

The Washington Post

Tour firms retool for pandemic travel

Operators reinvent themselves by adopting new safety measures and offering enhanced services

BY RENEE SKLAREW

Before the pandemic, Joey Parrott, an inveterate traveler, had plans to visit Norway, India and Italy. But when these borders closed to Americans, his trips were all canceled. After staying at home for five months, the retired banker from Dalton, Ga., was eager to travel again. He and his sister Cathy Barker signed up for a Collette tour to South Dakota.

"It had to be domestic because no other country wants us," Parrott said.

His friends questioned his decision to travel before there was a coronavirus vaccine, but Parrott assured them he would be cautious. His travel pod was impressed by Collette's safety measures — regular temperature checks, stringent sanitizing and social distancing. Their bus held only 15 passengers, with plenty of room to spread out. Everyone was required to wear a mask on the bus, during guided tours, at attractions and at restaurants, unless they were eating.

"Nobody complained about it," Parrott reports. "At Mount Rushmore, it was fairly crowded since we got there on July Fourth, but we tried to keep our distance, and most people had a mask on."

Collette is one of many tour operators that have reinvented themselves for pandemic travel. After stopping all tours for months, the company has responded to the changed landscape by developing new protocols and offering new services. For those seeking a way to resume travel despite the challenges posed by the pandemic, small group tours offer an alternative to going it alone.

Tour operators have always handled the logistics of travel for their customers. In the pandemic era, those services have expanded to include coronavirus testing and

precautions, as well. Nearly every tour operator interviewed prioritizes getting over the first hurdle — adhering to coronavirus testing requirements. Most can arrange for testing throughout the world, and they can provide medical care and a place to quarantine if needed.

Among the other services now being offered by tour operators are scheduling visits to museums during off-hours, disinfecting communal spaces and arranging private dining at restaurants vetted for safety and sanitation. Most important, tour companies typically have a network of local guides who can respond quickly to the needs of the group and individual travelers.

A few months after stay-at-home orders were lifted, Edward Piegza, founder of Classic Journeys, began receiving requests to craft tours for his clients. The luxury tour operator set up the first tour for two families who wanted to plan an August trip to Alaska, a state that required a negative coronavirus test within 72 hours of arrival. Initially, the logistics team arranged for the clients to test in their home state of Florida. But the group wanted to stop in Jackson Hole, Wyo., first. Classic Journeys scrambled to accommodate them. "We had our guest services team find a clinic that would do a drive-through PCR test with a 24-hour turnaround, so they could have it done in Wyoming and fly into Anchorage," Piegza said.

Classic Journeys has begun to design tours for clients traveling to international destinations that remain open to Americans. This month, the company will send a prescreened group of travelers to Ecuador, which requires a coronavirus test within 10 days of boarding a flight. A local guide will greet group members at the Quito airport

and take them to a hotel, where a medical professional will conduct a PCR test. They will remain in Quito for two nights, then with proof of a negative result, fly to the Galápagos Islands, which requires a negative test within 96 hours of arrival.

"It's incumbent on tour operators to help travelers remove hurdles," Piegza says. "These restrictions are in place for a good reason, and we are here to help our clients make sense of it, to make their travel seamless and safe."

Some travelers who had trips canceled because of border closures and shelter-in-place orders were unpleasantly surprised to discover their travel insurance didn't cover "unforeseen circumstances" such as the pandemic. Recognizing that travelers who lost money on prepaid trips are skittish about buying travel insurance, tour operators will now help them identify the best policies to cover medical care or trip interruption. Some companies are also offering tours that cover any unforeseen expenses they may incur on the trip.

Before her group traveled to Mexico in October, Phyllis Stoller, founder of the Women's Travel Group (WTG), encouraged her clients to purchase a Worldwide Trip Protector policy from Travel Insured that covers preexisting conditions and evacuations. If a traveler gets sick, WTG will arrange for local medical care with an English-speaking escort, set up a place to quarantine and provide someone to stay with travelers while they recuperate. Additionally, WTG will assist with rebooking flights, talking to doctors and submitting insurance claims after they return. Since the company caters to solo female travelers over the age of 45, Stoller regularly speaks to adult children to reassure them that their mothers will

be cared for if they get sick.

Bruce Poon Tip is the founder of G Adventures, the largest small-group tour company in the world. Like other tour companies, it has a virus mediation plan in place. "We will get the whole group tested if someone shows symptoms and provide escorted medical attention," Poon Tip says. No Americans are traveling on G Adventures tours because most tourist-friendly international borders are closed to U.S. citizens or require a 14-day quarantine. For the company's Canadian and European customers, tours focus on outdoor adventure in places such as Switzerland, Croatia and Greece. "The countries we're traveling to have covid-19 transmission under control, so that's why they allow travelers to come in," Poon Tip said.

"We're not back, but we are getting people traveling for the first time. These travelers are early adopters, and it's been very good seeing pictures of our people coming back and putting them on our social channels. One trip was trekking in Mont Blanc, Switzerland, and there's a picture of them walking up the mountain six feet apart."

One way to evaluate the safety measures implemented by a tour operator is to compare their list

with the 11 protocols created by the World Travel & Tourism Council (WTTC), after consultation with the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and the World Health Organization. "These protocols help to protect both the travelers and the workers — they have to do both — such as mandatory wearing of masks, sanitizing hands and physical spaces, training of employees. All those things are aligned," said Gloria Guevara, CEO of the WTTC.

The WTTC has approved protocols in hotels, convention centers, airports, attractions and more than 120 destinations, including Hawaii, Las Vegas and Fort Lauderdale, Fla. Among dozens of tour operators, G Adventures, Intrepid, Viator and Abercrombie & Kent have all earned the #SafeTravels stamp.

Guevara recommended talking to a travel agent or calling the tour operator directly to ask about the protocols they use. "If the tour operator has implemented the Global Protocols, you should be okay," she said. "Then they've done everything possible to reduce transmission of covid-19 while traveling."

Terry Dale, CEO of the United States Tour Operators Associa-

tion, said that while tour operators do their best to enforce compliance and safety precautions, there is always a risk. Dale predicted travelers will adjust to that risk just as they did after 9/11.

"The people in our industry are doing exceptionally well — whether it's hotels, restaurants, attractions — as caretakers of their customers," Dale said. "But the customer has a shared responsibility. We are in this together and need to take our responsibility seriously."

Despite the challenges of the last eight months and a near-complete shutdown of the travel industry, Dale was optimistic: "When people travel again, customers will recognize that the tour operators' safety net is even more important."

For Joey Parrott, traveling with a tour group felt a lot less risky. He has another Colette tour coming up in December. "I can't stop living," he said. "I'm just going to keep going, be cautious, avoid unnecessary contact and go from there."

travel@washpost.com

Sklarew is a writer based in D.C. Find her on Twitter: @TravelandDish.





CLASSIC JOURNEY

TOP: Trekkers stay six feet apart while hiking Mount Blanc in the Alps, adhering to guidelines enforced by tour operator G Adventures. ABOVE: A woman watches a giant tortoise in the Galápagos Islands, where tourists must have a negative coronavirus test within 96 hours of arrival.