

# The Guardian



## Without help 40,000 jobs could go, warn UK coach tour operators

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**Henry McDonald**

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Coach tourism operators have said 40,000 jobs will be put at risk because of the coronavirus lockdown unless their business is reclassified as part of the leisure industry.

The body representing 300 coach tourist enterprises across the UK said that as they are not deemed to be part of the leisure sector, their firms are not entitled to benefits such as rates relief.

The Coach Tourism Association (CTA) said its members, which run tours throughout Britain and Northern Ireland, generate an estimated £6bn a year for the national economy.

The warning comes as more than 2,000 jobs were lost after the collapse at the weekend of one of the largest coach tour operators in the UK, Shearings.

Shearings, which is owned by the Specialist Leisure Group, announced the closure of the business on its website on Friday evening: "All tours, cruises, holidays and hotel breaks booked

with the Specialist Leisure Group have been cancelled and will not be rescheduled.”

Other coach operators have told the Guardian they have lost hundreds of bookings since the lockdown. One tour guide on Merseyside has switched to driving delivery vans for Argos during the pandemic.

John Wales, the chairman of the Coach Tourism Association, said his organisation wanted tour coaches to be treated the same as other leisure industries that have received state fiscal support like restaurants, hotels and pubs.

“The key action we are looking for from government is to recognise coach tour operators as leisure businesses. We are aware that many of our coach operator members are being denied support that is being made available to other tourism businesses in terms of rates relief, which is crazy; our members whole business is about tourism and leisure.”

Wales said coach tourism felt forgotten and unrecognised. He added that coach tours could play a vital role in any “staycation” surge in holidays in Britain after the lockdown.

“Coach operators are understandably aggrieved when they see billionaire airline owners go cap in hand for support from the government, when the largely family-owned coach tour sector delivering holidays for millions of customers is unrecognised and unsupported.”

Steve Barnes has been picking up tourists in Liverpool city centre for short-term and day trips around Merseyside for the last 30 years.

Last year, Barnes said he sold 33,000 seats and was expecting a rise in demand for his tours this holiday season particularly because 2020 marks 80 years since the birth of John Lennon.

During the lockdown Barnes has had to earn a living instead driving Argos vans around the city.

He said he had been preparing for 220 coach tours in the first weeks of summer on his “Liverpool Living Memories” trips. These would have included visits to the original homes of the Beatles, The Cavern Club and other attractions connected with the band that two university studies estimate raises around £89m for Liverpool.

On a potential “staycation” surge after lockdown, Barnes said: “There is the fear factor to consider here. Are people going to go back on coaches again for two hours or even seven hours inside a coach with up to 50 other tourists? Consumer confidence after this lockdown will take a long time to build up and in the meantime this industry is going to need proper support. Because halving the numbers on coaches to say 25 to create social distancing on board will just not be economical.”

One suggestion to counter cross-infection fears has been to limit coach tours to open top, open air buses only.

Across the Irish Sea in Belfast, the coach tour guide Billy Scott said the expected increase in tourist traffic due mainly to a record number of cruise ships visiting Northern Ireland has evaporated.

Scott, who ran tours to beauty spots such as the Giant’s Causeway and the set of Games of Thrones, said he knew of one tour operator who had invested £300,000 in one new coach to cope with the cruise ship surge.

“We got Northern Ireland to be one of the most popular cruise ship destinations and that is why so many people invested heavily in the coach tour industry. Now it is going to take years to

get that market back so in the meantime we have to rely on the ‘staycation’ business. Which will mean 70-seater buses cut to about a quarter to maintain social distancing,” he said.

But the CTA insisted that open top buses were not a practical solution for the entire industry.

“The open-top sector is a nice operation used particularly for city sightseeing and not easy to integrate into general day-tour work which needs an all-weather option,” John Wales said.

He added that coach tour companies would be ready to provide “rigorous cleaning regimes” before and after journeys as well as strictly-imposed hand washing facilities onboard.

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