

# Stepping back out

As escorted tours restart across Europe,  
Katie McGonagle finds out what's new in the sector

A tour to Italy, Greece or the UK wouldn't normally cause much of a stir in a sector where operators take guests to the farthest-flung, least-travelled regions of the world on a regular basis. But when it's the first departure in months, the first chance to show their Covid-19 safety protocols in practice and the first opportunity to remind customers of the joys of travelling again, it's very much a cause for celebration.

It has been heartening to see the likes of Riviera Travel, Newmarket Holidays, G Adventures, Intrepid Travel and Explore resuming departures for the first time in five months. Yet even while trips were on pause, escorted touring operators weren't – they've been busily reshaping tours and revamping booking terms to help you give customers the confidence to book again.

#### WHAT'S NEW ON TOUR

While the touring experience remains as enticing as ever, there are a few small tweaks – some more apparent than others – to make sure tours operate within new guidelines. On Cosmos and Globus trips, that means health screening on arrival, the end of seat rotation on coaches with a guarantee you'll sit only

with members of your party – meaning solo travellers will have a free seat next to them – plus queue jumps at attractions to avoid crowding.

Sister companies Trafalgar, Costsaver, Insight Vacations and Luxury Gold have brought in 'wellbeing directors' on every trip of 20 or more guests, to ensure new safety and hygiene measures are delivered, freeing the tour leader to focus on guests. Business development director Rachel Coffey says: "Travelling with a guided operator can provide more reassurance than travelling independently as we can ensure every element of the holiday experience – from hotels to transport, restaurants to attractions – adheres to our strict protocols. We have done the due diligence and removed the confusion so guests can concentrate on having a great holiday."

Group size can be one of the biggest sticking points, so many operators have limited capacity – for Insight, departures of 24 guests rather than the usual 40 are being offered on every Europe trip; for Latin Routes, groups are limited to 16; and for On The Go Tours, signature small-group tours have been reduced from 24 to 20.

G Adventures has introduced a Travel with ➤



### top tip

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**CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE:** Cycling in the Lake District; small-group sailing trip in Naxos, Greece; gardens of Hever Castle, Kent **PICTURES:** G Adventures/Greg Snell Photography; Intrepid Travel; G Adventures; Shutterstock

Confidence Plus collection featuring 37 trips that guarantee smaller group sizes (up to 12), private transport and 50% off private rooms. There's also the option to 'book your bubble', reserving a private departure for friends or family on any one of 80 itineraries. Departures restarted this month and popular options have included its Local Living trips in Italy – where guests stay in one place rather than changing hotels – and small-group sailing trips in Greece.

### WHAT'S NEW ON BOOKINGS

Prior to Covid-19, cancellation policies and rebooking terms were low on customers' lists of priorities, but with ongoing uncertainty at home and abroad, added flexibility or free date changes can be a major selling point in getting customers over the line.

Newmarket Holidays has added 'Covid cover' to its travel insurance policy at no extra cost, and has updated its terms so customers can amend their date or get a refund if Foreign Office advice means they can't travel or, if quarantine is imposed, amend their dates free up to 21 days before departure.

Exodus Travels and Intrepid have, likewise, committed to free date changes or amendments up to 21 days before departure; for Insight and Trafalgar, it's 30 days; and for Back-Roads Touring, deposits are transferable up to 40 days prior to travel.

APT has updated its flexible booking policy, offering free amendments up to 100 days before travel for new bookings made by November 30, and says demand has spiked for forward bookings to Canada, Australia and New Zealand over the past few weeks.

Just You and Travelsphere are also offering customers the option to change their booking as often as they need to up to 45 days in advance. Managing director Alastair Campbell says: "We are supporting our customers and trade partners by allowing them to change their bookings for free. As a way of saying thank you to all the loyal customers who have stood by us over these difficult months, we are extending the offer to include all existing bookings."

It's not just about making changes – booking discounts and low-deposit offers are also helping to drive sales. Titan is offering £49 deposits for tours booked before March 1, 2021; Insight and Trafalgar's deposits have been reduced to £49; while Latin Routes has discounted all tours by £200 up to October 31, meaning its Costa Rica Highlights tour now comes in at £1,999 for 11 days. Product manager Catrin Davies says: "We are very excited to launch our full group touring programme with revamped itineraries and more departures for 2021-22. Our Make Your Day Individual concept remains popular, where clients can choose one of three carefully curated experiences most-suited to their interests on selected days, at no extra cost." **TW**

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### NEW UK TOURS

**Arena Rail Holidays** has added to its UK portfolio for spring and summer 2021. New tour Historic Railways and Medieval Durham travels along the South Tynedale Railway, the highest narrow-gauge railway in the country, from £495 for five days.

**Exodus Travels** has seen good sales of self-guided UK trips, prompting expansion of its domestic range. Popular trips include walking tour Jewels of the Jurassic Coast, from £729 for five days.

**Back-Roads Touring** has added an English Country Gardens tour, visiting stately homes and their grounds across southeast England; from £2,079 for eight days.

**Explore** has launched seven UK trips focusing on walking or cycling along coastal paths or in Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty. Cycle Hadrian's Wall is a 100-mile journey via Roman sites and beautiful countryside, from £545 for four nights.

**Intrepid Travel's** new Intrepid Retreats – shorter tours based in a single location – has seen its strongest sales on active UK trips such as cycling in the Lake District (from £495) and walking in Cornwall (£480).

**UK government guidelines** now prohibit gatherings of more than six people, meaning tour groups may be split into smaller parties.