



Digital
that
Delivers.

Your Guide to 'Connected' Online Booking Systems

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1. Introduction

The past two years have seen unprecedented change in global travel markets and in the Irish travel and tourism industry. For those who provide visitor experiences (including day tours, activities, and attractions) it has brought significant financial, operational, and personal challenges.

But visitors are returning, and they are bringing with them opportunities for visitor experience providers — but especially for those who have adapted to changing customer needs and behaviours.



Trends and opportunities

Technology is changing travel. It is changing the way people find places to go or things to do, and the way they plan and book their trips. It is even changing how people behave when they're on holiday and how they share their travel experiences.

Technology is also changing the travel industry. It has enabled the creation of online travel agencies (or OTAs, e.g. Booking.com, Expedia) and online marketplaces for visitor experiences (e.g. Viator, GetYourGuide) that promise travellers increased choice and convenience — and promise tour, activity, and attraction providers increased visibility and sales.

At the same time, technology has made it easier for visitor experience providers — from major attractions to micro-businesses — to bypass third party distributors and sell directly to the consumer. It is easier and less expensive than ever for you to create a website and attract traffic to your website from email, social networks, search engines, and other sources.

It's up to you to decide what experiences you offer and where you sell them. However, many consumers now prefer to book online — and expect the same availability whether they're booking through your website, over the phone, in person, or through distributors. Today's online booking systems are capable of providing this real-time view of your availability and pricing and of driving sales through multiple channels at the same time.

But the right system can deliver benefits that go beyond online bookings. It can also make your business more cheaper and easier to run, and generate insights to help you improve your products, marketing, and distribution. In order to enjoy these benefits, you need to select the right system — and use it to its full potential.



Whether you're in the market for your first online booking system, looking to replace or extract more value from your existing system, or simply wondering whether you need such a system, then this guide is for you.

About this guide

We created this guide for tour, activity, and attraction providers — to help you understand the features and benefits that online booking systems offer, to select a system that meets your needs, and to create a plan for activating and operating your chosen system.

Section 2 explains how online booking systems for tours, activities, and attractions differ from the sorts of systems you might use to sell physical merchandise. It describes how online booking systems can be used to power real-time distribution of experiences across multiple channels. It goes on to distinguish between systems that are designed primarily for tours and activities and those designed with venues and attractions in mind.

Section 3 identifies some of the key features and benefits that online booking systems offer, including those that are likely to be essential for any experience provider and those that could help you work more efficiently or intelligently.

Section 4 explains the different pricing models that booking system vendors use and identifies the different costs you're likely to encounter, including setup, subscription, booking, and payment fees.

Sections 5 to 7 outline processes that you can follow to select and activate an online booking system — and to integrate your chosen system with your website and other distribution channels, as well as with other software (e.g. an existing CRM system) or hardware (e.g. access control barriers).

Section 8 notes some key points that you should take into account when developing your plan for operating the system — for instance, in relation to training staff, updating processes and policies, or working with tour operators, affiliates, and other third parties.

2. Online booking systems

Online booking systems aren't just about taking bookings through your website. They're also capable of processing back office or walk-up bookings — as well as bookings through OTAs, tour operators, and other distributors.

And they're not just about bookings, either. Systems that are purpose-built for tours, activities, and attractions can transform the way you run your operations, manage staff and equipment, handle payments, communicate with customers, and monitor performance.



Booking vs. e-commerce systems

When people book a tour, activity, attraction, or event, they do two things:

1. They **reserve** a slot. For instance, they might book one of 10 slots on a walking tour that meets on a particular date and time, at a specified location. Reservations allow people to add items to their itineraries — and allow you to plan ahead and manage capacity. If you don't expect to face constraints on capacity, then you might choose to allow visitors (in effect) to reserve all slots within your opening hours, without choosing a specific time.
2. They **pay** for the specific combination of product and slot that they selected at the reservation step.

Some museums, galleries, and other experiences are free to the visitor — and some now allow reservations. But in the sense we use the term, only products that are both paid for and reservable are 'bookable'.

An **online booking system** allows people to reserve and pay for accommodation, experiences or other travel products through the internet — or through point-of-sale devices or contact centres that are connected to the internet.

Online booking systems are a type of e-commerce system. But they differ from general purpose e-commerce systems such as WooCommerce or Shopify in that online booking systems are designed to sell travel products — rather than products like physical merchandise that don't require reservations.

When it comes to selling tours, activities, and attractions, general purpose systems like WooCommerce or Shopify might not be the best choice. These systems can handle online sales, of course, but they lack the specialised functionality that experience providers need — for instance, to create and manage complex schedules, to manage staff and equipment, or to facilitate distribution through tour operators.



What type of system should you choose?

Tour, activity, and attraction providers are not, as a rule, experts in developing software or managing tech projects. So they tend to struggle when it comes to building booking systems or re-engineering general purpose e-commerce systems to meet their needs.

In most cases, visitor experience providers find that an off-the-shelf system — one purpose-built for tours, activities, attractions, or events — is better and more sustainable than a bespoke solution. Not only are such systems often cheaper to implement and run than bespoke systems, but they may also offer more functionality, since they have been developed over many years to address the needs of hundreds or even thousands of experience providers.

You may also find it beneficial to use a system that is separate from but 'plugged in' to your website. This provides flexibility — since it allows you to change your system without redeveloping your website, or to switch web developers without losing your booking system.

Of course, systems may be 'purpose-built' to suit different purposes — so it's vital to choose the right one based on the types of products you sell, on how you distribute those products, and on how you run your operations or reports. In this guide, we have divided online booking systems into two broad categories:

- 1. Tour and activity booking systems** allow you to create and manage schedules, particularly where you want to offer a range of experiences but have limited slots, staff, or equipment. These systems are often built with the needs of small businesses in mind — including small to medium-sized attractions — and tend to be priced accordingly.
- 2. Venue and attraction booking systems** (sometimes called 'box office systems') are designed to sell tickets for admission to larger attractions or for events. They may emphasise features such as point-of-sale integration, allocated seating, user account sign-in (e.g. for members), or donations.

It is worth noting that some tour and activity systems can also be used to sell admission or event tickets — and some systems designed for larger venues and attractions may also be capable of selling tours and activities. Again, you'll need to identify the particular features that you need or want and conduct your own research to determine which systems might be the best fit for you.



Channels vs systems

It can sometimes be difficult to distinguish between an online booking 'system' and an online distribution 'channel'. The confusion arises, in part, because some online distribution channels have supplier portals that allow you to upload information about tours, activities, admission or events and to create and manage schedules. Distributors may even encourage you to think of these lightweight systems as a substitute for your own independent booking system.

For instance, Viator, GetYourGuide, and Tiqets are online distribution channels that specialise in tours, activities, and attractions. They have their own online booking systems that allow you to manage schedules, slots, and pricing. But the products you upload to their systems can generally only be sold through these channels or their networks of distributors. If you used these as your primary booking system, then you might end up paying substantial commissions on every booking — while missing out on the features and flexibility offered by standalone booking system.

Similarly, eticketing companies such as ClearBookings, Ticketweb, and MyTopTickets look like booking system vendors, but are actually distributors. They don't sell booking systems, but sell tickets on your behalf. While they might seem an easy solution to the problem of selling tickets online, they generally won't provide you with the capability to power bookings through your website, in-person, and back-office channels. In most cases, they won't give you the flexibility to use the third party distributors of your choice, or offer the full range of features that we've identified in section 3.



This is not to say that you shouldn't use these channels — they can make useful additions to your distribution mix. But we recommend using them as distribution channels in addition to your own online booking system, not as a replacement for it. When using systems like Viator, GetYourGuide, or Tiqets, you may even have the option of creating direct connections with your booking system.

Distribution and connectivity

When choosing a booking system, it's important to think not only about the needs of users on your website, but also about the other channels through which people may want to book your experiences. For instance, if you take bookings from consumers or trade customers over the phone, then you will need a system that supports back-office bookings — or you might start directing those bookings online. If you sell over-the-counter or in-the-field, then you might want a system that can integrate with electronic or mobile point-of-sale devices. Integrating all of your direct distribution channels with a central booking system makes it easier to manage scheduling, pricing, and capacity, and to create comprehensive sales reports.



But the same logic also extends to your third party distribution channels. If you're selling through tour or coach operators, then you might choose a system that lets you set them up with accounts — so they can see live availability for exclusive products and book online. But the future of distribution for visitor experiences is in automation — and many booking systems now allow you to connect directly to resellers and distributors online through an API or channel manager (see section 3.2).

Connectivity is the 'killer app' of modern booking systems.

By integrating all of your distribution channels with a central 'connected' booking system, you can provide your customers with a real-time view of availability and pricing, regardless of whether they're booking online or offline, directly from you or through your distributors or resellers.

But integrating your distribution channels also benefits you: by reducing the need for you to process bookings manually on behalf of customers; by streamlining your management of products, schedules and capacity; and by at once enhancing and simplifying your sales reporting.

Direct: Online via your website

Your website is probably the first channel you have in mind when implementing an online booking system. Some booking system vendors allow you to publish booking mini-sites on their web domain. Some allow you to embed booking buttons or forms easily on your existing website. Others involve more complex or technical integrations, and will require a web developer. Compared to phone or email bookings, bookings through your website are less resource-intensive and can provide you with more data about your customers and about your marketing performance.



Indirect: Online via trade portal or channel manager

Many systems allow you to create special trade accounts for your distributors, allowing them to check your availability and book online at special rates through a 'trade portal'. This can speed things up for them and reduce overheads for you. But the best systems also include a 'channel manager' module that allows you to connect to your distributors' systems — automating the flow of information and bookings. Channel managers have already transformed how accommodation is distributed and are now doing the same for tours, activities, and attractions.



Direct: Offline via phone & email or POS

Some people prefer to speak to a real person when booking — perhaps because they have special requirements or want to discuss their options. Others prefer simply to walk up and pay on the day. By processing back-office and in-person bookings through your 'online' booking system, you can reduce the need for separate systems, simplify your product management, and improve your reporting — though, of course, you still need the people and hardware (e.g. ePOS / mPOS systems) to facilitate those bookings.



Indirect: Offline via phone or email

Just as you can use your system to book on behalf of consumers, you can also make back-office bookings for tour operators, hotel concierges, and the like. You might also reserve allocations of product for specific distributors, or even allow distributors to sell your products without restriction. But these methods come with costs: time spent liaising with distributors is time you could have spent on other things; allocations risk tying up products; and free sale can result in over-booking (especially where your capacity is limited).



3. Features

Booking systems for tours, activities, and attractions first and foremost enable you to process bookings through your own website, contact centre, or point-of-sale.

However, many of these systems can do far more than schedule tours and activities or sell tickets. They include a variety of other features that can enhance and streamline your distribution and your management of staff, equipment, marketing, communications, finances, reporting, and other business processes.



What can these systems do for you?

With so many online booking systems out there, choosing the right one can seem daunting. But the right system — when used to its full potential — can transform your business. So it's worth taking some time to look at your needs and the options available and to make an informed and well-considered choice.

In section 5, we have outlined a process that you can follow to select a system. First, however, it's important to understand some of the different features these systems offer — so that you can match those features to your needs.

Each system has its particular strengths and weaknesses. In this section, we have identified some of the more common features and their benefits and described what you need to activate and use those features.

We've classified these features as follows:

- 1. Essential features** are those that nearly all tour, activity, or attraction providers are likely to need. These include support for real-time scheduling, online bookings, international payments, vouchers, and Google Analytics e-commerce tracking.
- 2. Situational features** may or may not be essential, depending on your particular requirements — and these are normally the features that will lead you to choose one system over another. For instance, if you have limited capacity on tours and want to sell through OTAs, then you will almost certainly want to choose a system that includes a channel manager.

Ultimately, you will need to decide which features you can't live without and which might help your operations run just a bit more smoothly. But make sure you understand what each feature is and what it could do for you before flagging it as simply 'nice to have'.

3.1 Essential features

Direct online bookings

Allows visitors to your website to book your tours, activities, admission, or events through a web browser.

Benefits for you: Convert more website users into paying customers; Capture customer data and drive opt in to communications; Understand online customer behaviour and calculate digital return-on-investment; reduce the amount of time you need to spend processing bookings by phone or email.

Benefits for your customers: Choice and convenience, especially if they are unable to book by phone, email, or in person — or if they prefer not to do so.

Integration requirements: Some vendors allow you to publish branded booking pages — or even entire websites — on their web domains. Others provide booking buttons or 'widgets' that you can embed on your existing website (often the best solution for smaller providers). Still others support integration via iFrames or APIs — which can give you more control over the user experience, but are more complex and costly.

Operational requirements: Select, activate, integrate, and manage your online booking system (see sections 5–8).

PIM & scheduling

'Product Information Management' (PIM) modules enable you to upload information about your experiences — including names, descriptions, and pricing. When uploading this information, you will also need to set schedules and rules that determine which slots customers can reserve. These rules may be based on date, time, number of participants, or other variables, and may be set to 'close out' other slots automatically where your resources or capacity are limited. Some systems include more advanced features that allow you to set availability based on equipment, staff, seating, or other factors.

Benefits for you: Manage all your product information, schedules, pricing, and availability in one place; monitor bookings and plan capacity; prevent over-/under-booking; obtain reports for sales across your whole product portfolio.

Benefits for your customers: See and book experiences based on up-to-date information with live availability and pricing.

Operational requirements: Depending on your requirements, scheduling may be straightforward or very complex. Consult your booking system vendor to find the right balance between what works for you, your customers or distributors, and your system.

Payment gateway (online payments)

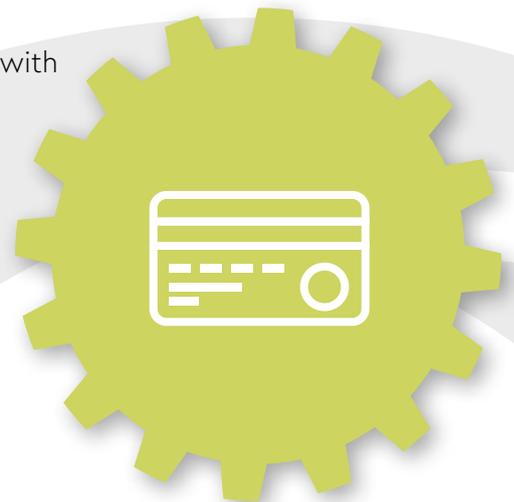
A payment gateway authorises transactions between you (as the 'merchant') and your customers. It captures, encrypts, and manages customer payment details — such as credit card numbers — and processes payments or refunds.

Benefits for you: Reduce the need for manual invoicing and simplify your payments process; allow payments by card (and digital wallets such as Google or Apple Pay) in multiple currencies; increase security and prevents fraud or data breaches at your end — helping to ensure GDPR compliance; increases customer trust and sales.

Benefits for your customers: Increase simplicity and security — with less risk of data falling into the wrong hands.

Integration requirements: Some online booking systems lock you in to a single payment gateway — and this can simplify activation and billing. Most, however, give you the option to integrate with a range of third-party payment gateways.

Operational requirements: You may require additional training to use your payment gateway effectively, especially where processing refunds. And take note of any additional fees!



Customer relationship management

A CRM system stores information about your customers — such as names, addresses, email addresses, bookings, or special requirements (e.g. allergies). Your CRM should allow you to allocate users to different segments (e.g. 'members') and to send emails and run reports based on customer data.

Benefits for you: Capture and organise customer data in one place; allow you to view information about consumers or trade customers to help manage bookings or provide support; understand, communicate with, and retain your customers.

Benefits for your customers: Allow better and more personalised service; improve security of personal data.

Integration requirements: Some systems include a built-in CRM, while others allow you to integrate with a third party solution (e.g. Salesforce). Some CRM systems may require further integration with separate e-marketing platforms in order to send e-newsletters or campaign emails.

Operational requirements: You may need additional training to use your CRM — e.g. to capture and manage customer data, configure segments, send communications, or run reports.

E-communications

Send automated emails or texts based on booking behaviour (e.g. confirmations, reminders), or send email campaigns that promote new products, vouchers, or other offers on your website. More capable systems allow you to target campaigns to user segments (e.g. based on last booking date or location).

Benefits for you: Reduce support enquiries or 'no-shows'; generate online sales by re-engaging past customers (who have 'opted in'); promote new products or upcoming events.

Benefits for your customers: Receive essential information about bookings; discover new things to do; receive relevant news; and access exclusive offers.

Integration requirements: Some CRM systems include integrated e-marketing modules, while others require integration with a third party platform such as MailChimp or DotMailer. In order to send marketing communications, you will need to get customers to 'opt in' via your website and/or booking system.

Operational requirements: You will need training to create and send campaigns, and to measure performance. Look at processes to capture emails and opt in at point-of-sale.

Gift Vouchers

Allow customers to purchase gift vouchers through your booking system and to redeem those vouchers when booking your experiences.

Benefits for you: Drive more sales by offering your customers the option of buying a voucher or gift card for family, friends, or employees; generate additional revenue during your off-season or holidays (e.g. Christmas); provide option of converting cancellations (e.g. due to covid-19) into vouchers.

Benefits for your customers: Purchase experiences as a flexible gift for and friends, or as an incentive for employees; Redeem vouchers for experiences at a time that suits them.

Integration requirements: Most systems include an integrated module for selling and redeeming gift vouchers — others offer this as an add-on.

Operational requirements: Most systems will generate gift vouchers automatically when users purchase these through your website. However, your staff may need additional training to support customers who want to purchase or redeem vouchers in person.

Accessibility

Ensures that your online booking facility is accessible to users on mobiles, tablets, or other devices, or who are experiencing vision, cognitive, or other impairments — while providing and capturing information to make your experiences more accessible.

Benefits for you: Increase sales by making your experiences accessible to and bookable by more people; Plan and provide support for visitors with disabilities; Ensure compliance (e.g. with EU Directive 2019/882 on access to products and services).

Benefits for your customers: Discover and book experiences on mobiles or tablets, or when experiencing a disability; Identify potential access issues in advance of visit and request support.

Integration requirements: Identify and address accessibility and (mobile) responsiveness concerns when integrating bookings with website. Configure product listings and booking system to flag access issues and capture accessibility information. Consider using assistive technologies or mobile payments.

Operational requirements: Provide training for staff to ensure website, booking system, booking processes, and experience delivery are managed to enhance accessibility.

Sales reports

Booking systems vary greatly when it comes to measuring sales performance and generating reports. You will need a system that not only reports total transactions or revenue, but that also allows you to break down sales by date and time, by product and category, by distribution channel (e.g. direct online vs. walk-up) and by customer segment (e.g. nationality, purpose of travel).

Benefits for you: Monitor the performance of your direct and indirect, online and offline distribution channels (when run through a central system); Identify trends in booking behaviour; Learn about your customers and improve your product mix.

Benefits for your customers: Enjoy improved satisfaction due to ongoing, insight-driven optimisation or marketing & products.

Integration requirements: In order to report by distribution channel, you will need to integrate all of your channels with your booking system; In order to report by customer segment, you will need to integrate your booking system with your CRM — and capture relevant data to your CRM.

Operational requirements: Provide training for staff in capturing data, running reports, and interpreting reports.

Google Analytics integration

Allows anonymised data about online bookings (or other online transactions) to be shared with Google Analytics.

Benefits for you: View e-commerce reports for users from segments based on age, location, or marketing campaign; See impact of marketing spend on sales; Make informed decisions about investing in marketing, websites, and content; see where users are dropping out during checkout.

Benefits for your customers: Discover relevant experiences through search engines, social networks, or other channels; enjoy an easier-to-use or 'frictionless' online booking journey.

Integration requirements: Some online booking systems include modules that simply require you to 'paste in' your Google Analytics tracking ID. Others may require the assistance of a website developer — ensuring unbroken, end-to-end tracking from your campaigns through to completed bookings.

Operational requirements: Train marketing staff in tracking campaigns and in running Google Analytics reports against key performance indicators (KPIs) — such as e-commerce conversion rates or average order values.

Help desk support

Support is one of the most important (if not the most important) factor that will determine how satisfied you are with your booking system — especially if you're new to online bookings or have complex requirements. But this is also one of the biggest costs for booking system vendors. Some may direct you to online resources, offer limited support during Irish business hours, or charge extra for one-on-one sessions. You may want to look for a system with a support team in your time zone.

Benefits for you: Get the help you need, when you need it, and without long delays; use more of the functionality in your system; reduce downtime due to technical issues.

Benefits for your customers: Improve satisfaction by enhancing booking functionality and reducing errors.

Operational requirements: Keep a record of issues and try to address them as they arise — rather than waiting until they become 'critical'. Online booking systems are built to address the most common needs of experience providers, so won't always map perfectly to your operations. Bear in mind that it might take a few hours or days for someone to get back to you, listen to the advice of your support team, and be prepared to compromise.

3.2 Situational features

Back office bookings

Process phone or email bookings (as well as changes or cancellations) on behalf of customers through the back-end of your booking system.

Benefits for you: Streamline your operations by centralising products on a single system; Manage your capacity and prevent over-booking by 'closing out' availability on your website or other channels; Use a single system to report sales through all of your distribution channels (e.g. direct online and direct offline).

Benefits for your customers: Continue booking over the phone or by email when online bookings are not desirable, available, or adequate (e.g. because of special requirements).

Integration requirements: Most tour and activity systems offer a built-in facility that allows you to create and manage bookings on behalf of customers — with no integration required.

Operational requirements: Define and document a process for processing bookings, changes, and cancellations over the phone or by email. This should not only include the booking itself, but also any CRM data capture or opt in. Of course, the first step in your process may be to encourage people to book online!

ePOS / mPOS

Electronic point-of-sale (ePOS) systems allow you to sell products over the counter. They differ from a standalone 'till' in that they are connected to online systems for product information and payments. Mobile POS (mPOS) systems simplify this by pairing a mobile device such as a tablet with an app and a card reader (plus a scanner, printer, cash drawer, etc.)

Benefits for you: Streamline operations by centralising scheduling on a single system (e.g. to prevent over-booking); Take bookings and payment from customers in person; Report in-person sales alongside sales through your other channels.

Benefits for your customers: Book in person, where capacity permits; Enjoy improved security of booking and payment.

Integration requirements: If you are already locked in to an ePOS system, then you will need to choose a booking system that can integrate with it — such integration can be complex and expensive. mPOS may offer a simpler solution with significantly lower setup costs (but may not address complex requirements).

Operational requirements: Train staff to use e/mPOS system for in-person bookings, including a CRM data capture step.

Trade booking portal

Create accounts for coach operators, tour operators, or other distributors who frequently book your experiences — allowing you to offer them exclusive products or pricing, and to provide them with a secure online facility to view live availability and book.

Benefits for you: Streamline your operations by reducing the need for day-to-day email or phone communications with distributors; Increase your attractiveness to distributors (many of whom were forced to reduce the size of their operations teams as a result of Covid-19); Consolidate all your distributor sales reports on one system.

Benefits for your customers: Allow consumers to book your experiences through a coach or tour operator; Allow trade to see live availability for their exclusive products — reducing delays and improving their efficiency.

Integration requirements: Booking systems that support trade portal functionality normally do so 'out of the box', without any additional integration requirements.

Operational requirements: Time required for setting up, briefing, and training distributors to use the booking system.

Resource management

Enables you to upload details of the staff (e.g. tour guides), equipment (e.g. bicycles or audio headsets), spaces (e.g. classrooms), or other resources that you need to deliver your experiences. Depending on their specific capabilities, systems may allow you to manage the resources themselves (e.g. to track equipment repairs or staff time), to hire out those resources, or to limit capacity on tours or activities based on what resources are available (e.g. to close out a kayak activity if there are no kayaks, paddles, and/or life-jackets available).

Benefits for you: Streamline management of essential resources; Control availability of tours and activities based on resources, as well as time-based schedules.

Benefits for your customers: Improve satisfaction by ensuring all necessary resources are available and in good condition.

Integration requirements: Booking systems that support resource management normally do so 'out of the box'.

Operational requirements: Define and document processes for managing resources and linking to schedules — and train staff to ensure that these processes are followed consistently.

Channel management

Most tour and activity booking systems (though few venue and attraction systems) now include a 'channel manager' with built-in connections to major OTAs and other online distributors. This allows you to synchronise your availability and pricing with online distribution channels and to reconcile bookings and payments with your system. If you have limited availability and want to sell through online channels, then this is an **essential feature**.

Benefits for you: Streamlines distribution by giving your distributors access to live availability and pricing on your system; Makes it easier for you to switch channels on or off, as needed.

Benefits for your customers: Consumers can see live availability and pricing information; Distributors can sell more of your product, with lower operational overheads.

Integration requirements: You will need to create separate accounts with each distributor, negotiate commissions, and upload products before connecting through a channel manager. Note that different systems may connect to different channels.

Operational requirements: Train staff in the requirements of each channel and in managing channels through your system.

Reseller marketplace

Connect with other providers using the same online booking system as you and grant them permission to resell your products, ask permission to resell theirs, or create new, combination products — e.g. a combined walking tour (yours) and afternoon tea (theirs) experience. These platforms should automatically reconcile availability and payments, and allow you to negotiate commissions or other terms.

Benefits for you: Switch on new distribution channels for your existing experiences; Switch on new revenue streams by reselling products from other providers.

Benefits for your customers: Discover new experiences from local providers; Book complementary products in a single basket.

Integration requirements: Systems that support reseller marketplaces normally do so out of the box. However, similar functionality may also be available through connected third party online marketplaces (see 'channel management').

Operational requirements: Develop and manage relationships, contracts, and combination products with your suppliers and/or resellers nationally and internationally.

Verified visitor reviews

Send past visitors/bookers automated invitations to rate their experience and leave a review. Verified reviews can be displayed on product listings pages.

Benefits for you: Prevent people who have not booked an experience with you from posting a review; Improve your visibility in search engines by adding structured content to your website; Increase confidence in the quality of your experiences.

Benefits for your customers: View reliable opinions from real visitors before making a booking decision; Share views with other visitors and provide feedback to the provider.

Integration requirements: Some systems have fully integrated, verified guest review features that come as standard with the booking system integration. Others work with third party review services, e.g. TripAdvisor. Remember it's better to have multiple options rather than being on only one platform.

Operational requirements: Provide training for staff to ensure they are able to respond to reviews (whether negative or positive) in an appropriate manner. Prompt customers to submit reviews, e.g. by configuring automated post-visit emails.

eTickets & scanning

Issue eTickets with unique bar codes or QR codes. Visitors may save these on their mobile phone, print them at home, or obtain pre-printed eTickets from you or their tour operator. You then validate eTickets using a mobile phone with a scanning app, a separate scanning device, or a scanner-equipped barrier.

Benefits for you: Ensure that only customers who have satisfied all requirements (including payment) are able to take part in your experiences; Allows you to track and report actual visits, as opposed to just bookings; Used in conjunction with your CRM, can streamline data capture for contact tracing.

Benefits for your customers: Increase confidence of expected arrival time, seat, etc.; Avoid queuing for manual ticket check on arrival; Avoid having to bring a printed ticket, ID, etc.

Integration requirements: Depending on your setup, may require integration with eTicket printers and scanning devices or barriers. Systems that include a mobile scanning app can offer a simple alternative to more infrastructure-heavy solutions.

Operational requirements: Train staff in creating, scanning / validating, and trouble-shooting eTickets.

Extras: merchandise and meals

Sell merchandise, food, beverages, or other products via your online booking system. If you generate a significant share of your income from retail or catering, then this should be a key consideration in your choice of booking system, given the benefits of using one system for all your product types across online and in-person channels. However, if you only want to cross-sell a few extras (e.g. a Prosecco upgrade for a river cruise), then most tour and activity systems can handle this.

Benefits for you: Generate additional revenue by cross-selling your offers; Simplify your infrastructure by using a single system to manage different product categories and channels.

Benefits for your customers: Discover other products or options when booking experiences; Purchase products from different categories within a single transaction.

Integration requirements: If you want to use your booking system for over-the-counter purchases of merchandise, food, or drinks, then you will require additional ePOS integrations.

Operational requirements: Define process for uploading and managing non-experience products in your booking system.

Extras: accommodation

If you operate a campsite or sell accommodation 'on the side' — e.g. a self catering cottage or apartment — then you might not want or need a fully-featured accommodation booking system. However, accommodation has some specific reservation and distribution requirements that most tour and activity systems struggle to meet. A small number of tour and activity booking systems include basic support for managing accommodation listings and reservations.

Benefits for you: Sell accommodation online without the need for a separate system; Cross-sell accommodation with your tours and activities; Combine your accommodation and tours to create multi-day experiences.

Benefits for your customers: Discover and book accommodation from a single supplier and as part of a single basket.

Integration requirements: Embed accommodation booking forms on relevant listings pages on your website.

Operational requirements: Upload and manage accommodation listings in your booking system.

Online waivers

Create online forms that capture information to ensure visitors meet specific requirements (e.g. age or skill) and to manage your liability in case of accident or injury. Online waivers can also eliminate the need for printed PDF forms.

Benefits for you: Ensure that customers meet all requirements (e.g. mobility, age) before completing a booking and before arrival — helping to manage your liability and saving you time.

Benefits for your customers: Confirm all requirements before completing a booking — avoiding disappointment in case they discover they are unable to participate on arrival.

Integration requirements: Some booking providers might require that you integrate a third party digital waiver solution with your booking system; If you take in-person bookings, you may also require an online waiver facility (e.g. on a tablet at the desk) to avoid parallel digital and paper-based systems.

Operational requirements: Provide time and training to set up and test online waivers. Contact your insurer and/or legal advisor to ensure that your waivers address your requirements and are compliant.

Seating plans and allocated seating

Most online box office systems allow customers to select a seat when booking. While this feature was originally used for events, it is also useful as a social distancing feature for cruises, bus tours, and other experiences in vehicles or confined spaces — and is now being adopted by a small but growing number of tour and activity systems.

Benefits for you: Manage social distancing within your venues or vehicles; Spread capacity over more sessions — e.g. encourage people to choose an earlier / later session in which their preferred seat or more space is available.

Benefits for your customers: Select preferred seat — e.g. based on proximity to a window or distance from other participants.

Integration requirements: Your online seating plans will, of course, need to reflect the actual layout of seats in your venue, boat, bus, or other space.

Operational requirements: Provide training for staff in configuring seating plans and guiding customers to their allocated seat.

Accounts and memberships

Create memberships associated with specific user accounts on your booking system — allowing you to offer them exclusive products or prices and to measure and manage relationships with your more frequent visitors and valuable customers.

Benefits for you: Generate income from the sale of memberships; Increase retention or 'stickiness' by identifying repeat visitors, targeting communications to those segments, and making exclusive offers; Upgrade members to higher tiers (e.g. patrons or sponsors).

Benefits for your customers: Sense of being recognised and valued; Access to exclusive discounts, early access, or other offers.

Integration requirements: If you are using a separate CRM system to manage memberships, you will need to integrate it with your booking system — and potentially also with your ePOS system to facilitate scanning of membership cards or in-person discounts.

Operational requirements: Create membership scheme and segments in CRM. Train front-of-house staff to service members.

Donations & fundraising

Collect and manage donations and fundraising campaigns (for eligible organisations only). Consider that while it is relatively easy to create separate one-off donation products in any booking system — essentially treating this as an item of merchandise — customers are far more likely to add a donation as an add-on during the booking process.

Benefits for you: Switch on additional online revenue streams (where eligible); Measure and report donations by time or year, customer segment, marketing channel, etc.; Identify and segment donors in your CRM.

Benefits for your customers: Contribute to organisations and causes whose work they value; Receive personalised communications and obtain a sense of 'belonging' to a cause.

Integration requirements: Some systems have this functionality as part of their system, others may require you to integrate with specialist 3rd party software.

Operational requirements: Train staff in capturing and managing donor segments in CRM. Build 'support us' calls-to-action into email, social, and other online campaigns.

4. Pricing

Online booking systems use a variety of different pricing models. Some charge you directly, while others pass on the costs to your customers. Some publish clear and transparent price information on their websites, while others are more opaque. Unfortunately, it's not uncommon for experience providers to learn the final costs only once they've actually started processing bookings.



Transparent vs. bespoke pricing

When comparing systems, it's vital to consider not only the features and benefits that they offer, but also what those features and benefits will cost you. You obviously don't want to pay extra for features that you don't need — or more than you have to for the features that you do need. Equally, you don't want to be saddled with a system that, while less expensive, is less satisfying for your customers or less able to deliver sales, efficiency, and insights. There are several different pricing models and price components— which can have significant implications for overall costs.

Transparent pricing

Most tour and activity booking systems operate on transparent pricing models. Their websites have pricing pages that outline what they will charge you (or your customers, which amounts to the same thing) — including fixed fees for set-up or recurring subscriptions, as well as variable costs that increase with volume (e.g. 'booking' or 'processing' fees).

Transparent pricing makes it easier to compare systems, though be aware that some systems offer different features or allow a different number of bookings at different tiers. You may also need to factor in the cost of third party payment gateways, ePOS / mPOS systems, CRM systems, eMarketing systems, and any other third party platforms or integrations.

Bespoke pricing

Venue and attraction box office system vendors tend not to disclose their pricing in advance. This is partly because they tend to require more bespoke features, customisation, and/or integrations. But it also reflects the fact that the volume of sales and of support requests can differ greatly between venues based on size, complexity, etc.

While this does mean that there is room for negotiation on price with box office system vendors (some, for instance, will offer lower prices to charities or not-for-profit organisations), it can make it more difficult to compare systems without actually requesting a proposal.

4.1 Pricing: setup and subscription fees

Setup fees

Relatively few tour and activity systems charge a setup fee – and those that do may be willing to waive it in order to bring you onto their system (so it's worth asking!).

Setup fees are far more common, however, for venue and attraction systems.

Setup fees cover the initial cost associated with onboarding you and your products to the booking system.

Note that setup fees apply only to the system itself. If you require integration with third party point-of-sale, CRM, or access control systems, then most vendors will charge for those integrations separately.

While some vendors charge setup fees in place of a subscription or annual licence, be aware that you may also face ongoing, per-transaction costs in the form of booking fees and payment fees.

Subscription fees

Some systems operate on a subscription model and charge fixed monthly fees – though some vendors offer a reduced rate if you pay for twelve months up-front.

Subscription-based systems are highly predictable, which can make them attractive to smaller suppliers as well as to those looking to grow.

There is a downside, however, as you may need to pay the same amount even during months when you don't generate as many bookings — such as during lockdowns or your quiet season. If you are a smaller provider with a highly seasonal offer, then you might want to look at a systems with pricing based on fees per booking or ask vendors if they are willing to pause your account at certain times of the year.

Some systems with tiered subscription models only allow a certain number of bookings at each tier. If you sell more products than your tier allows, they may transition you to a higher tier or, beyond their top standard tier, to a 'bespoke' pricing model.

Booking fees

Booking fees are charged on a per-booking basis (either as a percentage of the transaction, a fixed fee, or both) so your costs will rise as you generate more bookings. For instance, if your system charged a 5% booking fee and you went from 500 bookings at €10 to 5000 bookings, then your costs would jump from €250 to €2,500. If you don't want to be tied to fixed expenses — e.g. because your offer is seasonal — then you might prefer this to a subscription-based model.

Some systems give you the option of 'passing on' booking fees to your customers. This doesn't make any practical difference to what you or your customers pay, and it's usually best to be up-front with customers about the final price — and to treat booking fees as costs to you. Booking fees can also vary depending on where the booking takes place, with some systems charging different fees for bookings through your website, back-office, channel manager, or reseller marketplace.

Most tour and activity systems charge *either* a subscription fee *or* a booking fee.

Payment fees

In addition to subscription and booking fees, you will also be charged a fee for each transaction processed through your payment gateway. Payment fees normally include both a percentage and a fixed fee — and the exact amounts may vary depending on the payment method and currency.

For instance, the Stripe payment gateway charges 1.4% + €0.25 for European cards and 2.9% + €0.25 for non-European cards. As with booking fees, this scales with the number of transactions — so you would be charged €700.25 on 500 European bookings at €10, or €1450.25 on the same number of bookings from outside Europe. Note that these payment fees are normally charged in addition to any subscription and / or booking fees charged by your booking system vendor.

Some booking system vendors include a built-in or pre-integrated payment gateway, while others may lock you in to a specific online payment solution.

5. Selecting

When selecting your booking platform, research is key. You need to understand your operational, marketing, and other requirements and map these to the features that each system offers. You may need to find a booking system that can integrate with (or replace) your ePOS, CRM, or other systems. You may need to take into account your budget and the needs of other people or teams in your organisation — and you may need to compromise.

Problems and solutions

It's easy to get swept away by what technology can do. But you want to pay for solutions to the real problems you face every day — not for features you don't need and never use. So you should start by looking not at the features we've listed in section 2, but at your own situation. You might break down your 'business problems' and possible solutions as follows:

- 1. Products.** List your experiences (e.g. tours, activities, admission, events), along with any other products such as merchandise, food and drink, donations, or accommodation. Which do you want to sell online? Do you want to combine them?

Solution: You will need a system that allows people to book (i.e. reserve and pay for) the types of experiences you offer. If you sell other types of products — and especially if you want to sell them in a single 'basket' with experiences — then this may further narrow the field. Of course, you may decide to use separate systems for other product types.

- 2. Consumers.** Who buys your experiences? Are you targeting families, school groups, domestic visitors, foreign independent travellers, or 'enthusiasts'? How do you think they behave — e.g. are they likely to book online, using mobile devices, at short notice?

Solution: Consider which features are essential to meet people's basic needs and which ones could improve their experience — e.g. Apple / Google Pay, mTickets, partial payment, or easy rescheduling?

- 3. Operations.** What problems do you face in running your experiences and managing resources such as time, staff, or equipment? Do you sometimes struggle to manage capacity? Where does your time go?

Solution: Online booking systems can't automate every task (yet!), but they might help you streamline some of your work. For instance, if you run kayak activities, consider using a system that lets you limit availability based on the number of boats available.

- 4. Distribution.** What problems do you face in processing and keeping track of bookings or other transactions — whether through your direct channels or through tour operators, OTAs, or hotel partners? Do you struggle to manage schedules and pricing across different systems of distributors?

Solution: You want a system that can power all your channels, not just your website. Do you take bookings via your back-office or in-person? Could promo codes, a trade portal, or a channel manager make it easier to run and report third party bookings?

5. CRM. How do you want to engage with your customers and manage information about them?

Solution: Do you need a solution that can send real-time emails or texts to customers based on their booking behaviour? Or that can dispatch email campaigns to 'locals', 'members', 'big spenders', or other segments?

6. Finances. How do you process payments or refunds from customers and manage payments to your staff or suppliers? Do you manage your own finances, or do you leave this for a bookkeeper?

Solution: Could a system that is capable of generating receipts, tracking payments and refunds, or paying contractors reduce your workload?

7. Legal. You need to ensure that your products and services (including your website and booking system) are accessible. But what other legal requirements do you need to address — e.g. do you require visitors to sign a waiver before taking part in a tour or activity?

Solution: While all online booking systems should be accessible, it's up to you to ensure that they are — and to ensure that you manage your product information and integrations to support access. Could options such as digital waivers reduce your workload (or your insurance premiums)?

8. Reporting. How do you need to report sales — e.g. by category, channel, and/or customer segment? Do you want to track users through your website? Do you want to simplify your reporting process?

Solution: Online booking systems vary greatly in terms of reporting capabilities — ask vendors to take you through the process and provide sample reports. Fortunately, most systems now support Google Analytics e-commerce tracking.

9. Technology. What systems do you already have in place to manage your website (e.g. WordPress), analytics, customer data, finances, ePOS, email campaigns, or access control? Are you willing to change those systems, or are they locked in?

Solution: Do you want your online booking system to integrate with or to replace other systems? While the former can increase cost and complexity, some systems may integrate out-of-the-box or via add-ons.



Further research

After listing your business problems, review section 3 for features that might help you increase sales, generate insights, or improve efficiency — check our pricing guide, then pick 2–3 systems that seem like a good fit.

But this guide is only a starting point. There are many more systems on the market than we've covered here — and you'll need to learn more about your candidates before making a final selection. Every booking system vendor has a website with information about features and pricing (some are more detailed than others). Most vendors are willing to conduct live demonstrations to show what their particular system can do and

allow you to ask questions — and they may even provide you with a free trial account. Do not miss out on these opportunities.



You should also discuss your needs and plans with your digital agency and your Digital That Delivers project coordinator — who may be able to direct you to resources on the Fáilte Ireland website or connect you with an expert mentor to help you understand your requirements and the options that are available.

6. Activating

Once you have chosen your booking platform, you'll need to switch it on and start making it yours. At the most basic level, you will need to cover three areas: company information and branding, product information, and payment information. Remember that individual booking platforms support teams should be on hand (as part of the 'onboarding' process) to answer any questions that you have.

Uploading company information

Your first step when creating an account will be to provide some information about your company — such as your company's name, type, description, and logo. On some booking systems these will be gathered by an account manager, who will deal with this on your behalf as part of a structured 'onboarding' process. Some other booking systems may leave you to do this yourself.

Either way, it is important to ensure that these details are completed correctly — this will save you problems further down the line and make sure that you present your best face to the world.

You may also need to add multiple users and assign them 'user roles' depending on how many staff you have. 'User roles' determine how many features offered by the booking platform the person can see. Think about how often they will be interacting with your booking platform. Your guides likely won't need to see more than the bookings that have been assigned to them. The booking platform staff will help you through these steps.

Uploading product information

Now it's time to upload the details of your tours, activities, admission, or other products. For each product, you will need to provide a name, description, images, and other content. The better this content is, the more compelling your products will seem to users — so take your time. You will also need to provide information about location, pricing, accessibility, and so on. You should also be able to add fields to capture information about customers for marketing and reporting purposes.

Then it's time to configure schedules for your experiences, including times, number of slots, and dependencies. This is often the most complex step, and where tour and activity providers most often get stuck — ideally, you should test this **before** selecting your system, and most vendors will give you access to a free trial account for this purpose.

Finally, think about how you want to communicate with people who book your experiences. For instance, you might configure automated confirmation, reminder, and thank you emails or texts with useful information and links.

Activating a payment gateway

When you set up your online booking system, you will need to provide a way for people to pay for your experiences — or, if it comes to that, for you to refund their money.

As we noted in sections 3 and 4, some tour and activity booking systems come with a built-in payment gateway.

Note that your booking system may only support a limited range of payment gateways — and if you already have a one in place for in-person payments, then it may make sense to use that. Consult your booking system vendor and web developer before making a decision.

Customising your account

Once you've completed the basics, you should be ready to start driving bookings through your system. Depending on your requirements and the features of your system, however, you may also want to configure the following:

- **Product information** — Revisit each of your experiences to ensure all your content is up-to-date, that you've completed all relevant fields (accessibility, etc.) and that you've provided compelling descriptions and imagery.
- **Resources** — if your system has a resource management feature, upload information about your equipment, spaces, staff, etc. You may be able to track repairs, restrict bookings based on what equipment is available, or even make equipment available for hire.
- **Policies** — Protect your self and your customers by ensuring you've provided complete and up-to-date information about your terms and conditions before making products live. These might cover things like cancellations and refunds, bad weather, or bad behaviour.

7. Integrating

You should already have identified your integration needs when selecting your booking system — and taken care to select a booking system that can integrate with the other systems you already have in place (or, at any rate, the ones you want to keep!). Now it's time to hook everything up... Starting with your website.



Bringing it all together

As an experience provider, your online booking system sits at the heart of your operations. Integrating it with your other systems can, therefore, streamline or even automate your workflows. But software integration can be expensive and time-consuming — and a major source of friction and stress.

If you've chosen an online booking system that offers a built-in payment solution, then integration could be as simple as embedding some code on your website and setting up Google Analytics tracking.

Similarly, if you want to use features such as a trade portal, reseller marketplace, or channel manager that are built into your booking system, then this shouldn't require any additional integration — though it might take time for you to set them up and manage them.

If your resources and expertise are limited, then you'll probably want to select a booking system that addresses more of your needs, without complex integration. Some systems, however, include add-ons that allow you to integrate your booking system with other cloud-based systems, without the services of a developer. For instance, if you're already using Xero for accounts, MailChimp for email, and Salesforce for CRM, then you might like a solution that offers built-in integrations with those systems.

At the other end of the scale, major attraction tend to have more more complex integration needs. For instance, ticketed event venues might want to create API connections from their booking system into their website, or to run bookings within an iFrame. They might also want to integrate their booking system with existing ePOS, CRM, eMarketing, or access control systems. Where this requires bespoke development, things can get very complicated and expensive.

Common points of integration



Website content management system

Allows users to discover and book experiences through your website, based on live pricing and availability information. Many booking systems include widgets or plugins that reduce the need for web development.



Google Analytics e-commerce tracking

Passes anonymised data from your booking confirmation page to Google Analytics — allowing you to monitor the performance of your campaigns and content in terms of converting users and generating revenue.



ePOS / mPOS system

Allows people to book experiences from you in person, drawing on the same system that powers your website and other distribution channels — this can also help you capture customer data, and run reports.



CRM system

Shares customer data between your booking system and your CRM, allowing you to store names, locations, email addresses (and opt in) status, create segments based on booking behaviour, or use CRM data in sales reports.



eMarketing system integration

Synchronises your email database with customer records in your CRM, and to send targeted communications based on segment — e.g. to send regular newsletters to 'members' or seasonal offers to 'international visitors'.



Access control

Shares unique codes on tickets with scanner-equipped barriers or human-operated access control systems in your venue — allowing you to validate that users have paid (and see who has visited).

8. Operating

Online booking systems can streamline — or even fully automate — many of your existing workflows. Using them to their full potential, however, will require time, training, and a willingness to transform ingrained practices.

Practice makes perfect

Once you have completed the processes of selecting, activating, and integrating your online booking system, the next challenge is for you to start using that system.

This is where the 'transformation' really happens — and it isn't always easy or comfortable. If this is your first experience with online bookings, then it might seem strange the first time visitors simply turn up without interacting with you in advance.

And if you or your staff have ingrained ways of working, then it can take time — and a fair dose of patience — to adapt to new processes. It's often a good idea to involve your team right from the selection stage, to avoid imposing a system that doesn't work for them.

In most cases, however, unfamiliarity quickly gives way to enthusiasm, as your new systems and processes become a new — and hopefully better — normal. Some of the more commonly-reported benefits of updating to a fully-integrated online booking system include:

- **Scheduling and resource management.** As you take advantage of your booking platform you will be able to assign guides, manage your calendar and time more effectively.
- **Customer relationship management.** You will be able to see patterns and consider new revenue streams you did not consider before. This will lead you to optimising products to different segments of the market or being able to target your key markets for more income or efficiency.
- **Financial awareness.** With your sales coming in you will be able to import these directly into accounting software and start seeing trends throughout the week, month and year. After one or two seasons you will have a good knowledge of your incomes allowing for financial planning for your quiet periods and growth.
- **Product and customer insights.** Draw on data from your sales reports to understand how your current products are working and plan the development of new ones. Don't be afraid to get rid of poorly-performing products to make space for new ones.
- **Financial protection.** Issuing refunds through your booking platform and payment systems helps ensure that your customer has their money directly returned to the bank account they booked with. This creates a digital 'paper' trail and avoids frustrating customers.
- **Communication.** Depending on your booking platform you will be able to contact customers before and after tours and request reviews or up-sell other products. Loyalty discount codes, 'share with a friend', and 'rate our experience' campaigns can build your presence, improve retention and referral, and increase the lifetime value of your customers.

- **Marketing.** Having online bookings and Google Analytics e-commerce tracking in place allows you to track the effectiveness of your marketing campaigns like never before. Once you can see your return-on-investment, you can be more confident of investing time and money in paid activities such as paid search.
- **Tour operators.** If you're working with coach and tour operators, communications can be a major pain point — for you and them. Giving them access to a trade portal with live availability and pricing for exclusive products makes you both more efficient.
- **Local partners.** If you have agreements with local hotels, restaurants, or other experience providers to promote your business, consider setting them up with a unique reseller code or coded links to your booking system — you might even supply them with business cards with QR-coded links that they can share with their customers.