

THINK GLOBAL

Go Local

BY MATT ROBINSON

Whether you're touring in a foreign land or organizing a day trip, a little creativity and research can add new dimensions to any travel experience.

As school budgets shrink and music program budgets diminish even further, it may seem difficult to justify any sort of group travel, especially for a large band or orchestra. Many schools, however, see great rewards in making shorter excursions to nearby destinations as a means of outreach and promotion, as well as student enrichment. And those who are still willing and able to travel internationally are investigating alternative, potentially cost-saving options such as cultural exchange programs.

An International Experience Near Home

One popular domestic destination for school music groups is the Norfolk NATO Festival in Norfolk, Virginia. Formerly known as the International Azalea Festi-

val, it was renamed in 2009 to mark the 60th anniversary of NATO, which has its only North American command base in Norfolk. The annual event, which is held during the last week of April, features an adjudicated concert, a parade featuring marching bands and performers from all 28 NATO member nations, and the largest military tattoo in the United States.

Although the NATO Festival attracts thousands of students from across the country, it isn't located in a major metropolitan hub and can be difficult to get to by plane. As a result, some teachers choose alternative transportation. For William R. "Bud" Stewart, band director at John.I. Burton High School in Norton, Virginia, the choice of going by motor coach was clear. "Norfolk is about eight hours from our school," he says, "so it's an easy day trip."

Even so, Stewart worked with a travel consultant in advance of the Burton band's journey to Norfolk this past April to make sure all necessary arrangements were taken care of.

Besides offering Stewart's students a well-deserved break, the trip to Norfolk also allows them the opportunity for experiential learning. "Travel is a big factor in the educational equation for me," he says. "I feel

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that travel is very important for retention and recruitment.”

Although Stewart regularly schedules short-distance trips like those to NATO, he also likes to take his students further afield as often as he can. “We alternate trips by distance traveled,” he explains. “Our big trip is to Orlando every four years.”

Because there is so much planning involved, Stewart recommends that teachers and directors do their homework be-

fore making sure their students pack theirs. “Talk with other teachers about itineraries, performance venues, educational value versus expense, and the tour company used,” he advises.

Exchanging Players and Cultures

Domestic travel may be particularly popular these days with many teachers and directors, but some are still making the extra effort to take their performers extra far. And sometimes even when you’re staying at home, you’re helping to create a memorable travel experience. At McLean High School in McLean, Virginia, orchestra director Katie Labrie took over a program that already had an exchange program with a German youth orchestra. “I was very excited to continue it,” Labrie says, explaining that this cross-cultural exchange had begun between two friends—a colleague of hers at McLean and a teacher at the Grabbe Gymnasium in Detmold, Germany.

Though Labrie arranged the trip from Washington, DC, to Amsterdam and on to Germany herself the first year, she has since handed over some responsibility to a travel agent. “[The students] stayed



The Burton High School marching band at the Norfolk NATO Festival

Roadside Assistance

Why tour operators can be a help even when you’re day-tripping

Day trips can be as meaningful to students as overnight trips, with careful planning and the use of pre- and post-trip study aids. But such trips necessarily mean including a lot in a short amount of time, and this makes the services of a tour operator worth considering for a number of reasons.

Any worthwhile out-of-classroom experience includes an active itinerary, which must be thoughtfully designed and implemented. From choosing the right destinations and attractions to selecting student-friendly meal options, every detail must be considered. Using a tour operator can help coordinate the lessons and logistics of a trip of any length.

Most day trips aren’t necessarily the length of your typical school day. Many run as long as 18 hours and require the use of multiple drivers for each bus/coach. These tours are especially challenging in that they call for as many tour activities and visits as an overnight trip but are compressed into less than 24 hours. Additionally, it is important to

consider the size of your group. How many students will be participating? A few? Dozens? Hundreds? Professional travel planners understand the challenges and requirements of groups of all sizes, and the value they provide increases as the number of participants grows.

In the end, though, the main reason for using a tour operator on a short trip—or any trip—is so that you can focus on the students’ experience and let the tour operator handle everything else. You shouldn’t be responsible for selecting which route to take, or what to do if an outdoor attraction suddenly can no longer accommodate your group due to weather concerns. Your tour operator should simplify the entire planning and travel process and provide alternatives for unforeseeable last-minute changes.

After all, this may be a student’s first, or only, opportunity to travel outside of his or her hometown, so the experience should be enjoyable, educational, and positively life-changing.

A FEW SUGGESTIONS:

PLAN EVERYTHING EARLY. Many sites at popular travel destinations have specific requirements and a long lead time for booking.

BE FLEXIBLE, BE POSITIVE, AND EXPECT THE UNEXPECTED. Knowing certain challenges may occur allows you to react calmly so the students will follow your lead.

COMMUNICATE AHEAD OF THE TRIP. One way to make sure everyone is in the loop is to provide all chaperones and students with handbooks.

CHOOSE A TRAVEL PLANNER. Use the following list to guide your decision.

- 1► Determine how long the company has been in business and how long it has been conducting student trips.
- 2► Find out if they have general, as well as professional (errors and omissions) liability insurance and a risk management plan. Ask them what financial safeguards are in place to protect customers.
- 3► Ask for a reference from a recent student group leader in your area who traveled with the company.

4► Find out if the company is a member of SYTA.

SYTA member companies specialize in student and youth travel, and the association enforces a strict code of ethics.

