
UNIT 18 FAMILIARIZATION TOURS

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18.0 OBJECTIVES

After reading this Unit you will be able to:

- understand the importance of familiarization tours in tourism promotion,
- know why and how fam tours are organized,
- appreciate the role of different tourism organizations in fam tours, and
- learn about the markets/countries from where fam tours should be encouraged to India.

18.1 INTRODUCTION

The nature of the tourism product is such that it cannot be physically demonstrated, experienced or felt by the prospective buyers in advance. Hence, it is important that at least the intermediaries used in the distribution of the product must have full product knowledge and if possible, an experience. It is here that the familiarization tours (fam tours) play a major role in providing this experience not only to the intermediaries but to certain other opinion leaders whose words matter in a tourist market.

This Unit discussed the importance of fam tours. After explaining the reasons for organizing these tours the Unit mentions certain other aspects related to them like how to select the invitees, conduct the trip, etc.

18.2 FAM TOURS: THE PURPOSE

Familiarization tours or fam trips are aimed at **acquainting, intimating, informing and providing first hand experience of the tourism products or services to the opinion makers and business providers**. The entire effort is geared to bring them to experience, visualize and feel the product. By doing this they can decide on their own about the merits/strengths and demerits/weaknesses of the product and accordingly inform or influence the prospective buyers. The purpose of a Fam trip may vary according to:

- the **aims of the organization/destination**, say the market segment an organization wants to target, and
- the **stage of the product life cycle** a product/destination is in. For example launch stage or rejuvenated stage, etc.

Let us have a brief look at some of these purposes.

18.2.1 Destination Promotion and Image Building

Today every country/destination is making efforts to have a larger share in the tourist generating markets. This is applicable to both international as well as domestic tourist markets though the later is often ignored because of the lure of foreign exchange earnings. In a highly competitive market destination promotion becomes a difficult task-particularly for long haul destinations. The task of destination promotion and image building is performed in the international markets by the National Tourism Organization (e.g. Department of Tourism Government of India) and in the domestic markets by the state tourism organizations (e.g. Kerala Tourism Development Corporation) and even local bodies. Fam trips are regular methods applied for destination promotion and image building. In fact this is an ongoing process as the image built through the promotional effort is to be maintained, strengthened and enhanced. For this purpose Fam trips are organized at regular intervals.

18.2.2 Introducing New Products

All new tourism products howsoever attractive or strong they might be, need to be introduced/promoted at the right time to the right intermediaries at the right place. Take for example a product like the Palace on the Wheels. Brochures, advertisements and direct sales may not yield desired results unless the royal grandeur that is promised is made to experience by the opinion makers. Try to imagine the publicity the product will get if a reputed travel writer publishes a write up of his/her own experience of the journey. Similarly, a travel agent, after having experienced the journey himself would sell the product with more confidence to tourists. The method for providing this experience to the travel writer or the travel agent is a Fam trip.

Similarly, a tour operator may not use the services of a hotel, a restaurant or a transport operator unless he or she has ensured the quality of service.

18.2.3 Damage Control

Fam trips are extremely useful for a destination/country to deal effectively with a **negative image situation**. In many third world countries tourist arrivals often drop suddenly because of a crisis (health hazard, security, etc.) and in such circumstances the government and the industry join hands to deal with the crisis.

For example, during the 94 plague scare in India, opinion makers from 30 countries were invited by the Department of Tourism to fly down to India. Air India contributed to the fam tour through mandatory passages so that the opinion markers could assess for themselves what the ground level situation in India was like. Apart from Air India foreign carriers like Lufthansa, Malaysian Air and Air France offered free passages to India to select opinion makers. This select group was able to gather first hand information about the plague, they were able to see that it was an over blown affair and after going back to their respective countries they were able to give the correct picture or feed back. Among the opinion makers were specialists in their respective field like 3 doctors from the World Pasteur Institute, in France.

18.2.4 Publicising Events

Most of the countries/destinations are promoting special events to attract tourists. Organising event oriented fam tours is a method to publicise these events. For example, the **Department of Tourism** organised about 20 such fam tours in the year 1994. Prominent events covered in these tours included:

- Suraj Kund Mela (Haryana)
- Elephant March (Kerala)
- Tea Festival, Ooty (Tamil Nadu)
- Puri Beach Festival and Konark Dance Festival (Orissa)
- Desert Festival, Jaisalmer (Rajasthan), etc.

Fam tours can also be organised to cover or promote business events. For example SATTEE 94 being the first Indian travel mart was encouraged by the government by providing free international passage to leading overseas tour operators for participation.

18.3 WHO IS TO BE INVITED?

Organising and conducting a fam tour costs you and you cannot invite just any one for this. Besides, it is organised for a specific purpose and the people invited should be able to serve that purpose. Generally they can be divided into two categories:

- i) Opinion makers
- ii) Business providers

i) **Opinion Makers:**

In this category come the journalists, travel writers, TV and Radio persons, public leaders, etc. They play a role in creating or influencing public opinion. Where fam tours are organised by the Department of Tourism invitations for the tour are sent on the suggestions of the various overseas tourist offices of the Department, Indian embassies and high commissions, Air India and ITDC. Of course, while suggesting the names due weightage is given to their status and capability to influence public opinion.

ii) **Business Providers:**

Tour operators, travel agents and practically all those who form part of the delivery channels and are in a position of influencing tourist flows come under this category.

Today many companies offer incentive travel for leisure to their employees and one can also invite the decision makers in such companies for fam trips.

18.4 PARTNERS, ITINERARIES AND ORGANIZATION

Practically all segments and organisations of the tourism industry contribute towards organising the fam trips. This is because everyone is going to benefit with an increase in tourist arrivals. The proposals for conducting fam trips in the case of international tourism come to the national tourism organisation (Department of Tourism, Government of India) from any of the high commissions, embassies, national air carrier (Air India) or the various overseas tourism offices of the national tourism organisation. The proposal recommends inviting a single or a group of leading travel writers, journalists, T.V. and radio persons, incentive tour operators and other opinion makers from a particular market to visit specific destinations in India.

The proposal is analysed in relation to the potentiality of the market and accordingly planning is done for the conduct of the fam tour. This includes:

- preparing the itinery for the group, i.e. deciding on which destinations in India have to be promoted, how much time is to be spent at each destination and what kind of facilities/services are to be offered,
- taking a decision regarding who all are to be included as partners for the conduct of the fam trip, i.e. which hotel, which tourist transporter, which airlines, etc.

The itenrary should not be too exhausting or too leisurely. It should allow the person or persons on the fam tour to soak in the sights and sounds of the place or places on the itinerary. It should allow enough leeway for relaxation too, so that fam tour does not become a fleeting glimpse of the place to be visited. In fact, various aspects like entertainment in the evenings, cuisine, sight seeing, etc. have to be meticulously planned so that the visitors have a complete experience. The timing of the fam trip can be decided in such a way that it coincides with event oriented tourism like fairs and festivals.

There can be different requirements while catering to specialised fam trips. For example, if the fam tour consists of persons from a T.V. company who would be making films on various

monuments that have to be promoted as attractions and for this this Archaeological Survey is also to be made a partner in the conduct of the trip. Similarly, for wild life promotion one would need the support of the forest department. In fact all these aspects must be considered at the planning stage itself.

Though the national tourist organisation plays a major role in the conduct of the fam tour most of the private organisations use fam tours at a smaller scale to promote their own products or services. For example, a tour operator may invite a leading out bound tour operator of another country to experience the tour package in order to get business from him/her. Generally the itinerary in a fam tour varies between 8 to 10 days.

All the segments of the tourism industry and their associations along with the national tourism organisation keep a close watch on the emerging new markets which call for special promotion through fam tours. For example, recently fam tours were conducted for opinion makers and business providers from South Africa and Israel.

Check Your Progress

1) Why are fam tours conducted?

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2) Who all should be invited for a fam tour?

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3) Which aspects would you emphasise while planning the itenary for a fam tour?

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18.5 LET US SUM UP

Fam tours are important ways of destination promotion in the area of tourism. On the one hand they provide a first hand experience to the distributors of the tourism product and on the other influence the opinion makers to promote the destination to their respective publics while sharing with them the experience they have had.

Besides destination promotion and image building fam tours are also used for introducing new products and services, damage control and publicising of events. Practically all segments of the tourism industry are involved in the planning and organisation of the fam tour because of the benefits which they hope to derive by an increase in the volume of business. The itineraries, timing, services, etc. have to be carefully planned. It should be noted here that one should not organise fam trips for the promotion of a weak product as it would only lead to negative publicity.

18.5 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS EXERCISE

Check Your Progress

- 1) The reasons for conducting a fam tour have been discussed in Sub-secs. 18.2.1 to 18.2.4.
- 2) The persons to be invited should include opinion makers and business providers from a particular market. See Sec. 18.3.
- 3) See Sec. 18.4 for your answers.