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Time-saving travel escorts

Personal guides help families find adventure, education

By [Kristen Gerencher](#), CBS.MarketWatch.com

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SAN FRANCISCO (CBS.MW) - Travel agent Sue Frock doesn't just plan families' vacations to Ireland -she also goes along on occasion to show them the country's best-kept secrets.

Indeed, many tourists don't know that going out of their way to visit Mizenhead - a lighthouse perched across a suspension bridge up a rock stairway in southwestern Ireland -- can be well worth the effort, she said.

Baltimore-based Frock escorts individual families to Ireland several times a year, many of whom are friends or friends of friends, and has been doing so for 12 years for a nominal profit, she says.

"They're a lot more comfortable with me there," she said. "It's a security blanket because I know the country."

Such personal service is part of a growing interest in hiring tour escorts for family vacations, whether it's someone who travels with the group for the entire trip or meets them on-site during the day.

Different from tour directors who arrange trips and guide dozens of strangers on packaged tours, escorts cater to small groups that either pay them per diem or cover the cost of their trip.

In many countries such as Greece and Italy, the government licenses escorts, many of whom are professors or teachers, said Maria Polk, president of [Tours.com](#) in San Francisco.

"There are qualified tour escorts in every part of the world," Polk said, noting that some specialize in areas such as national parks or photographic safaris.

Where to find escorts

Afraid of getting lost in the Big Apple? Want to see Manhattan's architectural sites, explore immigration history or cruise Harlem's jazz haunts?

You can call the [Guides Association of New York City](#) for one of 1,200 "step-on guides" licensed with the Department of Consumer Affairs. Some guides are multiilingual, and cumulatively the escorts speak more than 35 different languages. Prices range \$150 to \$250 for a 4-hour half-day, and \$250 to \$400 for a full day tour, but rates vary depending on the tour guide and expertise.

The [New York site](#) also provides contact information for guide associations in many parts of the U.S. and Canada, as well as specialties such as "licensed battlefield guides."

But families can cash in on inside knowledge outside of urban centers as well, said Ted Bravos, head of the [International Tour Management Institute](#) in San Francisco, which trains tour directors.

"The biggest thing a tour guide can do is save time and enhance the visit," Bravos said. "They're going to focus on what you want to do."

Universities and local tour companies often can refer travelers to tour escorts for hire, he said.

"If a family came to San Francisco, they could call a tour company and say 'We would like a guide to take us to Angel Island; help us rent bicycles.'"

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Bravos estimates an escort could charge \$100 to \$150 a day on the low side and up to \$500 on the higher end.

When bigger isn't better

Of course, such individualized attention can come at a premium. At [Abercrombie & Kent](#), for example, many people opt to be accompanied by a driver who also functions as a tour escort, spokeswoman Pamela Lassers said. The company has more than 700 personal guides at 45 locations.

Some tour directors also are available for private groups such as families, she said. "In the case of Africa, they are university-trained in the natural sciences. Typically they live and work in the country. They would accompany you throughout the trip. They'd not only be driver, but explain animal behavior, talk about the culture, history, geography."

Private, customized trips tend to be 15 to 30 percent more expensive than a group trip made up of 12 to 18 people, she said.

"It's the equivalent of having another person along on the trip. So if it's a \$300 a day trip, that's what it's going to cost."

For Abercrombie, customized or "foreign independent travel" -people hiring personal guides - represents 40 percent of the business, up from 10 to 15 percent a decade ago, Lassers said.

"It's definitely more popular than it was five or ten years ago," she said. "It's been the fastest growing segment of our business."

What's more, family travel is up 30 percent since September 11, 2001, she said. "We're getting more families wanting to travel together as a family and choosing options that provide more privacy and security."

Still, some families may prefer the personal touch of someone like Serenella Leoni, a tour escort in Burlingame, Calif.

Leoni runs [Toscana Mia](#) and takes groups of 12 to 17 people to Tuscany several times a year to sample cooking and art classes, wine and olive tasting and other regional delights.

She began escorting friends and family on trips to Italy before developing a business three years ago, she said. Leoni, who was born and raised in Tuscany, now translates for groups who pay for her familiarity with the culture. "It's a passion and a pride that's nice to share."

While larger numbers allow groups to split the cost of staying in a villa, she's open to the idea of being a tour escort for individual families. Said Leoni: "I've been approached by families saying 'I want to do this in the future.' That would be ideal. It would be fun." ■

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