaining partner decided that it was time to "let go" I was at that time in 2005 studying to achieve a Blue badge tourist guiding qualification. And so STAGS passed into a new generation of ownership.

STAGS had built up a portfolio of national and international clients. I saw it as my role to strengthen existing contacts but also to seek out new ventures. You will have seen from my short bio that I lived for some time in Spain. That was a real opportunity to closely observe another culture and to appreciate the difference in thought processes between nationalities. In Spain my growing interest in international tourism encouraged me to look critically at their visitor attractions and to see what could be learned from the experience.

How often does a shop keeper stand outside his premises and look seriously at what his shopfront says about his 'invitation to trade'?

STAGS has experience providing ground handling, tour planning, logistics, and supplying tourist guides for a number of companies based in USA and Europe. Some of the European agents are themselves acting on behalf of clients in the Middle and Far East. As outlined on page 6 of the document Going Beyond (issued to accompany these workshops) there are several defined travel styles and in order to perform well, you need to tailor your service to fit the style of the traveller.

Tour operators, and travellers themselves, have widely differing expectations of their journey. Some of this is determined quite simply by the budget available. In the case of a "high end" tour operator the quality of the service or product, and the visibility of this to their travelling client is crucial.

In contrast, others may be price sensitive and perceived quality may not be as important. The manner in which the service or product is presented may have to alter and all staff involved must be well briefed to understand what is **expected of them**. Feedback from both staff, travellers and tour operators is important in keeping a service or product fresh and relevant.

For some tour operators it is the total package which is important. The 'meet and greet' at the airport, with speedy and efficient transfer of luggage to waiting transport is specially welcome with travellers who have been in transit for some time. First impressions are often lasting ones. Thereafter providing the guests with helpful arrival information is appreciated by travellers on their first visit. A good working relationship with the tour manager who may already be travelling with the tour is vital. This is also where some of the challenges for inbound groups can occur. It is also where differences in cultures show up most clearly. For example

Social hierarchy

In some cultures it is vital to understand the significance of social hierarchy – and a tour operator based outside the UK will expect us to honour their sensibilities. This is especially critical when working with high-end, diplomatic and business clients.

The treatment of, and interaction with, women

In certain cultures people working in service are expected to be servile and women working in service are often treated with disrespect. If a hotelier, you should consider carefully who you engage on reception and the effect on your waiting staff. It is unlikely that the overseas operator will guide you in this respect but will expect you to treat their clients in the way that they would be treated in their own country – with due deference!

Timekeeping

On the whole, European visitors are punctiliously punctual but that cannot be said for some others. For certain of our clients it is a sign of their seniority and their authority to be late

I will give you an example

On one occasion we had a group travelling to meet our guide at Stirling Castle. It was explained that the Castle would close at 6pm and that last entry would be at 5:15

“Tell them to keep the castle open ...” was the response from the Tour Manager

Altering itineraries “on-the-hoof”

Itineraries prepared by overseas Tour Operators and Travel Agents are prepared well in advance and agreed with the client. However, whilst from our standpoint an itinerary is sacrosanct that is not always the case with a Tour Manager. Some will see the itinerary as a way for them to exert their authority over the travelling guests and will re-arrange visits, restaurants and timings - not because they need to but because they can. Be aware that as an attraction or a restaurant you may have a scheduled booking for, say, 12:30 but unless you confirm on the day with the Tour Manager you could be turning away paying guests or watching the beef en croute cremate for a late arrival or a no-show.

Cultural engagement

What I mean by this is that not all tours are the same. Just because you have a visit from a cruise ship or a major International tour operator does not mean that a subsequent visit will be the same as the previous one. I find that the amount of up-front info that we get regarding a visit from overseas is poor.

One day the group might be a leisure group where the guests have seen the glories of Outlander on the TV and really want to come to Scotland to see the scenery and the sets for themselves. They are genuinely interested. The next visit, from the same operator, might be an incentive: cement distributors from Andhra Pradesh who have no interest in the escapades Bonnie Prince Charlie or the politics of Sir Walter Scott and just want to go shopping.

Attitude to money, spending and gratuities

Depending on your business this may be a deal-maker or breaker. We've all heard the stories of the tight-fisted Scots but there are others who could teach us a thing about cannierness. And be aware that Tour Managers will know where they can get a deal and a "cut" and will not hold-back to lead their guests to their best advantage.

The Swedes will buy but not tip, the Indians will buy – in Primark and the Dutch ... bring whatever they need with them.

Tour planning has been a regular activity at STAGS but sometimes there is no opportunity to contribute when a tour has already been set-up overseas with no reference to those who will be fulfilling it here. Some of the largest international tour operators fall within this description.

Hence as a tour guiding agency we do not always have the chance to incorporate visitor attractions such as your own when it would add to the quality experience of the overall tour. The 'honeypots' are often visited too often. Perhaps it is laziness on the part of the international firm or lack of knowledge of what is actually available here, but group inclusive tours can have a very poor itinerary.

One must also bear in mind that an incoming tour may already have been elsewhere in the rest of the UK (and Ireland) for some time before arrival in Scotland. A visitor attraction can feel very different depending on whether it is on day 2 of a 14 day panoramic, or on day 12. The job of a tourist guide or visitor attraction can be very different in consequence. Additionally the visitor 'spend' can be very different as a holiday draws to a close.

STAGS works closely with a number of international companies who entertain clients during a business trip. The clients are predominantly from overseas and the Scottish trip is usually to impress the visitors with the quality of their product or service, and to 'send them homeward' to think of consolidating their business contact. This often gives us the opportunity to organise a 'boutique' experience at a visitor attraction and these guests usually stay at highly accredited hotels.

But having said that, economic, commercial and political situations change and what may be a thriving market today may literally 'dry up' overnight. One need only think of recent tensions with Russia (and consequent visa restrictions) or the collapse of the Brazil economy.

There are a number of special interest travellers who visit this country. Whisky is a huge interest particularly with the Scandinavian market. Regrettably you have currently only one distillery in your area, but it offers a great visitor experience which can be linked into another attraction in the area, if the Tour Operator is allowed to augment the tour beyond simply Whisky. These visitors are big spenders and usually very discriminating.

Another area of special interest is ancestral tourism which has grown in recent years in response to programmes such as BBC's "Who do you think you are?" and the continuous interest of travellers from North America in their family origins, again stimulated by TV series such as "Outlander". STAGS has been involved in a number of ancestral tourism visits and they are most rewarding. It is good to see that in your own area, a small tourism business "Borders Journeys" has been inviting ancestral enthusiasts to connect with their Scottish roots and to explore their ancestry across the Borders towns and countryside.

When STAGS was founded the World Wide Web as we know it today did not exist. So when I acquired the business, all the guiding notes, which presumably had been gleaned from a detailed study of printed sources, came to me as a collection of box files. We even communicated using a fax machine! How much has changed since those days!!

The internet now permits my company, and yours, to communicate instantly across the globe. Everything is accessible; 24/7. But, there are positives and negatives to such freedom.

The positives are instant communication, access to an enormous source of information and many low cost or no cost ways of communicating. You can no doubt think of some.

One positive from STAGS point of view is the ability to interrogate the Internet when provided with the name of a client to find out as much as possible about them. With this knowledge you can improve the quality of contact, and often it is what is not said, but known about a client, that matters.

The negatives are more insidious. Instant communication allows the sharing of misinformation, uninformed opinions, lazy verdicts and uncorroborated material. The diverse platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and sites such as YouTube, Flickr and Trip Advisor permit this to occur. Whilst a footprint in the social media world provides a perfect opportunity to create a community of people that 'like' your company, provide photos or videos of their experience or give promotional testimonials. It also allows individuals who feel that they have had a less than satisfactory experience to share that information and rubbish your product with a wide readership.

Another source of revenue from international tourism is the increasing number of cruise ships which visit the shores of Scotland each year. The nearest ports of call for Midlothian and Borders are Rosyth, Queensferry, Newhaven and Leith. STAGS has been involved for some time providing tourist guides for shore excursions. Whilst the excursions are an opportunity for the travellers to experience Scotland, they are also a money-making exercise for the cruise line. Needless to say the 'honey pots' I referred to earlier tend to be the easily accessible visitor attractions of Edinburgh Castle and the Palace of Holyroodhouse. In some ways this is to enable the cruise line to offer two separate excursions, one in the morning and the other in the afternoon and hence maximise their income. Full day excursions do indeed take place and some of you have already participated. As mentioned earlier, the itineraries are devised outwith Scotland and rarely change.

It is hard to believe for instance that for cruise ships arriving at Rosyth and Queensferry, with a high percentage of American visitors, as yet no shore excursions visit Dunfermline; its Abbey (the site of the burial place of King Robert The Bruce) and the birthplace of Andrew Carnegie and combine such a visit with other nearby attractions.

Rosyth – Dunfermline 4½ miles, 11 minutes
Queensferry – Dunfermline 8½ miles, 20 minutes

So, to wind up what do tour operators from Overseas look for ..

Lots of things:

A warm welcome

A good visitor experience

Authenticity

At the correct price

Consistency of quality

Reliability

But my advice is to be aware of what you wish to do.

If it's simply footfall and a thin margin consider the impact on your business and your other clients. You will have to invest to draw guests from overseas – not least, to welcome them in their own language.

If high-end quality is what you seek, where will you source sufficient clients and will they pay what you need to make your business viable?

And, don't lose sight of the fickleness of the travel market - Russian visas, a volcanic cloud, a terrorist scare and the latest Hollywood blockbuster could impact on your best laid schemes

