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Death of the coach tour? Future of the holidays loved by older Britons hangs in the balance



UK coach tour operators have been hit hard by the lockdown, with many ceasing business as a result CREDIT: ISTOCK

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By **Tom Mulvihill**, TRAVEL WRITER

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While the world ponders the future of airlines and cruise companies in a post-coronavirus future, little attention is being paid to the challenges facing coach tour operators.

The chief issue is the same as those faced by large swathes of the travel industry: will they be able to operate under post-lockdown restrictions, and will customers return?

More than five million Britons take a coach holiday abroad each year, and a further 18 million people book day trips through UK coach companies. But the hazards of travelling in a relatively confined space with 50 other passengers, often for extended periods of time, could see these numbers tumble.

- [Why you're wrong about coach tours – they are the greatest way to travel](https://www.telegraph.co.uk/travel/tours/escorted-tours-why-you-are-wrong-about-coach-holidays/)

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A major concern for the coach industry is the age of its customer base. Older people are more at risk from developing severe Covid-19 symptoms, and roughly three quarters of coach tourists are aged 50 or over – with the largest proportion of passengers in the 65-74 age bracket.

“We’re facing two difficult questions at the moment: what will social distancing guidelines look like in the future, and what will the Government’s advice be for older members of the public,” said Steve Rooney, of the Coach Tourism Association.



Social distancing guidelines will be crucial to deciding the future of coach travel CREDIT: ISTOCK

As yet, the Government has yet to announce its plan for exiting the state of lockdown that has been in place since late March. Until more detailed guidelines are handed down, coach operators are unable to plot a course out of their current predicament.

In the meantime, they are doing what they can to prepare for customers’ return. Cleaning protocols have been tightened across the board, and some companies are beginning to use fogging systems to disinfect interiors.

It speaks of a confidence that coach tours will resume in the near future, and that the industry must be ready to meet consumer demand once lockdown restrictions are lifted.

“Travel will return, and when it does coach tourism can get into gear quite quickly,” said Rooney. “Domestic tourism will likely be most people’s first priority, and that’s where coach companies in particular will be able to help.”

Like much of the UK, the country’s coach industry is currently at a standstill.

While a few companies are turning over their resources to help the public effort – delivering food parcels or shuttling key workers – the vast majority have had to furlough staff and, in some cases, sideline their fleets with Statutory Off Road Notifications in order to claim back vehicle tax.

Some find themselves in even more serious circumstances.



The coach industry is hoping that a demand for domestic travel will help it recover after lockdown CREDIT: ISTOCK

Shearings, the largest coach tour operator in Europe, has put administrators on standby as it seeks new financial backers to save the firm from insolvency, according to Sky News.

Several others have resorted to large-scale redundancies, despite the Government’s furlough scheme.

Daish’s Holidays, a Bournemouth-based company with 25 coaches and 10 hotels, laid off 177 members of staff back in March.

Abta has reported the failures of three coach tour organisers in the last week alone, with many more choosing to wrap up business rather than go into liquidation.

A spokesman for Abta said: “Every day that goes by without Government help for travel and tourism, which is one of the worst affected industries, risks more failures in both the domestic and outbound sector, many thousands of job losses and the consumer detriment that will follow.”

Will coach tours survive the coronavirus? Share your view in the comments section below.

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