

DESTINATIONS

LATIN AMERICA | LATA

Q&A

COLIN STEWART, CHAIRMAN, LATIN AMERICAN TRAVEL ASSOCIATION

INTERVIEW BY Natalie Marsh

Q. You've been elected chair of Lata for the third term – what are your priorities for this year?

A. It's a continuation of the work that we've undertaken, which is to establish Latin America in the hearts and the minds of travel agents in the UK and promote the region of Latin America to the UK market to compete with some of the other regions of the world. That's really one of our objectives, to establish Latin America as an absolutely viable alternative and promote the fantastic array of reasons to travel there, because it is truly remarkable.

Q. How have you worked with agents in the past?

A. In research that we did a few years back, 60% of agents questioned said they had very little or no knowledge of Latin America. Working with agents over the last year and a half, we've been able to see big advancements in terms of awareness and understanding. We launched our e-learning platform on Online Travel Training and that helped establish the basics of the region. We've held travel agent webinars and broadcast from actual destinations and accommodation. Our ongoing strategy is to continue the online webinars, but also to look at going back out to meet agents face to face, when we can.

Q. You've got Lata Expo in June. Is there a bigger sense of excitement this year?

A. We're excited to meet face to face. It will be our ninth Lata Expo and it's taking place at Evolution



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London, Battersea, on June 13-15. The idea of getting the Latin American community back together, whether it be exhibitors, buyers or agents, is much needed.

Q. What has the Lata Foundation helped with over the past year?

A. We raised money for workers in Machu Picchu, Peru, and were able to support them and their families for more than a year. That was a huge benefit to those wonderful people who give the tours and support to tourists. With lockdown, they haven't had much ability to earn. This campaign basically fed families during this difficult period, which has been remarkable.

Q. Has there been an uptick in bookings to Latin America since travel restrictions eased?

A. Definitely. Now there are no Foreign Office travel advisories

– there will be destination-specific requirements regarding Covid, but removing the last advisories has allowed the region to be completely open for travellers. A number of our tour operators are seeing significant growth in terms of enquiries and bookings. But it's important to put into context that we've had two years of almost no travel. I'm cautiously optimistic. The initial reports we're getting are very encouraging, but there's still a long way to go.

Q. How important is consumer confidence for travel to Latin America?

A. Confidence is key. Once you remove restrictions, then there's still the natural question

COLIN'S TOP TIP

Don't fear selling Latin America. It covers every type of travel experience. If a customer is coming in with not really any idea where to go, but has an interest in a certain travel experience, I guarantee agents that Latin America will be able to meet that need.



people will ask, which is "what if it changes?". But we're seeing it in the numbers; confidence is coming back. People are much more aware that things can change and we're not naive to that. As a member association,

we ensure the communication is clear and we supply the latest information. People are seeing the benefit of booking through an agent and the trade because of that reassurance.

Q. Where will your next trip to Latin America be?

A. My wife and I were celebrating our 20th anniversary about two years ago. We had booked a trip to Buenos Aires and we were going to go to Iguazu Falls for three or four days. We still want to do that so the plan is that we will definitely head back down there within the next 12 months. **TW**