

# CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

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Writing at the end of 2018 in time for the publication of the *Blueprint Guide to Group Travel 2019*, we look forward to year of change with both challenges and opportunities. John Wales, Chairman of the Coach Tourism Association, is able to witness at first-hand the challenges for coach operators.



CTA members continually invest in vehicles to improve comfort and safety for clients as well as continually networking with supplier members at CTA events, developing key relationships, negotiating the best commercial deals and discovering new products to refresh tour programmes. Indeed, CTA coach operators are truly the group tourism professionals, arranging and operating tours day in, day out, and can share these benefits with savvy group organisers.

The two main 2019 challenges we all face are adapting and understanding the implications of BREXIT & ULEZ. Brexit is wide ranging, affecting staff resources, border control and no doubt many new regulations, but the uncertainty of the unknown worries many. All parties in group travel have the same objectives; our clients have the desire to travel, operators on land, air and sea want continuation, and destinations, both domestically and throughout Europe, want our business. Therefore, logic and common sense should prevail and although we may encounter some hurdles in the short term, I believe business will continue to prosper.

The thorny subject of London's ULEZ and other Clean Air Zones will require a lot of cost-based decisions by coach operators as they strive to bring on board sufficient ULEZ Euro 6-equipped vehicles. Destinations that impose the fines may be excluded whilst the process of acquiring new vehicles or converting existing coaches continues. This could take years for some operators as currently converting a coach could cost up to £30,000 and new

coaches can be £300,000 plus. This is an enormous incremental expense which has to be included in future business plans, especially when multiplied across a whole fleet.

In 2000, I co-founded a company, Encore Tickets, dependent on group travel, servicing clients from the UK and internationally. We know that continuous product development and service improvement delivers growth. I am pleased to say that this ethos is prevalent in many suppliers, with a lot of hotels now offering speedy group check-in, restaurants offering clients menus to choose from - as oppose to set group menus - and theatre agencies offering flexible payment terms and allocation holds and attractions improving infrastructure and the welcome for groups.

In 2019 and beyond, there are many positive factors we can draw on; an increase in the core demographic for mass group travel, investment & improved comfort on vehicles and, topically, an increased realisation that the green way to travel, is by coach. The group & coach industry has a very positive story to tell, especially with the larger 60- or 70-seater coaches available, moving large numbers with a single clean, more eco-friendly exhaust pipe! Importantly, it's our clients that will remain the focus as we all strive for continual improvement to their experience, ensuring they return and deliver advocacy for travelling by coach. So, despite a couple of hurdles around the corner, I believe our industry has a bright future for many years to come.



John Wales started a career in the tourism industry in 1983 working for Townsend Thoresen. He has worked for tour operators, restaurant groups and ticket agencies. In 2000, he co-founded Encore Tickets with Ashley Herman, which now employs 150+ staff and sells 1 in 5 theatre tickets in London as well as attractions, events, concerts & exhibitions. He became Chairman of the CTA in February 2018 and aims to deliver increased value to all members.