

Leading an Overseas Pilgrimage

NB: A number of ideas in this document are also relevant for those leading local pilgrimages

These ideas/tips/suggestions are things that we have learned over the years we have been organising overseas pilgrimages. We have found what works for us as a couple and are very happy for these ideas to be shared with others. We know that different people will have preferences for doing things in ways that suit them and this is maybe the first principle to work by – know yourself and your team, work to your strengths, and support others to work to theirs.

Before your pilgrimage

The early planning stages

- Define the purpose of your pilgrimage and what you would like to achieve.
- Identify countries/sites/themes and some key places to visit. Leave room for ideas from an on-the-ground agent, others with expertise, websites, books, travel guides, potential participants.
- Engage an experienced credible agent who understands the difference between a pilgrimage and a tour.
- Identify the kind and level of accommodation, bearing in mind that different places have different accommodation options e.g. Italy and the UK are great for monastery-style stays but Greece and Turkey aren't.
- Once you have decided on a possible date and length for your pilgrimage – we like northern hemisphere spring or autumn and approximately 21 days – get the agent to prepare a more detailed initial itinerary.
- Study the itinerary closely and use contacts and websites to help confirm whether it meets the purpose you have identified. Pre-pilgrimage reconnaissance trips (not necessarily every site but most) enables organisers to make changes e.g. being clear that you don't want to visit certain places or stay in particular accommodation, and also deciding that you want more or less time in certain places.
- Decide on a start and end place/date/time for the pilgrimage. The pilgrimage fee costings begin and end there. In our experience, landed (in the overseas country) is better than beginning and ending in NZ. Many of NZ-based pilgrims want to add on travel at either end. Participants are responsible for organising and paying for their international flights and any other travel/additional accommodation although they often come to organisers for advice and recommendations.

Money matters

- Unless it is a particular gifting and something you'd like to do yourself, we recommend that you don't take responsibility for collecting money. The beauty of using a reputable agent is that in the event of major difficulties, they have various indemnity and protection systems if anything goes wrong. They also have very good systems for processing deposits and fees.
- However, there will be money involved and we suggest opening a dedicated pilgrimage account to help you work efficiently and transparently. There are up-front costs that will need to be met, primarily accommodation deposits and international fares for leaders.

- We try to work on the basis of pilgrimages being cost-neutral for us. Although this hasn't completely turned out to be the case, the work is hugely enriching and we have been more than recompensed in terms of the opportunities, experiences, relationships, spiritual gifts etc that have come our way.
- As part of the itinerary preparation, the agent will cost this on a per person basis with double/twin accommodation or a single supplement, and based on a minimum of 20 paying participants and a certain number of free places. Be clear with the agent about costs for New Zealanders and that our dollar is usually around half the value of UK or US currency.
- Be clear with the agent that a cost-per-person amount needs to be built into the overall pilgrimage fee and paid to us to offset the costs incurred. We receive this as a single payment when all the pilgrimage fees have been paid. This money is used to reimburse us for the accommodation deposits, and for all leaders' and guests' travel and costs, accommodation and food. It pays for a range of before pilgrimage costs such as administration, booklets, flyers and marketing, gifts for overseas helpers/presenters. It is also our contingency fund while on pilgrimage and over the years it has paid for such things as local and international phone calls, taxis to and from hospital/medical/dental appointments for pilgrims, hospitality for unexpected pilgrimage-related guests, transport for the less mobile to a difficult site or where the weather makes walking impossible, the occasional special meal for participants. It is also used to contribute to gratuities for drivers, guides etc.
- Be clear about the costs that are included in the pilgrimage fee and those not covered. For our pilgrimages, entrance fees to sites, transport, koha to groups or individuals, breakfasts, and most dinners are built into the fee. Lunches and additional meals, before and after accommodation, insurances, within NZ and international transport are not included.

Marketing and communication

- Build a list of possible participants – keep a log of people who express interest leading to a more comprehensive database.
- Once the itinerary and costs are confirmed email all on the database.
- Identify organisations that will market free of charge e.g. Diocesan networks.
- Organise and distribute a professionally designed flyer through multiple networks.
- Encourage word-of-mouth marketing. People are always interested to have friends or family join them on pilgrimage.
- Follow up each expression of interest early and personally.
- Keep good hard copy and digital records of all communications – from the very beginning have a dedicated folder. This is useful when you are travelling and also for subsequent pilgrimage planning. It's an easily accessed record of the process.
- Develop a registration form for interested participants and a process for confirmation. This needs to take account of suitability of participants e.g.our pilgrimages are quite active and require people to have a reasonable level of mobility and fitness. Our oldest participant was a wonderful 89-year-old!

Ongoing planning

- Develop a registration form. Our form has two options – an expression of interest or confirmation of participation. This helps us keep track of the status of different people.
- Identify the tasks that need to happen and within what timeframe, and decide who will do what. Be clear about expectations. A couple or team with complementary skills is a big plus.
- Identify the various leadership roles – to some extent these will grow from your purpose or overall theme. Will you want a Biblical scholar, theologian, chaplain, pastoral person, spiritual director, site guide to accompany you? Some of these roles double up and emerge over time. Different countries have different regulations regarding the use of accredited guides. For example, you cannot self-guide a group of more than 10 to places like Canterbury Cathedral, St Peter's Rome, the Basilica of St Francis in Assisi. However where a local guide is required this will be organised by the agent and their fee built into the pilgrimage fee.
- Reading and research about your overall pilgrimage theme or purpose will be ongoing.
- We have regular contact with our agent, about all manner of things – modifying the itinerary, tweaking details around timing or order of site visits, sorting out payment issues, confirming arrangements that can't be made too soon, seeking advice on behalf of pilgrims...
- We always aim to build in experiences of contemporary/local expressions of faith e.g. on Sundays we try and worship with a local community wherever we are. To do this we need to be alert to possibilities in the places we visit, then need to do the work on our own and with our agent to ensure this can be fitted into the pilgrimage itinerary. Examples of this are services at a Commonwealth War Cemetery or visiting a denominational social service agency, or meeting with a key Christian leader...
- We develop a comprehensive pilgrimage booklet which includes contact details for all participants, the detailed itinerary, lectionary readings, worship services, prayers, poems, written material relating to the theme and to being a pilgrim.
- Provide support for participants with flights, payments, medical issues.
- Building a caring pilgrimage community is very important to us. Within a couple of months of our travel time we ask participants to email a photo and short bio to us. We collate these and send to other participants so that they can start to build their knowledge of others in the group.
- Gather passport, flight, next-of-kin and contact details for all participants and carry hard copy with us on pilgrimage.

During the pilgrimage

- Be ready to be 'on deck' 24/7. During the day we are always monitoring what is happening and Jenny counts heads endlessly. It is always possible for one of us to stay with the group and one of us to deal with something that might have cropped up – this could be helping deal with a lost passport, getting emergency medication, giving someone a Covid test...
- When appropriate, provide leadership and guidance for engaging with a site. Ensure that there is time for pilgrims to sit, walk, pray, contemplate, draw, write etc. We find ++David's framework very helpful to facilitate this – What did God do here?

What is God doing here today? In the light of these questions, how might God be calling me to respond?

- Communicate an attitude of 'we can deal with this' and keep calm under pressure, even when you might be paddling furiously beneath the surface. People join our pilgrimages because they want to feel safe and to not have to worry about arrangements or decision-making. Our goal is to meet this expectation when things don't go according to plan.
- Stay in close contact with your Biblical scholar/chaplain and be ready to support and follow up on anything they might need.
- Make decisions, preferably ahead of time and in consultation with other leaders about when group meetings might be needed, or when would be appropriate to have a worship service. Make the necessary arrangements in terms of room, set-up, protocols (particularly where we are using a chapel) etc.
- Once everyone else goes to bed ensure everything is set up for the next day, check in with people who may have particular needs, find answers to all manner of queries, sort out any food or dietary issues, anticipate any potential difficulties and where possible iron out beforehand, answer emails, liaise with accommodation providers re pilgrims' needs, follow up on things that have happened through the day...
- Focus on building the community – this happens before we even begin with our bio instalments and is ongoing throughout the pilgrimage. Some of the group will fly from NZ with us, and we encourage early arrivers in the pilgrimage place to meet and eat together beforehand. We have an introductory meeting on the first night, and regular meetings (particularly ensuring that everyone knows where they need to be and when) and services throughout the pilgrimage. We provide opportunities for every pilgrim to do Bible readings, give thanks at meals, take a role in services (keep a note of who does what so that everyone gets a turn), tell their stories, share their discoveries and experiences.
- We model getting alongside different people and encourage groups not to form into cliques. We emphasise that we do not own the pilgrimage and encourage people to own and use their gifts when they would like to – occasionally people are very happy for this to be a refreshing time in which they are ministered to. We affirm people for looking out for each other, sharing concerns, making suggestions, encouraging those who may be struggling.... we all try to be *The Servant Song* in action.

Following the pilgrimage

- Follow up on any undertakings made to share resources, photos, contact details with pilgrims.
- Support pilgrims with anything else they may need e.g. this could involve providing information for an insurance claim, checking on health after an illness or accident, following up on lost luggage.... Generally being available as a point of contact or a conduit for people to share with others in the group.
- Send thank you emails to everyone you can think of who has supported the pilgrimage.
- Write reports/articles for church publications etc as requested and also as a marketing strategy for future pilgrimages.