



Heidi Sarna worked through the six-part course

Guiding light

The lack of an international tour guide training standard in the cruise industry motivated Aquila Tours to do something about it, writes **Heidi Sarna**.

To create a pool of internationally certified tour guides, Saint John, New Brunswick-based Aquila developed the Tour Guide Excellence training program. The online, interactive course covers the nuts and bolts of being a tour guide. Participants who successfully complete the program within one year, verified by testing, will receive an International Certification in Tour Guide Excellence.

'The importance of a tour guide to the success of a shore excursion is really significant,' says Beth Kelly Hatt, president of Aquila Tours.

Aquila's program addresses the inconsistency in tour guiding standards specific to the cruise industry and shore excursion delivery. The course is \$290 per participant, but there are group rates given to tour operators, ports and destinations. The cost provides access to a members-only website, which has resources on best practices, a member's forum, and video clips from real guides with tips.

'We would love to see cruise lines require our program for all their tour operators,' Hatt says.

To see what the program was all about, I sat down at my computer and worked through the six-part course. Each section took about 45 minutes to an hour to complete.

A pleasant-sounding female narrator presented the course material in a conversational manner. Each section was well organised, easy to follow and packed with how-to advice. Challenging practice questions within each section reinforced and clarified the material.

Lesson 1: Overview of Tourism and the Cruise Sector

The tourism industry has a huge impact on the economy, and this section stressed the important role of the tour guide. It was reiterated that guest satisfaction is vital to cruise lines and so guides need to deliver excellent shore excursions, from the presentation of the commentary to the smooth running of the tour, giving an informative and pleasant overall experience.

Important points: 1

- The success of the shore excursion is in your hands as a guide, you are the ambassador and the face of the destination and the cruise line.
- To keep the level of satisfaction high, tailor your tours as much as possible to the group's expectations - consider age ranges, level of luxury and cruise experience.
- Shore excursions should be offered in such a way that it would be hard for passengers to do the same thing on their own.
- Promote responsible tourism by example and explain to the group why they shouldn't feed wildlife, take coral or rocks from beaches, or snap photographs of locals without asking.

Lesson 2: Hospitality and Service Excellent

This section started off reminding students to take care of their appearance. The narrator used a personal anecdote about a sloppy, unfriendly waiter in a restaurant. 'We lost confidence in the whole restaurant and we'd never go back and also told our friends not to.'

Important points: 2

- To project a positive image, don't chew gum, smoke or wear dark glasses.
- Make eye contact, be enthusiastic and listen politely to all questions, even ones you've heard many times before.
- Include fun and lively anecdotes in your commentary and remember to laugh at yourself, but never make jokes about religion, gender, language or politics.
- Don't compare cruise lines, tour companies or prices with passengers.
- Respond to guests with special needs, from children to the elderly and physically challenged participants, but do not hover and assume your help is wanted and never neglect the group.
- Treat the bus driver with respect. Introduce him and tell guests a bit about him. Your rapport has a positive impact on the entire tour.

Lesson 3: Research & Field Studies

This section was about building a foundation of knowledge to create engaging commentary.

Important points: 3

- Experience your region by exploring on your own. Also take other guides' tours to learn about their techniques.
- To learn more about your region, mingle with local residents, local historians, teachers and professors.
- Keep local stats at hand on population, housing costs, political system, climate, and flora and fauna.
- Scour the Internet for research, but remember to use credible sources, such as official tourism boards.
- Learn by reading newspapers, magazines and historical archives and collect photos and maps for files.
- Practice makes perfect, deliver your commentary in front of a mirror, drive the route alone first, take family members on a simulated tour and ask them for feedback and real questions.

Lesson 4: Presentation & Storytelling

This part covered communicating confidently by being passionate and enthusiastic about your topic and by mastering basic public speaking skills.

Important points: 4

- Humour is a great tool to engage the audience and also to diffuse difficult situations, but always keep humor light and spontaneous.
- If you don't know the answer, admit it to the group, but try and find it before the end of tour by asking another guide at the next stop, for example.
- Don't read from a script, be conversational.
- When things go wrong, for example the microphone suddenly stops working, relax and maintain your manners and dignity. Go with the flow and try to move on.
- Body language speaks to passengers as much as words, so be animated and passionate.
- Smile and use facial expressions to show emotions.
- Using relevant visual props can be helpful, such as photos, costumes and music.
- Sharing human interest stories will bring your region to life.

Lesson 5: Preparation & Processes

This section offered more practical advice, such as the importance of arriving at the pier early to confirm tour details and timing, checking traffic reports and meeting your driver. It also stressed the importance of making a report for your company if any incidents occurred or if there were itinerary adjustments or complaints.

Important points: 5

- How you handle the beginning of tour sets the tone for rest of tour. Greet the group warmly and introduce yourself and name the tour you're leading.
- When making group announcements, make sure everyone can see and hear you. Listen to questions, repeat them into the microphone, then answer them.
- Address housekeeping issues, such as where trash bins are, when toilet breaks and meals times are scheduled, and policies on safety.
- Review itinerary with the group at the beginning, explain importance of following it, and never put decisions to the group.
- Always be clear about how much time people have at a stop and when exactly to be back on the bus.
- To keep track of passengers, count the number of guests and write it down. Do a final count before departing.
- At the end of the tour, thank the driver, thank the group and say good-bye to guests individually. Accept gratuities graciously.

Lesson 6: Difficult Situations & Risk Management

The theme in this section was to 'expect the unexpected' and to master coping mechanisms in order to manage difficult situations. It's important to set clear expectations at the beginning of the tour, and to manage and minimise risk by being proactive.

Important points: 6

- Remind guests repeatedly to take everything with them. If something is lost, like a camera, assist guests by getting a description of it and calling the last stop to see if it was left there. Never offer to replace a lost item.
- To deal with disruptive behaviours (from excessive alcohol use to racism or talking too much), take the guest aside, mention behaviour and ask them to stop, without stating your personal opinion of their behaviour. If necessary, ask the guest to leave tour and/or call the police.
- Listen, relate and empathise with complaining guests. Take them aside, write down their issues, but never offer them a refund.
- Minimise risk by giving a safety briefing at start of tour - for example, mention slippery steps and to stay seated when bus is moving.

Conclusion

Overall, the course offered lots of valuable tools to make new or experienced tour guides better prepared to do their job. I liked that the course wasn't just theory, but hard facts, procedures and solutions, though in a few cases the advice seemed a bit unrealistic - such as, never do the same tour twice; in the case of emergencies, keep guests away from media (is that actually possible?), and don't take complaints personally, don't be defensive, don't patronise the guest and never promise or imply a refund. A tall order, maybe, but better to set the bar high to motivate tour guides to do their best.

I'm not sure what my grade would have been had I taken the final test, but I'll give Aquila an A for developing a very useful and pragmatic training tool for tour guides working for the cruise industry. Well done. •



Pompeii guide - animated and passionate