

Crafting

Unforgettable Itineraries



The Case for
Themed Itineraries
PAGE 3

Getting the Right
Partners in the Guild
PAGE 5

What's Needed for
Successful Itineraries
PAGE 6

How & Where to Display
Your Itineraries
PAGE 8

Learning to Craft Unforgettable Itineraries

ONCE UPON A TIME we decided to publish an Annual Itinerary Planning Guide in Leisure Group Travel magazine. We went into this process believing that all destinations/CVBs had these phenomenal itineraries that were just waiting to be discovered. We were wrong.

Digging in, we discovered a lot of inconsistency in the market. While some itineraries were in great shape – well thought out and marketable, a lot lacked creativity. Others had flawed routing with unreasonable distances between stops. In some cases they weren't even itineraries – just a list of stuff to do. With this new level of understanding, we started studying itineraries.

What makes a great itinerary? We talked to tour operators and asked what they looked for in sample itineraries. We researched trends in the market and discovered a wide discrepancy between what new travel groups were doing compared with the existing stock of itineraries.

Fast forward to 2025, our newest itinerary whitepaper, *Crafting Unforgettable Itineraries* is again the result of marketplace research focusing on industry trends. Through these pages together we'll craft those unforgettable itineraries that will keep groups coming back again and again.

Table of Contents

Making the Case for Themed Itineraries	3
Getting the Right Partners in the Guild	5
What You'll Need for Successful Itineraries	6
How & Where to Display Your Itineraries	8



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jeff Gayduk is the president of Premier Travel Media (PTM) and the publisher of Leisure Group Travel magazine.

A 30-year industry veteran, Jeff cut his teeth in the travel business by creating unforgettable itineraries as a tour planner for a student travel company, senior tour company, international tour company and his own receptive business in Chicago.

Realizing he was better at creating itineraries than selling them, Jeff started PTM in 1999.

MAKING THE CASE FOR THEMED ITINERARIES

With all the competition in the marketplace, you can no longer sell your destination on name brand alone. Everyone's vying for the same eyeballs, everyone's distracted with so much overlap in messaging and media; we all start to sound the same. The average person is exposed to more than 5,000 advertising and brand messages a day, making yours stand out in a crowd is a challenge, to say the least.

The solution? Themed itineraries that will promote the unique qualities of your destination. With an effective theme, you'll capture a buyer's interest with a ready-made itinerary that speaks to their group's curiosity and passion.

This speaks directly to the interest of today's group travel market. Groups are getting smaller, mostly by design. They have specific interests in mind when seeking their ideal vacation destination and look to pursue their passions while travelling. This new level of experience-based travel puts the activity and interest first.

While you can make the case for signature itineraries – your “go to” attractions, museums and activities – every destination should have these. And you can make the case for a mystery itinerary since traditional group tours still gobble up these packages. However, the key to successful packaging is a selection of hand-crafted themed itineraries that dive deep into your destination's hidden assets.

Here's a handful of themes that are driving consumer and packaged group travel. Each of them can spur itinerary development:

Live entertainment – based on your area theaters, concerts and live entertainment venues. For groups, add a green room experience or chat session with performers and technicians to enhance the experience.

Architecture – buildings, houses, historical and contemporary draw architectural buffs

Gardens – public, private (major coup!), zoos, botanical gardens and natural landscapes. How about a roll-up-your-sleeves and plant something event with a local master gardener?

Shopping – outlets, specialty shops and boutiques are an option on virtually every itinerary. Downtown shopping pairs nicely with lunch on their own. Enhance the experience with a treasure hunt that supports your theme.



Spectator sports – baseball, basketball, football, hockey – both major and minor league, the latter has strong opportunity for unique participatory activities.



Participation sports – rafting, canoeing, golf, hiking, biking, skiing, boating – all levels of outdoor fun.

Agriculture – farm-to-table, farm family visits and tours of local agricultural interests and food factories. Although farm-to-table is hardly unique, it can be if it's localized to your destination.

Foodies – highlighting local eateries and the personalities behind them, wineries, distilleries, breweries, cooking classes, demonstrations and competitions. Remember to make the experience group friendly.

Hands-on experiences – learn to and make it yourself, see it made, behind-the-scenes factory and craft guild tours.



Family fun – events and festivals, fun parks, museums and attractions that cater to grandparent/grandchild (multigenerational) vacations or traditional family travel.

Student/youth trips – focus on history, government or STEAM at amusement parks, water parks and kid/youth friendly restaurants.

Student performance groups – include the above, but these groups must have place to perform! If bands are to be adjudicated they will need field and parade venues.

Religious – church tours, religious shrines, meet and greet with local parish, missions and voluntourism to help those in need in your community.

Arts & artisans – galleries, locally made products and traditions. A hands on workshop can bring out the artist in all of us.

Ethnic & cultural heritage – find pillars in the community who know your community's history to tell the story behind the story.

Holiday – Christmas trips are the staples, but don't forget St. Patrick's Day, Cinco de Mayo, 4th of July, Harvest Time and Veterans Day.

Nature/outdoors – from birders to boaters, hikers to bikers and campers, too!



Mystery trip – A good mystery trip delves into a lesser known side of a destination's local heroes and cuisine attached to the area.

Girls-only – think dance, theater, culture, spa, shopping, great food, wine & recipes and drink (Don't forget golf and tennis for the ladies!).

Guys-only – think sports – spectator and participatory, gaming, a behind-the-scenes tour of a local brewery/distillery and great food!

Referencing the above list, you might be hard-pressed to create complete itineraries for each of the special interests. Here's where you get creative by mixing and matching themes. For example, shopping and gardens tie in well together, as do foodies and agriculture. People have diverse interests - variety is after all the spice of life.

TIP:  Avoid "kitchen sink" itineraries that mix and match diverse attractions and activities.

GETTING THE RIGHT PARTNERS

You will need a competent group of ready, willing and able partners that will roll up their sleeves and partner with you to develop these itineraries. If you expect your itineraries to drive any interest, you need to be specific as to the attractions, restaurants and other stops you make! The vanilla itinerary that is composed of – “come here and visit many of our fine attractions, then eating at one of our fine restaurants before checking into one of our fine hotels” isn’t worth the paper it’s written on, or web page it’s published on... Get specific in your recommendations – that’s what tour buyers rely on you for!

Chances are your destination has many hidden assets that aren’t even in the current repertoire of how you’re promoting to groups. Here’s where creative juices need to flow and new partners brought in. Destinations around the world are creating unique, group-only experiences from nontraditional group travel attractions and restaurants.

If you are under political pressure to be fair to all businesses in your community, and mentioning specific suppliers has the potential to cause friction, here are four options:

1 Working with themes that best fit your destination, create itinerary projects/committees for each. These work well as a special buy-in from interested businesses willing to work with you to create and market itineraries. You may already have a buy-in for group leads and Requests For Proposals (RFP). If not, for \$xxx include those interested businesses in building the itinerary to include their business and marketing assistance on your website, at tradeshow and advanced lead and RFP.

2 If you get that member that likes to be the squeaky wheel, put them in a mystery trip but make certain they’re group-friendly by establishing a criteria of what a business needs to accommodate groups.

3 Destinations fortunate enough to have multiple partners in a particular theme should keep that list close. Accommodations and restaurants may not have availability and do not respond to your RFP. Be ready to present the alternative to your prospect.

4 Find a competent local receptive tour operator and run your itineraries through them. More on this subject later...



ITINERARY PREPARATION:

- ▶ Take all elements and put them in a Word or Excel document.
- ▶ Gather your premier attraction and lead your itinerary off with it. First tastes are important! Find a nearby, local restaurant, looking to match the theme of your itinerary, or the first attraction. Lunch at that attraction would be ideal.
- ▶ Continue with an interesting stopover – something historically significant, articulating your region’s personality or substitute with a step-on guide with character or in character.
- ▶ Check-in at a local lodging provider – offer them a welcome reception.
- ▶ Bring passengers to a fun group-friendly restaurant that’s indicative of your area. Have the chef come out and explain tonight’s dinner, and/or bring in local entertainment, a story teller or historian.
- ▶ Let group rest for 8 hours.
- ▶ After breakfast depart for a local museum, garden or historic home. Best to do the education early in the morning. Offer personal guides, an audio tour or behind-the-scenes experience – something they can’t get on their own!
- ▶ Follow with another local attraction, fitting with the theme of this itinerary. Add a photo op of your iconic landmark/attraction/museum. By the time the group gets home you’ll be a social media superstar!
- ▶ Take group to lunch at another LOCAL restaurant. Remember that lunch is frequently on their own and shopping & lunch are often combined, so think about areas where you can drop groups off for individual exploration. This would be the perfect time to show off your downtown shops and restaurants.
- ▶ Let group relax, explore, shop or get out and exercise this afternoon – free time is a must! Return to your host hotel so passengers can rest and prepare for an exciting evening of dinner and entertainment.
- ▶ Breakfast and check out of the hotel and depart for home.
- ▶ On the way out of town hit anything they missed, a surprise attraction, memorable stop. This is a great time to pick up unique food items that are perishable.

Elements for a Successful Itinerary:

- A destination (that’s you!) with a really good story or theme
- A well-planned route with thoughtful guidance to avoid crisscrossing all over town
- or more group-friendly attractions
- A variety of group-friendly attractions
- Delectable restaurants, wineries or breweries
- More chances to shop at locally-owned businesses
- Memorable museums or other interesting stops along the way



ADDITIONAL TIPS



Time it out! How long does it really take for a group to visit, shop and eat at each of these places?

1

Make it small-group friendly! The largest growth segment in the business today is small group travel. Organizations, clubs and individuals are putting together their own groups as small as 6-8 people. This opens up many of your smaller restaurants, attractions and experiences to pint-sized groups.

2

Make it memorable! Include something that will leave everyone talking on the trip and when they get home. Referrals from friends and family are your quickest path to NEW business.

Make it authentic! Chances are you're going to need to dig deep here to find those unique group experiences that convey your destination's best assets. No one said it was going to be easy, but today's travel is all about experiences.

3

Hotels set the mood. Over-the-road groups will typically arrive at/near check-in time. Easy check-in and a welcome reception are very important as they set the tone for the entire stay. A poor accommodations experience and the escort/group leader will spend the rest of the time trying to salvage the tour.

4

5

Make it easy! Okay, now that you've put this itinerary together, how does a tour planner book it? Do you provide assistance, a cheat sheet of contacts so they can strike when the iron's hot? If you don't provide actionable means of booking this trip, all the work you've done up until now will go flat. While itinerary creation is a necessary step on the path to group sales success, once you've crafted these great itineraries and started marketing them, you're going to get phone calls from groups interested in booking these trips. Now what? You are a Destination Marketing Organization, not a Destination Selling Organization, right?

3 Ways to Bring Your Itineraries to Life

1. Earlier we talked about partners that buy into the itinerary crafting and marketing. Turn the selling over to them. Whether it's an early notification to an RFP, an advertising/trade show lead, or an inquiry from your website, let them do their thing.
2. Packaging certainly isn't a new concept. Amtrak, cruise lines, airlines and inclusive resorts have been packaging itineraries for decades. Today, you can add accommodations and even a few attractions to the list offering packaged itineraries to the tour operators and group leaders. Are there hoteliers in your destination that can price a full itinerary, collect the funds and disperse payments to other partners?
3. Consider a receptive operator(s) who can package your itineraries with actual dates and pricing. They have local knowledge and can provide guide service. Their attention to detail will turn itineraries into memorable experiences.



HOW TO SHOW OFF YOUR ITINERARIES

Having crafted these magnificent itineraries, it's time to show them to group buyers. Here are some tips to get your itineraries in front of the best prospects.



Print Still Works

- **Create one-page pdfs of each itinerary**, with contemporary graphics and images of the things they will see and do; put links to the companies that are mentioned and their contact information if warranted. These pdfs will suit you well as trade show follow-up and as simple attachments to emails.
- **Compile your pdfs into an itinerary booklet**, with a nice cover and intro page on your destination. This needn't be fancy, but should be representative of your brand. It's a great presentation piece to flip through at shows – an itinerary is bound to capture a buyer's attention and it is small enough (file size) to email. This also gives you a hook for your marketing campaign – "Contact me for a free itinerary booklet!" Online, having a dedicated, high profile area for your itineraries offers many benefits and is key to their success.



Digital Publishing Hacks

- **Pull out the copy and images from the pdf and repost them in article form on your website.** PDF documents add almost nothing to your SEO, but the copy they contain is full of high value keyword content that will boost your rankings and draw more prospects to your website.
- **Display a Featured Itinerary on your homepage or website sidebar.** People love itineraries, don't hide them behind layers of navigation and you'll see a marked increase in your reader engagement.
- **Include a call-to-action with each itinerary.** Giving people an obvious next step will drive them further down the customer journey toward making the purchase. Don't leave them hanging.
- **Adhere to SEO best practices.** Having a descriptive title, catchy subtitle, easy to read copy and properly tagged photos will ensure that more people find and see your itineraries.

- **Create short video introductions to each itinerary.** People consume information in different ways and you can convey the heart and soul of an itinerary faster and more powerfully in 30 seconds of video than you can from reading text.



Digital Promotion Hacks

- **Include your itineraries in existing marketing efforts.** Adding them into the mix will freshen up your destination ads and PR efforts, and spread the itineraries to more of your core audience.
- **Use Social Media.** People love trip ideas and itineraries can be very sharable, which means you have the potential to greatly expand your audience. Just remember that social media doesn't exist to make a sale, but rather to share information, so make your posts relevant and helpful.
- **Seek out partners in promotion.** No matter how big your audience is, it has a limit, and seeking out those with similar audiences, like group travel publications, websites, newsletters, blogs, travel writers, etc will allow you to reach people you never could on your own.

SUMMARY

We've crafted quite a few elements into what can be exciting itineraries. The only thing missing is your creativity. Develop themes that highlight your destination's premier and hidden assets remembering who would be most appreciative of your handiwork. Gather your partners keeping in mind the four tips for involving everyone. Next, determine who your packagers are and how you can best display your craft.

However, if you follow these timetested steps you'll be well on your way to saying hello to new groups in the coming years.

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