

Tour Operators Say Clients Are Shifting Destinations Rather than Just Staying Home

by [David Cogswell](#) / March 09, 2020



Austin Adventures helped one client move from an Italy bike trip to a custom adventure in the Black Hills of South Dakota. Photo: Shutterstock.com.

The coronavirus continues to present a moving target as it continues its global rampage, but tour operators are seeing some positive signs emerging from the hysteria.

While the story evolves every day, tour operators are finding that some clients are reacting to the crisis by shifting their destination preferences rather than just staying home. And some are just postponing, placing their bets on containment of the disease in the long run.

While new cases of COVID-19 continue to appear in countries where they had not occurred before, there are some positive signs in places that have been previously affected.

China, where the disease originated and where the vast majority of cases have occurred, has begun to see a decline in the number of active cases. The Chinese government reported hopefully that [new cases may drop to zero](#) by mid-March.

In response to the apparent success of the Chinese government in containing the spread of the virus, Apple and Starbucks have indicated they are reopening their facilities in China.

Shifts in preferences

And tour operators are seeing signs of life in the traveling public.

Nish Patel, president of Mayflower Tours, told Travel Market Report, “We have seen a small uptick in North America tours, but not a huge one.”

And there are more indications of a cooling off of the hysteria.

“It is not simply a matter of people moving from international travel back home to domestic U.S. travel,” Patel said. “Our bookings for river cruises are still coming in for both 2020 and 2021.”

Dan Austin, president of Austin Adventures, told Travel Market Report that his company is seeing “movement” in its clients. “Just last night, we helped an agent move a guest from an Italy bike trip (not with us) to a custom adventure in the Black Hills of South Dakota,” said Austin. “While we have only had one cancelation (a high-risk guest heading to Kenya), we have had a dozen or so moves. Domestic seems to be clearly the safe bet right now. We are actually adding more domestic product in an attempt to get ahead of it.”

Ashish Sanghrajka, president of Big Five Tours & Expeditions, is seeing similar movements in destination preferences to what he has seen during previous epidemics. “While there is a slight pause, there is a shift towards Costa Rica and Peru, which we saw during similar conditions in the past, as well,” said Sanghrajka.

Experienced travelers see opportunities

Big Five is also seeing responses from its more experienced clients, who are seeing opportunities for themselves during the slowdown.

“There is a parallel shift starting, as well,” Sanghrajka said. “More seasoned travelers with a clear understanding have seen this with H1N1 or Ebola and know they can have a better choice of accommodations in places like the Thailand coast where, a few months ago, everything was full and locked down with minimum night stays.”

Sanghrajka reminds clients that the tourism industry serves other purposes than just indulging the pleasures of vacationers and that there are higher purposes for which to support the industry around the world.

“Travel represents almost \$6 trillion in the global economy,” he said. “Worldwide, one in 10 ten jobs on average come from tourism. Without tourism, you saw poaching increase in safari Africa. You saw women’s rights stop progressing. With tourism, you see a kingdom working in harmony like Morocco, you see innovation like Costa Rica, you see genuine gratitude for international visitors like in Colombia, and even a progression of new finds in places like Egypt.

“There are direct correlations to tourism and geopolitical stability when tourism represents 10% of a GDP. Proof of that is in Ethiopia, Egypt, Zimbabwe, Colombia, and hopefully one day, Venezuela, too.”

Postponing rather than canceling

There is no doubt that a general reluctance to travel continues to prevail in the marketplace, but there are signs that it may be temporary. “We were seeing a bit of alternate bookings,” said Jon Nicholson, director of product and planning, for Zegrahm Expeditions. “However, now with the spread of COVID-19 outside of China, people seem to be concerned that it can appear anywhere. For guests who are concerned about programs operating in Asia, we are offering flexibility on changes and promoting trips in Africa and the South America, but have not seen any large movement.

“I think, right now, for the longer-term, guests are taking a ‘wait-and-see attitude’ to see if the virus ‘peaks’ in spring as predicted. We do have a long booking window, so guests who are likely looking at 2021 programs can wait a while before booking.”

“We are noticing that guests seem to be less nervous about committing to travel farther out,” said Jon Grutzner, president of Insight Vacations and Luxury Gold. “We released our 2021 Preview Collection earlier than ever before this year because of the large volume of demand from our guests — offering them the opportunity to get the best prices and travel with peace of mind.”

The Globus family of brands is seeing a trend toward drawing back to domestic North American travel. “Since late January, Globus and Cosmos have seen a surge of bookings for travel to and through North America, up 10 percent, year-over-year over that time span,” said Cory McGillivray, channel marketing manager, with the Globus family of brands.

“Certain regions in Europe are also doing quite well, despite the recent coronavirus news. Specifically, we’re seeing an influx of bookings to Spain, Portugal, Ireland, Scotland and Greece. Eastern Europe is also seeing an increase in interest and bookings from all brands.”

Avanti Destinations, which offers independent travel in Europe, Latin America and Asia, introduced its first programs on the African continent last summer, and is now seeing some surprising advantages to being on the African continent during the coronavirus crisis.

“Morocco is a destination where we have seen strong, steady bookings growth since we introduced it in August,” said Paul Barry, president of Avanti Destinations, “and that trend continues today.”

For Perillo Tours, which has built its brand over generations as being “synonymous with Italy,” it’s a waiting game now. “We’re 75% Italy,” Steve Perillo, president of Perillo Tours, told Travel Market Report. “But we also have lively programs to Spain and Hawaii, and our ad hoc group department. We’re just getting a tiny number of bookings – but way more cancellations. I believe the fear of being on an aircraft with strangers is becoming stronger than the fear of any given destination.”

The importance of travel professionals

Dan Austin, of Austin Adventures, reminds clients that the coronavirus crisis is one more example of why it is important for travelers to align themselves with industry professionals in the tour operator and travel advisor industry segments, so they can have the support of the global network of experts who are keeping up-to-the-minute watch on changes at the destinations.

He offered what he called “a shameless plug for using a respected travel professional.”

“It is without question our number one priority is to keep all of our travelers (and staff) safe and out of harm’s way at all times,” Austin said. “This is our commitment without fail to do, whatever it takes to keep you safe and make decisions every day to do just that. Far beyond today’s virus concerns, we work tirelessly, 24 hours a day, to evaluate a wide range of ever-changing conditions.

“We do so by staying on top of the details and educating ourselves at a level most might find daunting. We have an extensive network of tools and experts (often on the ground) that we communicate with 24 hours a day, every day.”