

GLOBAL PROGRAMMES MEET LOCAL CULTURE

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TIPS TO HELP INTERNATIONAL MEETING PARTICIPANTS EXPERIENCE THE LOCAL CULTURE, INCLUDING

- ✦ using meal times to organise private home visits
- ✦ arranging for some morning or afternoon breakout sessions to be held at local offices of government agencies, nongovernmental organisations, charitable groups, or small businesses
- ✦ and finding a local programme presenting topical cultural issues where your group can join in

How many times have you planned or attended an international program and wished you'd seen more of the local culture? All too often, we get to our destination and spend most of the time in meeting or hotel rooms. Despite the planning challenge, you want your program participants to have a better understanding of the place they are visiting and to leave knowing more about the people they met.

With each program that I organise in another country, I try to accomplish this by matching participants with local families. It is important to get people off the beaten path, minimize their costs, and maximize their cross-cultural experiences. I've done this in Belfast, Jakarta, Paris, London, Brussels, and Cairo. These events work best with smaller groups--for example, 50 or fewer--but the idea can be used for any size group.

Breaking bread abroad

I coordinate with local families to host a typical meal for the group or a subset of the group. Not only is this of great interest to meeting attendees, but it also can reduce the cost of registration

fees. Here are some ideas that you can use or modify to suit your needs:

- ✦ Try to use meal times to organise private home visits.
- ✦ Contact embassy cultural ministers, chamber officials, or local chapter members to seek help in organising a home visit.
- ✦ Limit group size to ten or fewer in each home. As an alternative to homes, local hosts may take a small group to a local restaurant.
- ✦ For larger groups, try a progressive dinner in a local neighbourhood. Get a taste of local foods by having a first course, main meal, dessert, and drinks at a series of small neighbourhood restaurants where local people go.
- ✦ Arrange for groups of two or three students to experience an overnight stay with a local family.
- ✦ Arrange for some morning or afternoon breakout sessions to be held at local offices of government agencies, nongovernmental organisations, charitable groups, or small businesses.
- ✦ Find a local program presenting topical cultural issues and have your group join in.

BUILDING BONDS

Programmes that incorporate local people and culture improve the chances for participants to enjoy being part of a more global community and encouraged the development of sustainable relationships. Global understanding is what we strive for and an ongoing attempt to promote this kind of understanding can seriously reduce the likelihood of participants attending a US-centric (or other nation-centric) programme in an international destination.

As people travel and become exposed to other people, cultures and lifestyles, their horizons are broadened, their minds opened, and their sense of ethnocentrism (the notion that their own cultural perspective is always correct) slowly diminishes. As Mark Twain wrote, 'Travel is fatal to prejudice, bigotry, and narrowmindedness...'

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