Free tours alert! please disseminate the information

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Free tours alert!

Our observer member the Federations and Associations of Qualified Tourist Guides across Europe (FEG) is seriously concerned since 2009 with the services offered by the so-called *"Free Tours"*. In most of Europe's major cities, unqualified, untrained, uninsured and untaxed "guides" conduct tours for unsuspecting visitors, without any control whatsoever on the quality, veracity and accuracy of information.

We would like to kindly ask you to diffuse the following amongst your own members to raise awareness of the issue.

***"Free Tours" are* companies or private persons under different names found in various European destinations, mostly active in the capital cities of several countries.** These tours are advertised by their organisers on the web, social media, etc. as being completely free of charge for the consumer/visitor. They are guided walking tours not organised by a travel agency or a tour operator and conducted by unqualified and unauthorised persons, who – at the end of the tour – ask the visitors for tips. These "Free tours" are usually scheduled to start at a certain meeting point at a specific time, so anybody can join them without prior booking or notification to the organiser. This worrying phenomenon is fast spreading across Europe, whether the **tourist guide profession** and the tour operator/travel agency activities are regulated in a country or not. As a result, we see guided groups "for free" with 50-60 people in the streets, while at the same time many qualified professionals are unemployed and many travel agencies close down.

FEG has organised a Round Table meeting on this issue, as early as 2010 in Brussels after receiving complaints of their member-associations, which still keep seeing these unauthorised persons acting in their own countries, ignoring any existing E.U. or national laws.

POINTS OF IMMEDIATE CONCERN

1. There is no guarantee that the person organising or leading the tour has any professional authorisation, adheres to standards or has any relevant qualification. They are not qualified tourist guides, nor do they – in countries where this is required – have any permission to operate as tourist guides or tour organisers. **There is therefore no guarantee of the quality of the services proposed.**

2. There is an issue with regards to trading standards and transparency. The tours are advertised as "free", but in practice a tip is demanded from the tour participants. Regardless of the tip received, the usual practice is that then a commission per participant is demanded by the company from the person conducting the tour. **The consumer and tour participant is therefore misslead in two ways; the tours are not without cost and a commission is demanded by the operator.**

3. The tours raise several legal issues with regards to the income earned by the persons organising and conducting the tours. Is the income earned declared? Do they pay tax on it? Do they have work permits? Has the employer a legal right to demand commission from the tips earned? If the tour leaders are not employed by the organiser, is their self-employed status declared? Do they pay national insurance? Do they pay any taxes? Do they have a legal permit to trade on the streets? Do they have professional liability insurance?

4. There are **issues with regards to health and safety**. Do the persons leading the tours have any training in health and safety? Do they have first aid training?

POINTS OF WIDER CONCERN

1**. The image of the qualified tourist guide risks being negatively influenced by the conduct of unqualified persons** operating with no regard for quality or ethical standards while just claiming to be "tourguides".

2. Group tourism as a whole risks being tarnished and viewed negatively by residents and local stakeholders for who these tours may appear to be "an environmental nuisance" and not differentiated from those tour operators who do respect quality, standards and the law.

3. Where these "free tours" operate at - or within close proximity of - historical sites and monuments, overcrowding - they frequently have very large groups and often several tours are conducted at the same time - and a complete lack of group management and control are already having a negative and detrimental effect on the presentation and preservation of the relevant sites. For other visitors – and individuals and groups led by qualified tourist guides - the experience of the site / monument may as a result be severely impaired.

4. These tours are the very opposite of the broadly agreed goal of striving towards increased quality, standards and sustainability within the tourism industry, and the wish to create sustainable employment for young people. The persons conducting the tours are paid in tips only, which means low payment with no guaranteed income or employment. No professional qualification for conducting the tours is required. These are only ever short term engagements and could be seen as a way of exploiting young people outside the professional labour market. Meanwhile, the operation of such "free tours" make it even more difficult for those young people who are – through educational qualifications and professional training – seeking sustainable employment as qualified tourist guides. Their efforts are severely undermined by the phenomenon of "free tours".

Do you wish to be guided by someone with proven, guaranteed knowledge of the area, its customs and heritage, who contributes fiscally, lives permanently in the area, speaks the local language and is trained in dealing with groups, including with any emergencies which may arise?

Or do you want to be guided by someone who is only one page in front of you in the guidebook? Who

makes up what they do not know, because they have only lived there a week? And who probably is working “black”.

We think we know the answer.

For further information about the “Free Tours”, please feel free to contact our Secretariat.

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Membership list

Inter-professional

- Union Nationale des Professions Libérales (France)
- Unión Profesional (Spain)
- Irish Inter-professional Association (Ireland)
- Confprofessioni (Italy)
- Malta Federation of Professional Associations (Malta)
- Uniunea Profesiilor Liberale din România (Romania)
- Union Nationale des Professions Libérales et Intellectuelles de Belgique (Belgium)
- Union Nationale des Professionnels de Santé (France)
- Die Freien Berufe Österreichs (Austria)
- Fédération luxembourgeoises des travailleurs intellectuels indépendants (Luxembourg)

Mono-professional

- Association Européenne des Médecins Experts
- Confederation of the European Biopathologists
- Council of European Geodetic Surveyors
- European Council of Podiatrist
- European Council of Nursing Regulators
- European Federation of Clinical Chemistry and Laboratory Medicine
- European Confederation of Conservators-Restorers’ Organisations
- European Council of Engineer Chambers
- European Federation of Psychologists’ Associations
- European Society of Aesthetic Surgery
- European Federation of Osteopaths
- International Association of Automobile Experts

Observer members

- Chambre Nationale des Professions Libérales (France)
- Federation of European Notaries Associations
- European Federation of National Engineering Associations
- European Federation of Tourist Guide Associations