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Tour Guides and Museums See a Healthy Rebound in Places That Have Eased Restrictions

Sean O'Neill, Skift - Jun 10, 2020 1:00 am



Skift Take

The recovery for sightseeing, attractions, and experiences is still in early stages in Europe and North America. But it is happening faster than expected in some segments and countries.

— Sean O'Neill

Several signs point to a modest but meaningful recovery in bookings for sightseeing and activities and in ticket sales for museums and attractions. Some operators are adopting new technologies to try to maximize the rebound as governments ease travel restrictions related to the coronavirus pandemic.

In European countries that have eased restrictions, domestic tourism is rising.

Online bookings for tour and activity operators in Germany, Austria, and Switzerland in May were only 15 percent down from the level of May 2019, said Bookingkit, a significant provider of reservations software for operators in those countries. European operators are rebounding from minimal bookings in April.

Iceland is leading the way in recovery, with notable rebounds in Ireland, New Zealand, and Latvia, according to booking data from Bókun, a provider of booking management software that's owned by Tripadvisor. Weekly online experience bookings via Bókun tripled last week, compared to last month.

"In Switzerland, for example, some of the glacier look-out points on mountains

are seeing level equal to previous years,” said Olan O’Sullivan, CEO at Trekksoft, a maker of booking software.

Operators primarily in Switzerland and Norway, for example, have seen online bookings rise 56 percent in the past seven days, week-over-week, as processed through Trekksoft.

Almost one in four operators worldwide are already open, and 48 percent are planning to reopen by the end of June, according to an ongoing survey of about 1,400 experience providers by Arival.

“Operators are getting into reopening mode,” said Douglas Quinby, co-founder and CEO of Arival. “It’s still very early in the reopening cycle, but there is at least a glimmer of light now at the end of what has been a very, very dark tunnel.”

MUSEUMS TAPPING TECH

Up until now, museums have typically avoided so-called dynamic pricing, where prices for tickets vary by demand. Many museums have felt culture is for everyone and that standardized pricing is an ideal to hold.

But some museums are beginning to test offering higher prices on peak days and at peak times. The reason? The crisis is prompting museums to encourage visitors to arrive throughout a day, discounted pricing helps to encourage visitors to book off-peak times.

Dynamic pricing also helps the institutions earn additional revenue on reduced visitor numbers.

“If you charge three bucks more at prime time, everyone is okay with that in this circumstance,” said Luuc Elzinga, president of Tiqets, an Airbnb-backed company based in the Netherlands that is a major reseller of museum and attraction tickets.

“We see some museums creating themed hours and events, such as family-focused mornings, as a marketing method to activate local travelers to visit local attractions they may not have visited recently,” Elzinga said.

Many museums have had to invest in new tech or retool existing tech to prepare for the new realities. The Louvre museum in Paris, which plans to reopen its doors on July 6, is updating its booking system to handle the new types of ticketing.

Museums that use paper tickets are considering mobile tech to reduce the frequency with which workers touch the same paper as visitors. Mobile apps for ticketing allow staff and visitors to use devices only they contact to scan and

present tickets with either a barcode or a QR code as proof of having paid the

admission fee.

Some museums are also becoming more assertive about pushing upsells, such as print books describing exhibitions, or requesting donations. For more context, see our earlier story on how museums are also planning how to reopen in an era of social distancing.

CHANGING DYNAMICS

Some players appear better positioned than others to gain share as travelers return. In recent months, Booking.com has pivoted its strategy in tours and activities to focus more on partnerships and less on building its technology, as Skift has reported. Meanwhile, Airbnb paused its experiences unit, with some critics calling the effort a “fundamental mistake.”

Tour and activity providers face a burden in having to ensure guests obey local public health requirements, as Skift has reported.

“Over-communicating about the public safety measures you’ve adopted is critical,” Elzinga said. “I had thought open-top tour bus operators would be the last to rebound. But we’ve seen at least one operator have some success by very clearly marketing how it takes cleanliness super-seriously, such as by even disinfecting the pens guests use to sign waivers before making a trip.”

For more context, see our earlier story: [Tours and Attractions Pursue New Hygiene Regimes to Coronavirus Recovery](#).

RECOVERY VARIES BY MARKET AND SEGMENT

Experience and sightseeing providers who primarily rely on long-distance and international visitors remain in bad shape. But domestic business is up relative to historical patterns.

“Experience bookings are returning, and we’re not surprised to see a considerable jump in domestic travel compared to last year,” said Molly Burke, a spokesperson for Tripadvisor and its experiences booking brand Viator.

“Destinations with outdoor experiences are popular with travelers right now, with boat rides and walking tours among the top products in the last week,” Burke said.

Other providers are confident that, once travel restrictions are lifted more broadly across Europe, they’ll see a jump in new bookings.

“We recently ran a customer survey on future travel preferences, receiving about

3,000 responses (mostly from Americans),” said Stephen Oddo, co-founder and CEO of Walks. “About 65 percent of respondents said they still have travel plans in the second half of 2020.”

New in-destination bookings are not completely at zero, Oddo said, and many new bookings made in recent weeks are for September and October and for May 2021 onward.

Positive sentiment by travelers seems to be surfacing across the U.S.

There’s been “a strong recovery” in the sector, said Ruzwana Bashir, co-founder and CEO of Peek, a maker of software services for the sector primarily in North America.

Tags: tickets, tour and travel providers, tours and activities, trekkssoft

Photo Credit: Visitors at the Bayou Bend Collection and Gardens at the Museum of Fine Arts in Houston, Texas. MFA, Houston