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Home > Topics > Tour Operators >

Offering smaller groups, FITs as an escorted alternative

By Michelle Baran

Insight

Tour operators who aren't seeing the same growth they once did in the big-bus escorted touring market are giving agents and clients more small-group and FIT booking options.

The latest such operator is Perillo Tours, which at the end of 2010 launched [ItalyVacations.com](#), a direct response to the growing FIT and small-group markets.

The new website enables users to book hotels, car rentals, rail and customized packages -- everything except the

standard escorted Perillo Tours product.

"It's a much younger demographic finding us online," said Laurie Roveto, executive vice president of ItalyVacations.com. "We're opening to a whole new set of people who would never potentially go with Perillo Tours."

Travel agents can register for ItalyVacations.com at [www.italyvacations.com/travel-agent-registration](#), but full online booking capabilities for agents won't be available until later this year. For now, they can go as far as quote creation and can then call Perillo to finalize the booking.

It's a reality operators across the spectrum face. Whether it's Globus, which in recent years has continued to market and grow its FIT product Monograms as an alternative to its escorted tour brands Globus and Cosmos, or Big Five Tours & Expeditions, which has gone almost entirely FIT, more and more operators are seeing greater interest from the independent and small-group travel markets, and are consequently creating more product to cater to them.

Escorted tour company Collette Vacations, for instance, recently gave more autonomy to its small-group division, Explorations, which caters to groups of no more than 28 passengers. Collette initially launched the division in late 2007 as Explorations by Collette, but in the fall rebranded it Explorations. The new brand came with a new logo, brochure and website, [www.explorationstouring.com](#).

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