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Time for more shouting from the rooftops?

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Delegates attending last week's annual Coach Tourism Association Conference and Workshop were left in no doubt that an increasing awareness of the environmental benefits of coach travel, combined with the spring publication of CPT's forthcoming Coach Strategy, could be the prompt for a renaissance in coach tourism. However, as delegates discovered, there's a need for the industry to make itself heard. Stuart Render reports

Since December 2019, six coach tour operators and 12 suppliers have joined the Coach Tourism Association (CTA), the industry body set up 30 years ago to bring the coach tourism industry together and to promote travel and tourism by coach. A check on the CTA website shows the number of members to be around the 300 mark, made up of around 110 coach tour operators and 185 suppliers.

One of the benefits of CTA membership for coach tour operators is being kept updated on latest legislation and industry developments. The programme for this year's CTA Conference and Workshop held in York last week (23 to 25 February) did just that, featuring a range of presentations that looked at the future of continental European coach holidays, challenges facing domestic coach tour operation, and a specific look at the tourism landscape in London and York.

Hosted at the DoubleTree by Hilton York hotel, the conference attracted 175 delegates, making it one of the best-attended conferences in recent years. 35 different coach operators were represented including new members Acklams Coaches from Beverley in Yorkshire and A&P Travel from Ely in Cambridgeshire.

John Wales, CTA Chairman, welcomed delegates to the first of two conference sessions saying that the CTA provides a catalyst for operators and suppliers to do business. Reinforcing that point John noted that the well-attended trade

workshop earlier in the day had brought 750 individual appointments between operators and suppliers.

Coach policy from local mayors

The first session of the day looked at the future of continental coach holidays, bringing together Tim Fairhurst, Secretary General of ETOA, the European tourism association, Andy Warrender, Coaching Manager with the CPT, Paul Acklam, from Acklams Coaches, and Barry Cobb, Tours Manager with Johnsons Coaches.

Tim explained that a lot of what affects coach operators engaged in continental European touring is down to local policy makers, often the local mayors. ETOA has working groups in various cities meaning it can sit down with counterparts in Barcelona, Paris or Rome to find out what's going on. It also has a very strong presence in the evolution of destination policy and product promotion around Europe. He quoted Amsterdam as a city where popular opinion has prompted a knee-jerk reaction from politicians keen to attract votes, explaining that ETOA looks for officials who can offer a balanced response.

He stressed that coach tourism is a very valuable sector that's in the front line of innovation in terms of vehicle technology. "Sadly, this message isn't always getting across," he said.

For success there needs to be better dialogue, being honest about the problems, and a need for better data, especially from the private sector, including the value, commercially or otherwise, of group tourism around Europe. There will be a move towards smaller vehicles for accessing cities and there needs to be a more creative collaboration with the supply-side and destinations in particular, including offering business to places and attractions outside the main cities that aren't currently well served by public transport."

Rebutting the prophets of doom

Andy Warrender questioned those industry commenters who have said that the market for continental European trips is in crisis. He told delegates that around 40,000 coaches crossed the channel in 2019, with around 35,000 of those being coach tours operating from the UK. Around two million UK travellers took a continental European coach holiday in 2019.

He emphasised that demand for the key elements of a holiday remain: culture; education; a shared history; entertainment; sport; leisure and sightseeing, so why would anything change? Where are the prophets of doom getting their information from? After all, the opportunities will still be there.

He pointed out that after 31 December a trade deal for coaches could result in the landscape being slightly more restrictive, with the balance in favour of EU operators coming to the UK. However, CPT's position is to look for an

agreement that allows UK operators to participate in markets in Europe on the same basis as EU operators access the UK.

Paul Acklam surprised a few delegates by saying that his company only introduced a tour programme in 2013. Today, Acklams Coaches offers 200 holidays of which 25 are continentals. He highlighted the fact that being close to Hull means most continental trips use the North Sea ferry routes. Teatime sailings reduce the need for early morning starts and a long and often congested drive to the channel ports. He said that drivers enjoy going to the continent, and this work has helped the company attract and retain drivers.

Barry Cobb told delegates that only 7% of Johnsons' 9,000 tour customers a year are on continental holidays. "The number of overland coach holidays is reducing because air and cruise is now emerging as a significant competitor to the traditional coach holiday and many customers have now 'done' most European destinations," he said.

Johnsons works with other regional operators of the same standard (Woods Travel of Bognor Regis for example) to offer a joint programme where you share departures and reduce the risk of cancellation.

However, picking up on the eco-theme, he showed a slide that clearly indicated that when it comes to carbon footprint, travelling by coach is only bettered by bicycle or on foot. He said that we should be singing that message from the rooftops.



Strategic partnership with the CPT

The conference's second session gave CPT Chief Executive Graham Vidler his first opportunity to talk to CTA members. He said that it is a pleasure to be working with the CTA, a relationship that he regards as strategically important for the CPT because coach tourism matters. He said that coach tourism provides convenient and hassle-free holidays, often for people who might otherwise have stayed at home, and that domestic and international visitor travelling by coach contribute over £6 billion to the UK economy each year.

In similar vein to earlier speakers, Graham identified that if the industry is to maximise the opportunities it has to do a better job in painting a picture of the industry to customers and those making the big political decisions. He

explained that the media loves data, and that data drives decisions, but coaching data barely exists. CPT has spotted that gap and is taking on the challenge, looking at ways to harness that data. However, that requires input from operators. With the information CPT will be able to tell the story of the industry more effectively.

Graham briefed delegates on the CPT Coach Strategy, saying that an industry that offers a solution to the challenges it faces is more likely to be listened to by government. The strategy is therefore designed to provide government with a range of policy tools to help them encourage more people to travel by coach. The strategy will focus on three key areas: access (primarily parking), clean air (the benefits of Euro VI) and congestion (replacing cars, using bus lanes, and introducing new high occupancy lanes on major roads), as well as highlighting the benefits of coach travel today.

Graham praised transport minister Baroness (Charlotte) Vere commenting that she has already attracted the two hashtags 'Baroness of Buses' and 'Princess of Potholes.'

"We need her to become the 'Countess of Coaches'," he said, "and really have her demonstrating a commitment to, and helping raise the profile of our industry."

Following Graham, Dan Hayes from the Low Carbon Vehicle Partnership gave an update on how the organisation is helping to accelerate the shift to low carbon road transport, a topic that has been featured several times in these pages.

Dave Parry scores a hit!

The third conference session, which took place the following day, after a well-attended Yorkshire Showcase exhibition, saw Fiona Mulliner, Director of Commercial Ventures & Domestic Tourism at London & Partners join with Julian Ridge, Sustainable Transport Manager with City of York Council to offer their thoughts of coach tourism in the two cities.

Fiona outlined the agency's new marketing campaign 'Let's Do London,' saying that marketing collateral is available for operators wanting to promote the capital to customers. Julian said that the city of York appreciates the business that coach tourism brings to the city, but that limited kerb space, and many competing users, presents its own challenges in providing drop-off and pick-up points away from the main coach parks. He said the next Local Transport Plan would be addressing the issue.

Joining Fiona and Julian on the panel were Dave Parry, of West Midlands-based Parrys International, and Daniel Kirby, of Essex-based Kirbys Coaches. Both expressed their concerns over parking in London.

“Drivers just don’t want to go anymore,” said Dave Parry. “The capital is last on the list when destinations are being considered.”

Daniel Kirby highlighted the social implications arising from London now being less attractive as a destination.

“A coach brings 50 people who probably don’t want to navigate stations or the underground. Cities appear not to want coaches. It’s clear that they’re pushing us out.”

Directing a question to Julian, Roger Bull of Kettering-based RB Travel explained that in Strasbourg, coaches can use the Park & Ride site for a fee of 22 euros that also includes a tram ride into the city for passengers.

“Why can’t York’s Park and Ride network offer bus travel into the city?” he asked.

With both Fiona and Julian clearly surprised at the ferocity of some of the questions, from both the panel and the floor, it was down to Dave Parry who scored a direct hit.

“Just where do you park in London?” he asked. “We drop off at The Waldorf Hotel but have to park at the coach park at the Tower of London. We’re good for the environment, but we’re not being taken care of.”

Bringing the conference to a close, John Wales said that a drop in the number of visitors to a destination due to access or parking challenges would affect revenue. “Perhaps that might prompt a change of thinking!”

Comment

A well organised conference, with its attendant dinners and socialising, gave delegates plenty to think about and enjoy. It is clear that now, more than ever before, the industry needs to be singing the eco-friendly coach tourism message, singing it loud and singing it from the rooftops. It was good to hear Graham Vidler and John Wales talk of the CPT and CTA working more closely together. That partnership, combined with the forthcoming CPT Coach Strategy, should go some way to generating a much-needed voice for the coach and coach tourism industry. That could be the best news this industry has had in a long, long time.



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