



Luxury Tour Operators reveal: the top 10 criteria for gaining inclusion in their programmes

April 11, 2005...Gaining entry into a luxury tour operator's programme is often a critical necessity for many luxury properties, due to the operator's loyal databases, premium positioning, and wide distribution.

However some are more successful than others at being included in these programmes, due not only to their location and service, but also to their ability to manage a long term professional relationship with the tour operator.

Six luxury European tour operators provided insights into their selection criteria, which ranged from hotel characteristics, to the professionalism of hotel staff:

- **Outstanding Personalised Service.** This was the no 1 priority for all operators, who stated the importance of providing excellent service for their very discerning clientele. "Our clients are more discerning than the average, so it is extremely important to be able to rely on a hotel to understand and provide for our clients' special needs" said a leading operator. "These needs may include availability of multi-lingual staff, special foods such as Soya milk, or an extensive wine list."
- **Ongoing customer appeal.** Properties that do not generate sufficient sales due to waning customer appeal may find themselves removed from a brochure or programme due to lack of customer interest, particularly if new or more attractive properties enter into the market.
- **Excellent Location.** Location was extremely important, on one hand to provide a range of activities complementary to the type of holiday, such as beaches, cultural attractions, and sports; on the other hand to be nearby restaurants, the centre of town, or the office in the case of business properties. "As cultural touring specialists, the hotel has to be in an area that is attractive to our clients" says Lucy Nicholson, Product Manager – Latin America for *Cox & Kings*.

- **Quality Facilities.** The inclusion of a spa was deemed very important by several operators, citing the new wellness trends. Exotic treatments such as caviar facials, or hot stone therapy were mentioned as adding extra appeal, as were holistic classes such as meditation or Tai Chi. However general facilities such as good restaurants, gym, pool, business centre, sporting facilities and special playing facilities for children were also very important.
- **Luxurious Rooms** Luxurious appointments were seen as essential by most operators, with a particular emphasis on good bathrooms. Some requested modern, fully equipped rooms, with clear instructions for the use of facilities. Others deemed privacy and seclusion important for their discerning guests. A variety of room types, ranging from rooms for families with interconnecting rooms, to intimate suites for honeymooners or couples on a romantic weekend were also attractive.
- **EU compliance and Responsible Tourism.** Strict laws governing European tour operators require any hotel featured by a tour operator to comply with several legal requirements, such as fire and safety regulations. In addition, the environmental impact of tourism, especially in wilderness areas, is of concern to many luxury tour operators and their clients, who favour properties that are sensitive to the ecological and cultural protection of the environment.
- **Character.** For many discerning clients, the character of the hotel was seen to be important, as well as local flavour even if it is part of an international chain.
- **Marketing Incentives.** Provision of a variety of marketing incentives and special offers was important. "We are always receptive to hotels that provide creative offers, especially if they are clearly presented and communicated in a timely manner," says Marcelle Hoff, Joint Managing Director Expressions Holidays.
- **Efficiency, Flexibility and regular Training.** Hotels showing efficiency and flexibility when dealing with a tour operator are highly rated, as are those who provide regular training to reservations teams. Examples included prompt cooperation in the provision of images, contracts and any other information necessary to produce a brochure or website. Flexibility was seen as important in finding solutions to meet additional client requirements. A willingness to train tour operator staff regularly to educate them on the unique qualities of a property were seen as an aid to selling the property and maintaining good relationships.

- **Consistent rate and availability Management.** Maintaining a relatively competitive rate was deemed important, to ensure that there were not wide price variances between properties of a similar quality. For long-haul operators, it was important for hotels to provide competitive rates to ground handlers, especially in the developing world, where it is difficult to book directly and much easier to deal entirely with a ground handler.

Others cited the importance of being consistent in providing good availability for the tour operator in peak seasons, and not just low. “We generate the most business, on a long-term basis, to properties that combine a consistent standard of service and facilities with a long-term commitment as a strategic partner” said Vanessa Morris, Public Relations Manager for *Elegant Resorts*. “Importantly, we appreciate hotels that support us when times are good, and not just when they need the business.”

Luxury tour operators occupy a specialised niche in the travel arena, and tend to command exceptional loyalty from their clients, especially their long-term customers.

Despite the growth of internet bookings and the increase in direct to consumer marketing, other factors such as ease of booking, local knowledge and legal protection under stringent European laws are likely to keep luxury tour operators in business for quite some time.



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