

Step this way...

Viola Lier gives her top tips for debutant guided tour leaders.



Give your guests things to do as well as look at

Wonderful! You have done your preparations, you know your facts and you have thought about the practicalities. Your tour is of the right duration, you are comfortable with the route, have allowed plenty of places to sit down and to take shelter. You know the maximum size of your group and have adjusted your stopping places. You are sure your visitors will be able to hear you, see what you are talking about and will be safe and comfortable throughout your tour. Great! That's it, isn't it?

Let's slow down and make this a truly memorable experience for your visitors. Here are some more thoughts:

- **Put yourself in your visitors' shoes.**

Can you remember the first time you came here? What did you expect? What surprised you? What fascinated you? What disappointed you? Re-discover – be inspired by your visitors.

- **A little chat can go a long way.**

Try to find out as much as you can from your visitors before you start. Apart from establishing rapport and putting your visitors at ease, it just might provide you with the information you need to tailor your tour content to the expectations, knowledge and background of your crowd. And remember: you never get a second chance to make a first impression.

- **Start at the beginning and take your visitors with you on a journey of discovery.**

Mention the practicalities (duration, safety, photographs, mobiles...) and whet your visitors' appetite for what's to come. Never overestimate previous knowledge and never underestimate your visitors' intelligence.

- **I'm not nervous!** Nerves are good, but letting them show is not. Perhaps memorise the beginning of your tour. Breathe and smile. Pauses in your commentary are good: remember that they will seem longer to you than to your audience. Your visitors need pauses to digest information and impressions.

- **You know enough.** In truth, you probably know more than enough. Don't be tempted to tell them everything you know, but select and present information in a clear, structured, meaningful way that will create a basis for your visitors to want more and come back. Less can be more.

- **If you don't strike oil, stop boring.** Variety is the spice of life. Have a good mix of contents and be prepared to chop and change. Give short-hand descriptions and definitions for complex ideas. Don't blind with science. Don't drown in dates. It's not only what, but how you deliver it. Remember the good old provoke – relate – reveal. Always be aware of what your visitors are looking at: that's what has caught their interest.

- **Involve, engage, enthral, enthuse your audience.** Your visitors chose to come with you. They want interaction with their guide. How about riddles and activities? Are you using suspense? Are you making links? Listen as well as talk. Perhaps some of your visitors have first hand experience of living or working in an environment you are describing.

- **Do you have the touch?** What about handling objects and illustrations? You will be surrounded by them in a museum or on a nature walk – make good use of them. And just in case, why not carry some appropriate objects with you.

- **May I ask a question?** Are you happy for questions to come at any time throughout your tour? Will you invite questions at certain points or at the end? Remember to thank visitors for their questions and to repeat the question for the whole group to hear and feel involved. Perhaps throw the question back to the group or to the one who asked. And if you don't know the answer, that's ok. Don't make it up: admit you don't know, and say you will try to find out and/or suggest where visitors can learn more.

- **Finish on a high!** Have you delivered what you promised? Briefly summarise the highlights, invite final questions and give visitors pointers to what they might like to do next.

This article is inspired by *The Art of Guiding* by Katrine Prince and *Guiding is Fun*, part of the STGA (Scottish Tourist Guides Association) Training Programme, by Ros Newlands.

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