

Ask the Expert



Henk Witte launched Witte Travel & Tours in 1975 in his home in Ada, Michigan, after working for two international airlines and a tour operator, because he wanted to use

his expertise to arrange performance tours for choirs, bands and orchestras traveling throughout Europe. Over the decades, the high demand for special-interest tours led Witte to expand into custom-designed tours for art, architecture, religious, historical, cultural heritage and study-abroad programs. Now leading a team of more than 30 professionals, Witte still works one on one with group leaders and serves as a mentor for his staff. NTA caught up with **Dan Hermen**, Witte's group sales director, to get the inside scoop.

NTA: What are some areas of expertise for Witte Travel & Tours?

Hermen: Witte definitely is well known for our expertise in Europe and North America, where we operate our tours directly. Established partnerships with local operators allow us to provide our high-standard tours to much of the rest of the world, but we have strong historical connections here and in Europe, and that's where we really excel.

Performance tours still are a strong focus for Witte—our expertise is custom-designing tours that perfectly match the goals (and budget) of the group. We've developed a vast network of concert contacts that ensures great venues and appreciative audiences for our performers.

Faith-based tours also have always been a big part of Witte's success, and our Spiritual Journeys division has seen strong growth recently. Where clients really appreciate our value is in our

partnerships overseas with local experts and associations that can make a special lifelong memory for their specific religious heritage.

No matter what type of tour you are planning, we are going to make it uniquely yours; if that takes research on famous church organs in Bavaria or arranging a campfire in the Dordogne Valley of France, we'll make it happen!

NTA: How would you describe the group leader/tour operator relationship?

Hermen: We think of this as a true partnership. We're not selling a product as much as we're building together with the group leader the experience that they desire for their travelers. And we find that once a group leader travels with us, they most likely become a lasting partner. We offer all the services of a large tour company, with staff throughout the United States and Europe, but the



WITTE TRAVEL

relationship you'll have with your Witte tour planner will be personal and attentive. Then while on tour, your professional tour manager will handle all of the details, freeing you to focus on the group.

Some of the best group leaders can have certain "nuances of personality" that they really appreciate being accommodated. That keeps things fun for us as we learn what works best for a client. When you work with Witte, you quickly will form a relationship with your group tour planner—someone who shares your passion to broaden horizons through travel. As you work through the trip-planning process with him or her, from itinerary, proposal and promotion to travel, your GTP is your partner, and you'll soon find yourself discussing the possibilities for your next tour.

NTA: Are you noticing any trends in the tour and travel business?

Hermen: One trend that we've seen over recent years has been an increase in the amount of collaboration we are able to do with group leaders in the tour-planning process. As technology allows group leaders to become increasingly more knowledgeable about destinations and more connected to faraway places, our group leader clients often are pleasantly surprised at our ability to incorporate their connections into the tour program. It's certainly not the norm, but when groups do have specific contacts for concerts or homestays or other tour components, we're happy to take that on and make it part of their tour.

Another related trend that we see is working with more group leaders who have been do-it-yourselfers in the past. The work involved or maybe even arrangements gone awry have led them to contact us for assistance. They definitely are seeing the value that a tour operator offers in expertise, accounting services, liability and time!

For more information, contact Dan Hermen at danh@wittetravel.com or +1.616.957.8113.



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