



Let's get touring – CTA event

Posted by [Chris Peat](#) on Wed 23rd September 2020 - 10:48AM | [No Comments](#)

Positive messages at the CTA's recent Zoom open meeting – but it is still a difficult market

News of operators starting tours and holidays again and tourism bodies still encouraging Christmas visits from groups were some of the positive things being said at the Coach Tourism Association's (CTA's) recent Zoom conference. However, there was a shot of realism on the current coach tour situation, with some very real difficulties mentioned, even for operators that are seeing some business.

Entitled 'Let's get touring' and chaired by the enthusiastic John Wales, the latest CTA meeting focused, perhaps unsurprisingly, on getting coaching again following the lockdown.

Parrys fill coaches full

With perhaps the most impressive back drop of the Zoom meeting was Dave Parry of Parrys International, who video linked in from his holiday destination in Italy. As mentioned in the latest issue of Bus and Coach Buyer (1577, 25 September 2020), he said his company has sent its first coach holidays abroad, as well as to destinations in the UK. Unlike many operators, he is filling coaches to full capacity without social distancing, having completed an extensive risk assessment and putting in place measures such as temperature checking passengers before they board. Dave said: "I'm not prepared to do it with less."

He reminds those who may also be about to run overseas tours that there are places the coach cannot stop in Europe, including France, Switzerland, Belgium and Holland. "It's not been easy," he said. "But we've managed it."

Dave is keen to make what he can of the year: "Our tour programme has been decimated. We have had eight coaches off the road, it's been a big financial burden. We have two coaches at the factory in Belgium that we can't bring over."

The operator has had to take advantage of government loan schemes to help get by.

The pandemic situation has caused problems with marketing at the operator, with Dave reporting: "Everything with planning and marketing is becoming out of date because week after week there are cancellations."

Good and bad for Alpine

It has been a difficult market, according to Alpine Travel and Jones Holidays MD, Chris Owens, but there is some light at the end of the tunnel: "Charter work has been difficult, but it is starting to pick up. In outbound work, our first holiday tour departed Monday."

An issue Chris has faced is around destination's interpretation of Government pandemic guidance affecting what is offered. He said: "My only word of warning is go back and review arrangements and get assurance they deliver what they promise to deliver."

He mentioned an issue he faced with a hotel in recent weeks. Chris said: "I don't think the hotel management had heard of social distancing."

He said some of his customers were put on a table with people from another tour operator's passengers, people they did not know, in groups of six. Chris said: "We have had an absolute nightmare with this. It's very disappointing. We are all trying our damndest to create confidence and I just feel absolutely let down by the hotel."

A representative from the hotel chain that attended the Zoom meeting said she would address this concern.

Chris went on to say his company is lucky in that its business is diverse, with one side of it helping deal with shortfalls in other parts. In particular, its City SightSeeing operation has had a bumper year: "It's been 40% up. Long live the staycation!"

coach parties. There have been problems associated with allowing coach passengers to stay at hotels. She said: "How come people can turn-up off a local bus and get booked, but if they turn up on a coach, they can't. I know someone else in the industry who had a group thrown out of a hotel because they were told that if they accepted them they would be prosecuted."

In response, a representative from a hotel said hotels are at the mercy of Environmental Health Officers (EHOs), some of whom have disallowed coach parties. The hotels want coach passengers to turn up, with meetings with EHOs on this being organised.

Attendees heard that Hovertravel was pleased to receive its first coach party from Johnsons Coaches of Henley-in-Arden. The company provides a hovercraft ferry service to the Isle of Wight. Followers of this website will have seen our [coverage of this](#) already.

Christmas is not cancelled

Christmas markets are often a good way to earn some money during the lean winter period. However, they are being cancelled due to the COVID situation. Dave Parry bemoaned this early on in the conference and their loss is lamented by many other operators.

Many local authorities are keen to promote the fact that even though Christmas markets are being cancelled, there are still festive treats on offer for coach parties. For example, attendees heard that Bournemouth may not be having its usual Christmas Tree Wonderland event, but there will still be a yuletide offering in the town for groups. Edinburgh will still be going ahead with its Christmas market, albeit to a reduced extent than usual.

Anu Desai from ITO Tours suggested changing wording on marketing material from 'Christmas markets' to 'Christmas shopping weekends'.

Anu has had group trips scheduled since August and has more booked until December. He said: "Positivity and forward thinking has to be what we show all the time. As tour operators, we have to do all we can to support hoteliers and attractions. Everyone can back that as much as they want, but but next it has to go to the public. The public really needs to take on our confidence. But hopefully our positivity shows the market and the public they have to go forward."

Clare Dwight from Visit Wales was pleased to hear the message that areas are still trying to promote Christmas shopping trips despite festive markets declining. She said: "Coach groups are really important for us in Wales. We had a working group that has met over the last two months to address some of the issues emerging today, such as attractions not opening. We keep to do what we can to help and support."

company said: “We have now welcomed 20 coaches on our service since 4 July. It’s going really well. What we find useful is when tours give us breakdowns of the bubbles within the tour group; that’s handy for us. We are running at a third of our normal capacity, so it helps us plan our capacity.

“We are open throughout the year; we do festive cruises.”

Don’t bite the hand that feeds

A final point came from Chris Owens at Alpine Travel, who notes some tourist destinations are putting their ticket prices up because of social distancing. Chris said: “So not only are we stuck with reduced numbers, but we find places put a £12 seat up to £18. We are all going to lose money this year, but let’s be honest, the coronavirus is still going to be here next year, the early part of next season. So we are going to have reduced numbers and lower confidence to travel. I just want to say to attractions: ‘Don’t bite the hand that feeds.’ It’s going to be difficult going forward as long as we are socially distancing.”

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