



'Tourists want a good time'

How did you become an official tour guide?

I studied journalism and history and then went to work in an advertising agency. But I got fed up with going to an office, having a boss, having no control over my time, so I decided on a change. So I left my job and tried to find work as a journalist. However, I realised that journalism is not going through its best moments and someone suggested I get a licence to become a guide. So I did the exam, passed it, and here I am. I started working for agencies and then I created the group, Enjoy Barcelona and Catalonia, on the US website Meetup. I started to organise tours with locals, expats and tourists, and now I combine my own tours with agency work.

How long have you been doing this?

I got the licence to be a tour guide three years ago and created the group straight away. It's a big group with around 7,000 people in it.

What makes Catalonia an attractive destination?

The best thing about Catalonia is its diversity. It is a small country but in only a few kilometres you can find many different things. You have amazing coasts, you have the capital, Barcelona, which is a nice city with lots of history and in my opinion an easy city to get around. And it's a cliché but it's true about skiing in the morning and going to the beach in the afternoon.

What are visitors looking for in Catalonia?

It depends but I get two types: those who want information, to know about the history or the structure of something, but I also get groups spending a few days who just want to have a good



Every Monday at 7.10 pm, El Punt Avui TV airs the interview series Going Native. This week, Neil talks to Toni Bellido, official local guide accredited by the Catalan government. He provides a variety of guided tours in Barcelona and around Catalonia.



Toni Bellido talking to Neil Stokes on El Punt Avui TV. /ARCHIVE

time. People do want information but what is more important is how you explain it, while they are also there to make friends and have a good time.

What is the typical size of one of your groups?

It depends but when I work for agencies it can be groups of 40 or 50 people, and when I organise my own groups it can go from 10 to 50 people. Big groups can be difficult to manage but at the same time they are fun because there are many different types of people in them. If you want to learn a lot about a place, it is better to be in a smaller group.

What's the typical profile of your clients?

With my own groups, the average is 30 to 40 years old, when I work for agencies the average is 55 to 60 years old. Of course, because of my age, I have more affinity with the younger

people, but I like working with older people because they explain so many things. If you just stand there and explain lots of things to them they get bored. But if you interact and ask them questions and make jokes, it helps and people like that.

Do you have to do a lot of preparation?

At the beginning I would have to do a lot of preparation, but after doing it for a while I now have contacts and a network, which makes it easier. But one thing I like most about my job is that it is a learning experience. When I started this I had two ideas: to work alone, without a boss and to be the master of my own time, and also to enjoy the experience and to learn.

Do you think people actually know less about their country than they think?

It is true. You could spend a

lifetime studying just Sagrada Família, so imagine that multiplied by everything in Catalonia. You'll find a lot of people from Barcelona who have never been to Tarragona, and people from Tarragona who have never visited Girona. It's my case, too. Before becoming a guide I had never visited Sagrada Família, and now I must spend about a month a year there.

Do you use guides when you're on holiday?

Not really. I might get a guide if I'm particularly interested in a certain cathedral or something, but usually I buy a book and I prefer to discover the culture or the city on my own.

Do you find that in the end everywhere is just the same?

Every place is different. Of course all humans are basically similar but Catalonia is not the same as England. All places have churches, for example, so what happens a lot is that visitors will think to themselves, "not another church" so, as I was saying before, the most important thing is that they feel comfortable and that they have a great time. That is much more important than whether the church is from the 6th or the 7th century, and in fact most people don't care much about that.

What about the touristification of Barcelona?

I'm the first to complain and yet part of my income comes from tourism. It's contradictory but sometimes when I'm not working I just wish all the tourists would go home. Nowadays, Barcelona has the same problem as Venice or Prague, in which it is becoming a bit of a theme park. It's difficult to manage and I don't know if there is a magic formula that would balance out the situation.