

Planning Tours as Part of a Professional Conference: Lessons Learned

Abstract

Tours are often one of the most popular aspects of a large professional conference. However, tour planning can be time-consuming and overwhelming. We share the lessons we learned while planning 17 multiday, full-day, and half-day tours as part of the 2017 International Master Gardener Conference. We consider tour organization, pricing, site selection, and tour promotion, among other topics.

Keywords: [conference planning](#), [master gardener](#), [tours](#), [conference committee](#), [event planning](#)

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Introduction

Tours are often included as one aspect of a larger professional conference or event. Conducting tours is a way to spotlight best practices in Extension (Hawkins & Southard, 2001) or to acquaint participants with the unique culture and natural history of a location (Oldham, 2007). Carrying out successful tours requires a systematic approach that leverages local knowledge of key stakeholders and organizations and may take a year or more of planning (Oldham, 2007).

The International Master Gardener Conference (IMGC) is a large conference held every 2 years ("International Master Gardener Conference," n.d.) that provides advanced training and networking opportunities for Extension master gardener volunteers and coordinators. Tours are often one of the most popular aspects of the conference. As part of the group overseeing the 2017 IMGC, we planned 17 tours during the 18 months in which we prepared for the conference. In this article, we share lessons learned from the experience of planning and carrying out those tours.

The 2017 IMGC featured two multiday tours, four full-day tours, and 11 half-day tours involving nearly 100 different stops. The tours included bus tours and walking tours. We registered 1,294 people for the conference and sold 721 tour seats, with many people registering for more than one tour (Table 1). These data speak to the popularity of the tours.

Table 1.
Tour Registrations

Conference day	Number registered
Preconference multiday tour	44
Monday (before official start of conference)	213
Tuesday	124
Wednesday	164
Thursday	142
Postconference multiday tour	34
Total	721

What Worked Well?

- The conference tour operator's experience in designing tours was invaluable to the tour committee chair. The tour operator had to be flexible and able to accommodate custom-built tours, including those involving Extension/master gardener–specific projects, private gardens, and horticulture-focused stops, in addition to tours to standard regional tourist stops. The company's strong local connections were important for securing knowledgeable, friendly guides and appropriate equipment.
- Choosing a tour operator whose representative had a style compatible with that of the tour committee chair ensured smooth communication and efficient workflow between the two.
- Securing an engaged, detail-oriented lead for each tour was critical. IMGCC 2017 tours included stops where the people were familiar with hosting tour groups and stops where they were not (e.g., demonstration gardens, experiment stations, private gardens); tour leads were able to provide guidance and conduct investigations regarding motor coach traffic, parking, and mobility issues. We developed the Tour Audit Sheet (see appendix) to assist tour leads in evaluating potential tour stops. Because situations change over the planning cycle, the tour leads also had to monitor and adjust plans as needed.
- Having the tour operator handle tour attendees' registration details, including payments, confirmations, reminders, and changes, relieved the conference staff of much labor.
- We solicited day-of-tour volunteers to help tour attendees check in and board the buses. Though the tour operator is responsible for these tasks, having several additional people helping was useful when various situations arose.

What Would We Do Differently?

- The tour committee chair should avoid taking on too many "tour lead" functions. Working with so many individuals and making so many adjustments over 18 months commands a great deal of the chair's time.

Tours should be run as a stand-alone profit center. In trying to reduce costs so that more attendees could take advantage of the tours, we budgeted to "break even." This left no margin for errors in accounting, changes in costs, cancellations, and unexpected charges.

- The tour operator should handle all financial arrangements associated with tours. We chose to have IMGC 2017 representatives, rather than the tour operator, handle payment details for several stops. This created confusion during the budget reconciliation process.
- If tours are exclusive to the conference, a system should be set up to ensure that conference attendees' guests (e.g., a spouse or a friend) are registered as conference guests before they can register for a tour. We had a modest guest registration fee (\$30) for tour participation. However, a number of attendees did not register their tour companions as guests.
- The conference catering bill should be reduced by subtracting the number of people who are registered to go on a tour from the on-site conference catering order for that day.

Other Recommendations

- Get a clear understanding of all contract terms, be clear on all costs, and build whatever profit you want into the price. Have enough people on the committee to ensure that financial details are followed up on at each stage.
- Cancel a tour if it does not meet the minimum number of registrations needed to operate the tour at a profit.
- Reserve the opening day of the conference for tours, business meetings, and registration packet pickup. Limiting competing activities and events on the first day of the conference allowed a large number of IMGC 2017 attendees to register for a conference tour (see Table 1).
- Do not exclude a potential tour on the basis of price if the tour includes unique sites and experiences for attendees. Our most expensive offering was a \$143 half-day tour. This tour, which included a four-course dinner in a private garden, sold out.
- Ensure that the tour committee has a close relationship with the publicity committee to facilitate promotion of the tours. A marketing person on the tour committee should provide a library of long-form tour descriptions (for websites, newsletters, press releases, etc.), short-form descriptions (for Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, etc.), and images that can be used by the publicity committee in public advertisements and communications.
- Maintain a positive attitude and be prepared to be flexible. Despite careful planning, unexpected issues will arise. Take pride in the fun and enjoyment that you helped build into the conference, and adapt to changing conditions when needed.

Conclusion

Tours are a fun and dynamic way to broaden educational and regional tourist opportunities for attendees of professional conferences. If planned accordingly, they may also generate local revenue.

Acknowledgments

This article was adapted from the postconference assessment of the 2017 IMGC, which was developed by Master Gardener Sherry Sheng.

References

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Appendix

Tour Audit Sheet

Name of auditor: _____

Contact Information: Email: _____ Phone: _____

Proposed Tour Itinerary

Site 1: Name and address: _____

Site 2: Name and address: _____

Site 3: Name and address: _____

Site 4: Name and address: _____

Site 5: Name and address: _____

Please complete the following or answer the following, as it relates to the tour you are previewing.

1. Please submit as an attachment to this document suggested driving directions from the starting point to each tour site and then back to the starting point.

2. Please estimate how long it will take to drive from the starting point to each tour site and then back to the starting point.

_____ hours and _____ minutes

3. Is there anything special or unusual that we should note about the traffic or navigation to and from the sites?

Tour Site: Name and address: _____

This page can be copied as many times as needed.

1. Please write a brief description of this site that we can include in the registration materials and in the program book. If possible, please also take a few photos. These may be used in newsletters, on the website, and in other communications to advertise tours.

2. What are some of the special features of this site that would be nice to point out to attendees?

3. In your opinion, is this site accessible to someone who
____ is in a wheelchair? ____ uses a walker?
____ neither is in a wheelchair nor uses a walker but has limited mobility?
4. Does the site have
____ stairs? ____ steep slopes? ____ uneven terrain?
5. Do you have additional comments about the accessibility of this site?

6. How many people do you think could comfortably enjoy a tour of this site at one time?
____ Up to 10 people ____ Up to 40 people
____ Up to 20 people ____ Up to 50 people
____ Up to 30 people ____ Up to 60 people
7. What about street space? What kinds of vehicles would be able to drive through the streets getting to the site and turn around at the site (if the site is on a cul-de-sac or in a location where a three-point turn might be required)?
____ Sprinter van (i.e., a van that holds 10 people)
____ A small bus (i.e., a half size bus)
____ A large bus (i.e., a full size bus that holds ~50 people)

8. What about parking? Is there nearby parking for a
____ Sprinter van (i.e., a van that holds 10 people)
____ small bus (i.e., a half size bus)
____ large bus (i.e., a full size bus that holds ~50 people)
9. Do you think this site will make a nice stop on a conference tour?
____ yes ____ no (if no, please explain why):
10. Is there anything else you would like to share about this tour site?

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