

Engaging a Third-World Tour Vendor

Cycling in the Third World poses unique challenges. Things we take for granted - quality medical care, reliable electrical power, air conditioning, stool-type toilets - are often entirely missing. Adaptation is required: if you have to use a slit toilet at night in the dark, make sure that your pockets are secure. Nothing that leaves your possession will ever return to you! (And if it did, you wouldn't want it.)

But, Third World cycling offers great rewards. It is unearthly to see fog settle onto Burma's Irrawady River from the top of an ancient temple while listening to chanting from two nearby temples. It is eye-opening to learn about the matriarchal Mosuo people of Lugu Lake in China and their tradition of "walking marriage". And it is an experience of a lifetime to visit the great Dzongs in Bhutan and to see the colorful festivals held there.

If you find the prospect of Third World cycling attractive, I hope this article will prove useful.

A preliminary note:

We are all accustomed to looking for reviews on the internet. The internet can be a useful information source, but some vendors pay services to load review sites with convincing positive reviews. And some customers use bad reviews as extortion tools. For these reasons, I use review sites only as a starting point. I don't engage a vendor unless I have personally interacted with them - extensively.

Initial Dealings

I approach vendor due diligence as a two-way process. In my initial e-mail contact, I introduce myself and my group. I tell the vendor our ages, occupations, prior experience, and what level of difficulty we want. If there is something I don't know (the exact number of people in the group, the exact duration and character of the trip we are looking for if it is not a prescheduled tour) I identify it. And if I have specific questions (e.g. how long and steep are the toughest climbs? will we have GPX files and when will we get them?) I ask them.

I do this so my business relationship with the vendor starts out on the right foot. Vendors need to field hundreds of inquiries from people who are not serious and who are basically looking

for free advice and information. Although vendors know they need to respond to these inquiries, they hate the waste of time involved. A vendor who gets my email knows that I am serious. (S)he prioritizes getting back to me with detailed answers and assigns a high priority to interacting with me.

These initial dealings are particularly important when dealing with a Third World vendor. In the Third World, economic security is nonexistent. While the great bulk of tours occur during high season, vendors receive deposits and advance payments during the low and shoulder seasons. Those funds are not held in escrow; vendors live on them until high season arrives. An obviously serious inquiry is an opportunity to collect valuable funds in the near term, and often gets an almost instantaneous response.

Significantly: I use this preliminary step to determine whether the vendor and the proposed tour are sufficiently promising to justify due diligence. If something about the vendor or tour doesn't work for me, I let the vendor know and I go on to another. But if it seems like things might be good to go, I explicitly tell the vendor this and I commence the diligence step.

Diligence

A personal bias: I favor itineraries that are constructed by small local firms and that are led by local people. But, whether you use a hyper-local firm like Bike China Adventures or a large-ish firm like Grasshopper Adventures, I find two factors determinative:

1. Whether the firm uses only freelance guides; and
2. Whether the firm will identify the specific guide for my tour and will provide references for that specific guide.

It's not feasible for a firm to retain a completely full-time guide roster. During high season, customer demand is intense and a vendor needs every guide it can get, while low season customer demand is minimal. It would make no sense for a firm to support a high season payroll during the low season. But, a good firm will keep one or two good guides working steadily, while using favored part-timers during high season.

Firms that rely exclusively on part-time freelance guides have high turnover, and the best guides leave most quickly to work

for more generous and reliable employers. This increases the likelihood that the remaining guides will be suboptimal.

Furthermore, the success of your trip will depend almost exclusively on the competence of your guide. And, you may seek a guide with particular qualities (e.g. knowledge of local history; female cyclists may want a female guide). It's not enough to check out your tour vendor; you need to check out your prospective guide as well.

Thus, if you are seriously considering a particular vendor, ask them to identify the particular guide who would lead the tour. Find out how long the guide has worked with them and whether the guide is full-time or part-time. Sometimes the vendor will give you the guide's phone number so you can call them and evaluate their personality and English fluency. Otherwise (or also), get contact information for references who have toured with that particular guide. (I prefer phone numbers; it is easy for a vendor to engage a shill to respond to emails. But, some people don't want to be called.) I have called all over the world to inquire about proposed guides, and I consider all this effort to have been well-spent.

Negotiating Prices

Tour vendors - particularly small local organizations that lead rides in the Third World, but some larger ones as well - are willing to negotiate prices. But, few will do this unless the group has more than two - advantageously, more than three - participants.

If one of your group is willing to handle all vendor negotiations and finances, your group will have a leg up in negotiating prices because one person will control a significant block of business. And if you need to make payments in foreign currencies, you can save substantial costs on exchange rates and wire fees.

I have found it unfeasible to try to book airfare as a block purchase because people prefer different travel classes and different departure airports.

Financial Default

Your deposit may precede your tour by almost a year and a year is plenty of time for a vendor to get into financial trouble.

And, Third World vendors are beyond the reach of the United States legal system.

Almost all travel insurance policies cover losses from financial default on the part of your tour vendor, but only if the policy is purchased within a certain number of days after your first payment to the vendor. Make sure you purchase travel insurance very soon after you book your tour.

I welcome your comments and will update this article as required. Feel free to contact me at adventures@mafww.org .

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