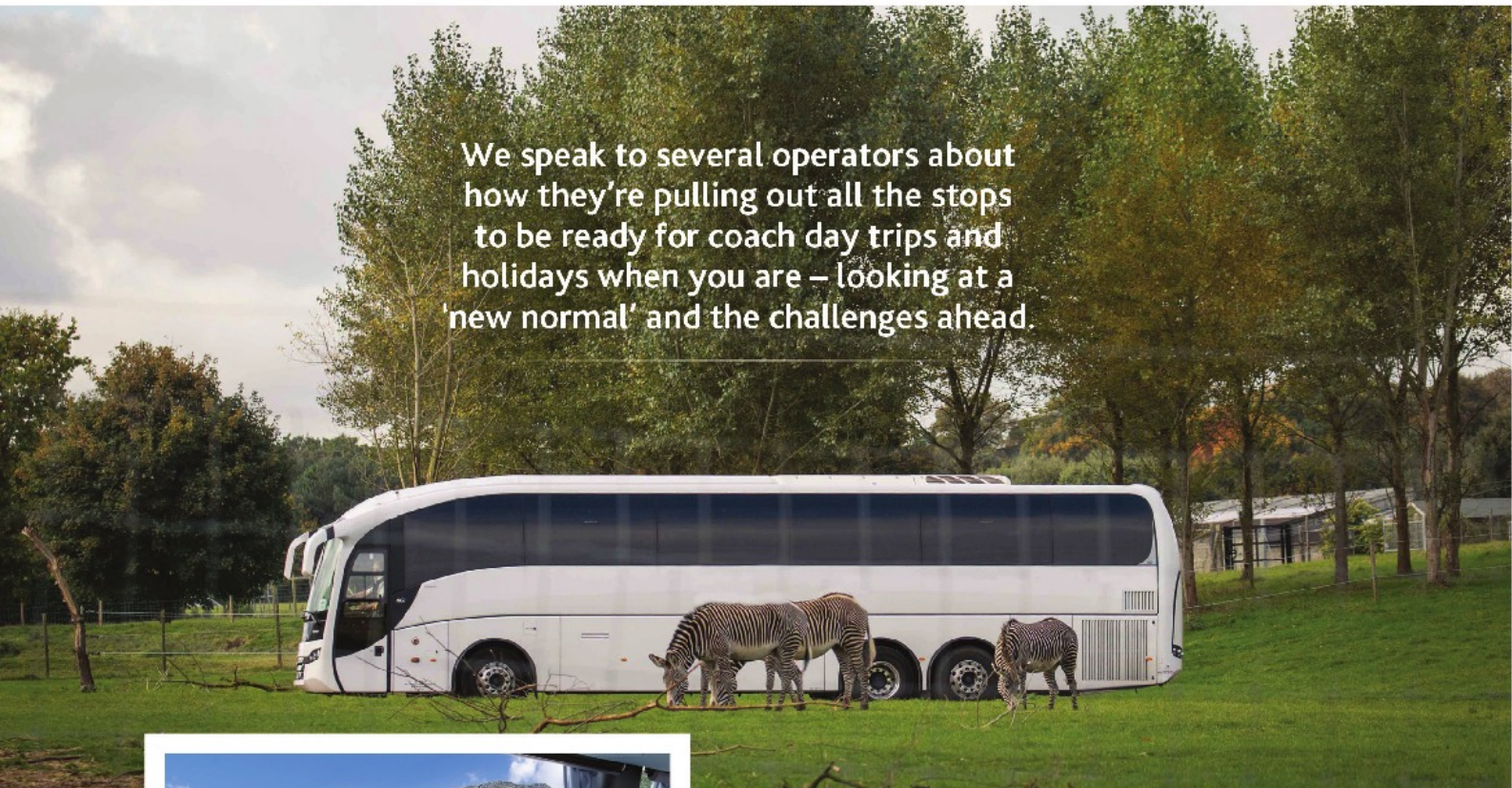


Coach tourism: operators explain the changes and offer reassurance

We speak to several operators about how they're pulling out all the stops to be ready for coach day trips and holidays when you are – looking at a 'new normal' and the challenges ahead.



- Coach operators are introducing various measures such as a reduction in passengers and extensive cleaning regimes.

Passenger numbers

Inevitably, even with a one-metre plus social distance guideline now in place, there will be a reduction in the number of people on each coach. Many operators have already discussed removing alternate seats in order to adjust their capacity. John Johnson, who runs Johnsons Coach & Bus Travel, has set out his new capacity; for example allowing 17 passengers on a 37-seat midi-coach 25 passengers on a 53-seat coach with toilet.

Feedback on prices

Of course with a reduction in capacity comes an increase in price but operators are hopeful that group organisers, and their members, will be willing to pay slightly more in order to stay safe and still have an enjoyable experience, whether on a day trip or holiday.

Shirley Winn of Isle of Wight Tours, said she had already spoken to GTOs who would accept an increase: "When I approached the subject of costs, they said 'you will keep us safe, we don't mind paying a bit more and because we haven't been anywhere for 16 weeks our pensions have mounted up'. It was quite heart-warming to know that they trust us enough to accept an increase."

Safety measures, on and off board

Alongside guidelines related to general hygiene, many operators will ask passengers to wear a face mask when boarding, and during the journey and some may be asked to have a temperature check before getting on the coach.

Other measures coach companies will be introducing include: having the roof vents open to provide a supply of fresh air and the driver cleaning all 'touch points' on the coach while your group visits the destination.

"Stick with us; we had a cracking industry before this and we'll have the same afterwards."

Daniel Kirby of Kirbys Coaches, said they were working with hotels and venues to create a safe environment from start to finish including the correct distance and procedures in place. He added: "The one-metre rule is going to help, more so with the venues as there was already mitigation that by wearing face masks etc, it may not always be needed on the coach itself." →

My message to group organisers is:



"Stick with us; we had a cracking industry before this, and we'll have the same afterwards. Coach tourism pleases an awful lot of people, especially those in the over 60s and 70s.

We've just got to work together and survive to see happier days."

John Johnson, Johnsons Coach Travel

"We're here for you, we will make sure it's right for you. We will get the product and safety right for our customers to give you the experience to enjoy when the time is right."

Shirley Winn, Isle of Wight Tours



"We will be working with the customers and hotels creating a 'start through to end' safe environment."

Daniel Kirby, Kirbys Coaches



"We'd like to thank our group organisers for their support and understanding through all of this and assure them that we will be providing our usual excellence service as soon as we possibly can."

Kristy Elsmere, Woods Travel



- Isle of Wight Tours said additional government guidance was needed including about localised lockdowns.



- Johnsons has produced guidelines for group organisers.

Photo credit: Jason Skarratt Photography



Building up customer confidence

This will be key when it comes to getting groups back on board – and indeed for group organisers themselves to reassure their members about travelling. John Johnson said it was crucial that coach trips were still “enjoyable” even with all the extra measures in place. He added: “We will be making sure that we’re still offering an attractive product, I’m going to be doing things like getting face masks with smiley faces on.”

Hope for the future

There is some cautious optimism about the future of coach travel with perhaps more of a focus on domestic tourism in the short-term.

Many group organisers say they are looking forward to travelling again although some will need reassurance. Shirley Winn of Isle of Wight Tours said: “For those who get through this, there’ll be a boom in coach travel.”

Kristy Elsmere of Woods Travel Ltd, said she was very optimistic for the future adding: “We have customers phoning up and asking for brochures now and we’ve got groups booked on trips in September – there are lots of people ready to travel as soon as the government allows. I would say to groups though, when booking future trips, make sure that the company you book with has financial cover through BCH, ABTA or similar – because then you know your bookings are covered if anything was to happen to that company”. ■

Comment from the Coach Tourism Association (CTA)

“The vital point about the one metre plus announcement and the detailed instructions that followed, is that it gives the hospitality and tourism industries the necessary guidelines they need in order to re-open their businesses.

Coach Tourism Association members have been hard at work during the lockdown doing their best to keep their businesses afloat. They now know what the restrictions will be on carrying coach tour passengers during the coming months. This means they can draw up their most effective seating plans and work closely with hotels to try and take as many people on much needed UK tours and breaks as soon as possible.

We all know that, pending a virus-beating inoculation, holidays and travel – as so much else in our lives – will never be quite the same for the foreseeable future. But this announcement certainly paves the way back to some form of normality and will get our members back in business.”

John Wales, chair of the CTA

