

How Tour Operators Are Adapting as Travel Restarts

What to expect if you're considering guided group trips in 2021

by Ken Budd, AARP, April 6, 2021 | Comments: 0



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If you think it's tough running a tour company in a pandemic, guess what? You're right. As governments issued travel bans in March 2020, tour operators scrambled to whisk their clients home. Some companies shifted from international to domestic tours; others, such as [Exodus Travels](#) and not-for-profit [Road Scholar](#), hosted virtual programs. Every company canceled tours, which was painful for clients and tour operators alike.

"We plan these tours years in advance," says Matt Thompson, brand manager for [Country Walkers](#), a Vermont company offering both guided and self-guided walking trips. "It's really depressing to see them canceled."

One year later, companies are rebounding. In a survey by the United States Tour Operators Association, 63 percent of respondents reported an increase in new bookings for 2021. Some of

that surging interest is in last-minute trips. In normal years, for instance, travelers book domestic tours with [Austin Adventures](#) four to eight months in advance. In 2021, the Montana-based company's U.S. trips will likely sell out by June (though it's adding new departures). Many tour operators are seeing similar demand, and as more Americans receive their vaccinations, [some travelers want to leave home now](#).

"Clients are booking domestic trips very last minute, such as calling today for a trip within a week," says Massimo Prioreshi, president and CEO of the California-based adventure-travel company [MT Sobek](#).

After more than a year of social distancing, though, the word "group" might make more cautious travelers cringe. To reduce such trepidation, companies are emphasizing safety and smaller groups.

Here are some ways group travel is adapting in the pandemic era.

Infection-prevention measures

Companies are emphasizing staff training and [COVID](#) protocols based on guidelines from governments, health organizations and medical professionals. Safety measures address everything from air circulation and social distancing in vans to the sterilization of high-touch areas. And you can forget about buffet-style meals.

No details are too small, no item too sterile. [Backroads](#), which has run more than 200 of its trips since the pandemic began, assigns equipment such as hiking poles to individuals at the start of a trip to minimize gear sharing (it also sterilizes equipment daily). [Austin Adventures](#) is working to provide more cabin-style lodging to emphasize social distancing. Nearly every tour operator is checking guests' and guides' temperatures each day and requiring a COVID test within hours or days of traveling. Guests typically must fill out a health declaration form or officially acknowledge that they understand and accept the company's guidelines.

No companies appear to be [requiring vaccinations](#). That could change, though clients may not need encouragement. A [Road Scholar](#) survey found that 98 percent of its travelers have received or intend to receive a COVID-19 vaccine.

Most tour operators are also prepared if a guest becomes sick. [Road Scholar's](#) programs include a plan that offers 24-hour assistance in the event of an emergency and medical coverage for anyone who becomes ill overseas. If a traveler on an [EF Go Ahead](#) tour is diagnosed with COVID-19 or required to quarantine while on tour, the Massachusetts-based company will provide or arrange support — including lodging, meals and translation services — at no additional expense.

Smaller groups

Tour clients often prefer the intimacy of small groups, and COVID has only increased that desire. In response, some tour operators are limiting capacity to allow for social distancing.

Road Scholar recently introduced “Micro Group” learning adventures, which limit attendance to 12 travelers. The average group size on an MT Sobek tour is eight people. Another pandemic trend: Clients want to book tours as small groups of family members or friends, and companies are responding by launching more private-group options.

"There is definitely interest in exclusive or custom tours, with people looking to travel within their 'COVID bubble,' " says Dan Austin, president of Austin Adventures, which accepts up to 12 adults on regular trips and up to 18 on family trips, though it will accommodate two to 20 guests for custom or exclusive journeys.



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Waimea Canyon in Kauai

A focus on U.S. travel and less crowded areas

Because of COVID, some companies are avoiding heavily crowded areas. Exodus' guided group trips, which average 10 travelers, largely skip big cities for less visited destinations. And most of those destinations are in the U.S.

Many domestic trips are close to selling out. "We've seen this in the past when there's a crisis," says Steve Spivak, vice president of global sales and partner relations for Tauck, an operator of high-end guided land-based tours and cruises. "People start traveling again closer to home."

Backroads has nearly sold out its domestic trips for 2021, and a new Underground Railroad tour from Savannah, Georgia, to Charleston, South Carolina, sold out in less than a week. Other

companies report interest in areas such as national parks and California's wine regions. Alaska could be particularly hot, and not just because it has America's lowest population density (about 1.28 people per square mile). Canada has extended its cruise ship ban until February 2022, which will prevent some cruise lines from resuming Alaska trips, since ships need to enter Canadian waters. The lack of cruises could boost interest in land-based tours.

"We forecast an uptick in trips to Alaska as cruises remove it from their 2021 schedules," says Austin of Austin Adventures.

Many tour companies plan to relaunch their international tours later in the year, and some travelers can't wait to venture abroad. EF Go Ahead Tours reports recent interest in trips to nearby countries that are beginning to open to tourism, such as Iceland (the Icelandic government announced last month that foreign travelers can visit if they present a certificate for either a COVID vaccination or a previous COVID infection). Some of Country Walkers' clients are booking European tours for the fall.

"I think there's a lot of optimism that the world will open up by June or July," says Thompson.

Tauck hopes to soon resume tours to Egypt, which requires foreigners to present a negative COVID test no more than 72 hours before arrival (and does not require visitors to quarantine). But restarting tours involves more than addressing entry and safety requirements. It also means assessing whether wary guests are ready to return to these locations. For many companies, those evaluations are ongoing.

Flexible booking policies and perks for booking ahead

For many travelers, summer or fall is too soon for travel. Many companies are seeing big demand for trips in 2022 and, in some cases, 2023. "We're getting a huge number of inquiries about 2022," says Thompson of Country Walkers. To encourage booking, some are offering perks. EF Go Ahead Tours is advertising a \$200 discount for travelers who book trips now for 2023 if they pay in full or in installments using the company's AutoPay program. Austin Adventures is honoring 2021 pricing on 2022 trips until June 1. Exodus recently introduced Dateless 1st Departures vouchers, which allow travelers to book a trip without a departure date. When a country reopens for North American travelers, those who purchased a voucher are guaranteed a spot on the company's first tour to that location.

Many companies are also touting the flexibility of their cancellation policies. When the pandemic hit, Road Scholar gave full refunds to anyone who requested them. Exodus promises a full refund if it cancels a trip for any reason or if a guest cancels due to COVID-19.

<https://www.aarp.org/travel/travel-tips/safety/info-2021/how-tour-operators-are-adapting.html>