

Coach tourism – battling to recover

The Chairman of the Coach Tourism Association, John Wales, says that not only does the coach industry need government help urgently, it offers the country the best opportunity for tourism when the market recovers



The Coach Tourism Association says it has a seat at the table of TIER – the Tourism Industry Emergency Response group – talking directly to ministers to mitigate the tourism crash and plan for recovery.

John Wales, the CTA's Chairman, told Business Coach Buyer that the key to emerging from the health crisis strongly later this year will be for

every element of the industry to share the problems and remaining risk, expressly to avoid coach operators going out of business.

"The fact is, the coach tourism can spearhead a tourism recovery," he said. "There won't be a quicker route to market than coaches, able to deliver 50 customers to hotels and attractions."

"The travel industry has demonstrated an admirable

ability to adapt to some of the most severe conditions. These have ranged from natural disasters to attacks by terrorists. The international pandemic of the Coronavirus COVID-19 does however represent the greatest challenge our businesses have had to face for several generations. At the time of writing it would seem that almost all non-essential travel is being closed down," John said.

"I recently wrote a letter to all the members of the Coach Tourism Association in which I sympathised with both those coach operators and suppliers who are now experiencing the immense financial impact, saying: 'There has never been a time when we have been more in need of flexibility and understanding during these extraordinary circumstances so we can mitigate costs and ensure we have strong

partnerships going forward"

"Yet I am still getting reports of some hotels and tourist suppliers enforcing strict cancellation terms on future bookings of coach operators, even though there is no actual operating cost to them.... it's a future cost."

"Operators are obliged to refund their clients in 14 days [PTD], due to the situation and comply with trading standards, which makes it even more astonishing that these generators of business are then 'fined' by large corporations who do not share the real impact on the front line and accelerate the financial disaster most operators are experiencing."

John said that the CTA is launching a website portal this week offering advice to group tourism operators: "I want to reassure operators that we will

planning some PR stories ready for the recovery and welcome any assistance and input from suppliers and operators."

"The hundreds of millions of pounds privately invested in low carbon emission coaches, delivering the cleanest form of transport, has been a massive burden on operators, magnified now as all incomes have dried up in this crisis. There was a sense of long-term optimism voiced in the CTA's Conference and Workshop in York in February."

"But – and this is a big but – survival through the effects on our industry from this pandemic is the only short-term focus for operators, suppliers and all services associated with tourism."

"I believe our coach tour operators and supporting suppliers in our close-knit

CTA is appealing to government to get coach operators to be considered leisure businesses, and get the business rates holiday and grants promised for that business sector

do everything in our power to put your voice across to the TIER group – we're at the table every week."

In particular, John said, CTA is appealing to government to get coach operators to be considered leisure businesses, and get the business rates holiday and grants promised for that business sector.

"Unfortunately, right now, we must wait to see the full impact and timescale. All we can do is control and reduce our costs and plan for a recovery, which we all hope will be in the shorter term. We must wait and see what government support is pledged to enable the coach operators to survive."

"Hopefully the media will show as much enthusiasm on the positives when the pain of the lockdown has passed to tourism – we will be sharing information on the CTA website to assist all members and

industry, can spearhead the recovery, capitalising on the stacked up demand generated from lock down, delivery of mass numbers around the country easily and in environmentally friendly way."

"I would say that, in all my 38 years in various tourism sectors, I have never had the privilege to be associated with a more hands-on, robust, friendly and forward-looking group of people than the coach operator members of the CTA who can react swiftly to changing circumstances. With help from Government, partner supplier support and determination to survive, we will overcome the dark clouds on the immediate horizon. Working together we can navigate, deliver and quickly climb down the road to tourism recovery the country needs, hopefully in the summer." ■



The European Union is in the process of suspending holiday refunds, concerned that the travel industry could be destroyed by the coronavirus pandemic.

The European Commission is now encouraging customers to accept vouchers or credit notes – as long as the holidaymaker can eventually reclaim their money. This guarantee must be backed by insolvency protection, with the above vouchers turned into IOUs backed by the state, reported The Independent.

This comes after Transport Secretary, Grant Shapps, promised to protect Britain's travel industry. Shapps is expected to agree to firms issuing credit notes which will enable the jet-setter to rebook a holiday within two years.

If, before this is possible, the travel company goes bust, the government-backed Atol scheme will provide financial protection.

Travel trade association ABTA praised the development. Mark Tanzer, Chief Executive of ABTA, said on Friday: "ABTA has been in urgent talks with Government ministers and officials throughout the week, as well as working with European trade associations at a European government level, to progress the asks that we set out in our letter to the Prime Minister on Monday."

"Today, the European Commission updated its guidance on the Package Travel Directive (PTD) in relation to customer claims refunds."

"It encourages customers to accept credit notes, as long as the customer is allowed to ask for a full refund, eventually, if he or she does not make use of the credit note towards a new booking."

"Crucially the Commission states that the credit note should be covered by appropriate insolvency protection. This is an extremely positive step and shows that the Commission recognises the strains being placed on tour operators due to Coronavirus."

"The Package Travel Directive is the legal framework on which the UK Package Travel Regulations are based, and we now need the UK Government to follow the European Commission's lead and confirm a similar approach."

"This new guidance will give customers the essential assurance that they will either get a holiday or their money back, as well as providing a much needed helping hand to travel companies through these difficult and unprecedented times."

However, until the rules definitively change, entitlement to a cash refund remains in place. The news is likely to upset holidaymakers who were initially guaranteed a full refund if their holiday was axed.

The Foreign & Commonwealth Office (FCO) advised against foreign travel on 17 March.