

Many shades of blue

Independent tourist guides all run businesses based on interpretation. Barbara Millar explains some of the skills involved.

Each of the 281 'Blue Badge' members of the Scottish Tourist Guides Association (STGA) develops their small, one-person business in a different way, according to their individual strengths and interests. Some may specialise in working with large groups on extended coach tours, others in leading small walking groups; some choose to offer in-depth tours of Glasgow or Edinburgh, others are happy to work anywhere in the country.

A skill shared by all 'Blue Badge' guides, however, is the ability to adapt their interpretation of Scotland for the diverse groups of tourists who visit our country. There would be no point in offering the same interpretation of Edinburgh to, say, a group of young German students on a weekend break and to a group of more mature American travellers who have just stepped off a cruise ship. Each group will have different needs and interests: understanding and empathising with these is an art which each guide quickly develops.

Even the briefest of conversations at the outset of the tour – whether it is a one-hour whirl around Edinburgh's Old Town or a packed eight-day trip from Moffat to Orkney – will give essential clues which will subsequently steer the guide's interpretation. For instance, it should be possible quickly to ascertain that the German students may be more interested in shopping and nightlife than in galleries and museums, or that the Americans have seen the Edinburgh Military Tattoo on television back home, and want to understand more about its historical location.

The STGA runs a central booking service, and holds a database recording each guide's special areas of interest and knowledge, languages spoken and other abilities. This helps clients to get the guide who can best interpret their needs and interests.

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I understand small business growth. I was one.
George W Bush