

## Getting F.I.T.

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International and domestic group travel is in constant transformation. New markets emerge and require continual evolution to be proactive in reaching these audiences. The last few years have reflected a significant trend in Flexible Independent Travel (FIT), both domestically and internationally.

The Flexible Independent Traveler is an individual or small group of less than 10 traveling and vacationing with a self-booked itinerary. Many tour and receptive operators have expanded their inventory to include FIT products to reach this emerging market.

How does FIT work? Visitors from the US or international destinations rely on tour/receptive operators due to trust, relationships and rate. The guests may not want the traditional group tour, but instead prefer a flexible product geared to individual tastes and interests. However, they want to rely on the experience of a professional to plan their trip. This is where you find FIT! A packaged itinerary is prepared for this small group that is customized to meet their specific needs including hotels, attractions, restaurants and more.

FIT is a growing trend in the Chinese travel market. There has been a strong shift from group to independent travel, as well as from traditional destinations to more authentic experiences. Chinese millennials are bilingual, financially stable and digitally connected. They are looking for cultural, authentic experiences ranging from self-driving tours to backpacking.

Expectations from tour and receptive operators include contracts with low rates and ease in reservation requests including Direct Connect for hotel brands, pre-buy room allotment, free sale or confirmation emails/vouchers and tickets. Guest expectations are comfort, service, independence and a free, flexible schedule.

The benefits for suppliers are increased visitation, extended travel season, and filling gaps in the shoulder season. Most importantly, FIT is an opportunity to strengthen relationships with group and FIT tour operators by providing them with products and services to meet the needs of their guests.

So how do you get on board? Get connected! Attend trade shows such as American Bus Association, National Tour Association, IPW and North American Journeys. Develop partnerships with Brand USA and your state tourism office. Connect with your CVB's and other local suppliers. Build products together to enhance the guest experience and create ease for the operator. There has never been a better time to "Get FIT."