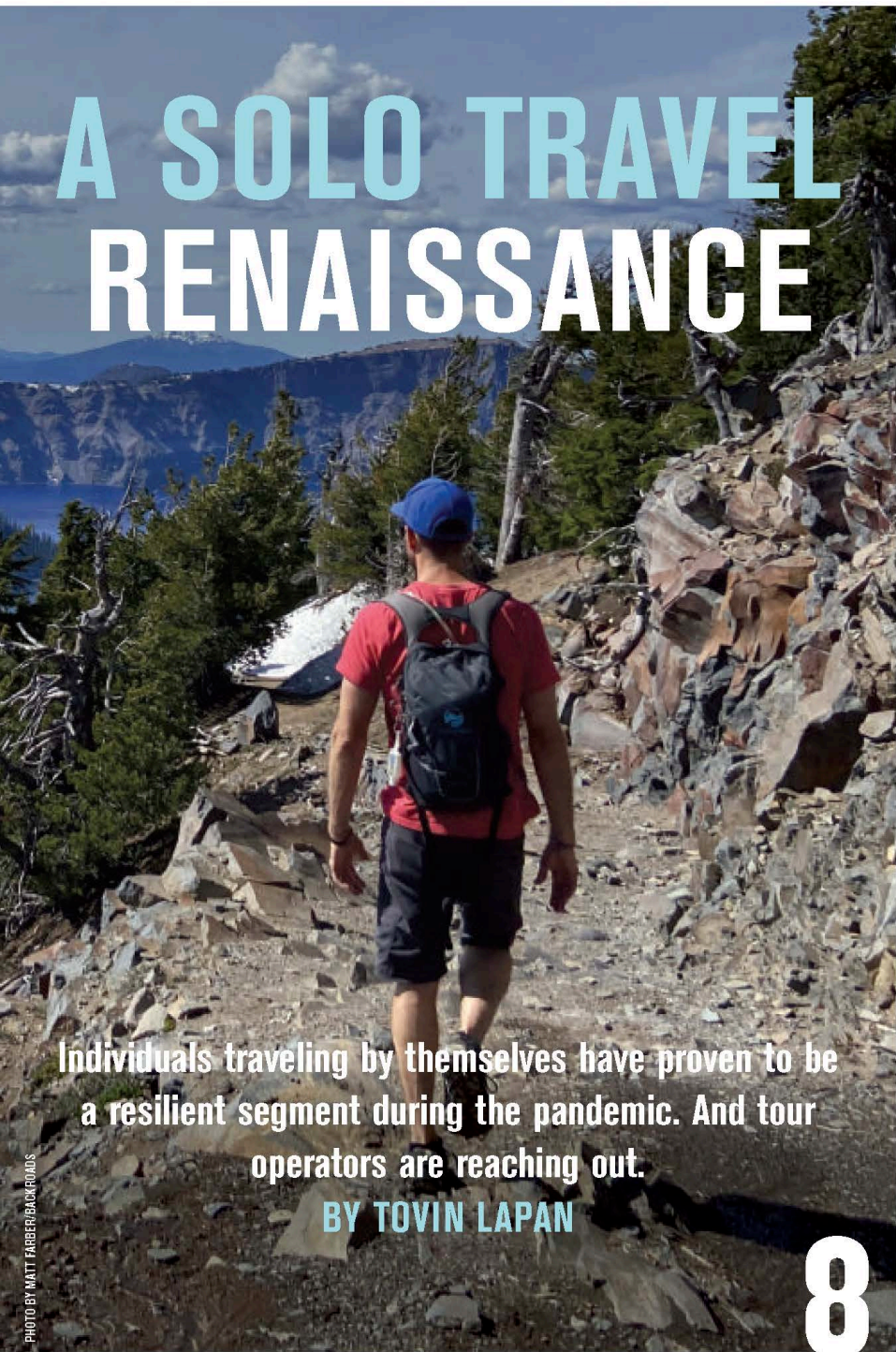


TRAVEL WEEKLY

THE TRAVEL INDUSTRY'S TRUSTED VOICE



A SOLO TRAVEL RENAISSANCE

Individuals traveling by themselves have proven to be a resilient segment during the pandemic. And tour operators are reaching out.

BY TOVIN LAPAN

8

'WE HAVE TO SIT IT OUT AND NOT PANIC'

A pandemic-era ethics question: Should travel sellers sell travel?

By Jeri Clausing

Luxury travel advisor Irving Betesh says that although many of his clients are eager to travel, he has convinced some not to because he just can't offer the pre-Covid-19 experience they'd be anticipating.

Another advisor, responding anonymously to a recent Travel Weekly survey, said their agency wasn't selling any travel at all, feeling it wasn't right to "encourage anyone to risk their lives for commission in our pockets."

Yet another said they hadn't received "any new 2020 trip requests that I feel comfortable selling due to the weekly restrictions

occurring."

As the Covid-19 pandemic rages on, the growing uncertainties about how long it will last, what aspects of travel are safe and what the travel experience will be like put focus on the fine line that advisors and travel suppliers are walking between keeping their businesses afloat and risking long-term damage to their reputation and customer relationships by selling the wrong trip, or selling too soon.

"Our agency is having this conversation," said Kerry Dyer, vice president of talent development for Brownell Travel. "Yes, we are all suffering, but no amount of revenue is ever worth losing credibility with your clients."

Perhaps nowhere is the struggle more evident than in the cruise industry, which

See **SELLING TRAVEL** on Page 6

Commissions lag booking — by a lot. Some agreements may change that

By Jamie Biesiada

Does this sound familiar? An agent works for weeks or months with a client to plan a trip, makes the booking months or even a year before the trip begins, and then waits. And waits. And waits.

And then receives a commission when (or soon after) the client travels.

This scenario, reflective of how agencies receive payments from suppliers, has remained relatively unchanged for decades. It typically means compensation can come months or even years after the booking — and all the work — have been completed.

Most cruise lines, to support agencies through the pandemic and motivate them

to offer future cruise credits rather than refunds, have been paying commissions on canceled sailings right away and will pay again when the client actually sails.

The double-commission program is welcome, but it's temporary. As the coronavirus crisis drags on, commission payments have become a point of contention between agents and some suppliers. Pending commission payments are, in some instances, the difference between going out of business and staying afloat.

To increase cash flow, an increasing number of agencies are turning to service and consultation fees paid by clients. But there are also voices calling for suppliers to

See **COMMISSIONS** on Page 22

CRUISE

Ritz-Carlton's yacht product will enable sellers to tap into some coveted niches. **16**

LEGAL BRIEFS

Securing the refund a supplier promised your client may not be easy. **21**



SUN AND SAND IN DEMAND

BY KELLY ROSENFELD

A lot has changed for the travel industry over the course of 2020, but at least one thing has stayed the same: Countless travelers are still looking to Mexico for their next escape.

According to May data from Booking.com that revealed top destinations and properties saved on travelers' "wish lists," Mexican beach destinations are among the most prominently featured international locations on those lists. A Travel Leaders Network survey of nearly 2,700 frequent travelers that was released in June also listed Mexico as a top-ranked international destination of interest. What's more, the survey found that many travelers were already starting to make "finite plans for their next vacation," with 18 percent planning a trip in the summer, 24 percent in fall, and 43 percent in 2021.

Mona Rodriguez, co-team leader and leisure specialist for ARTA Travel in Plano, Texas, is also seeing a high level of interest in Mexico for upcoming travel. "I've had more people inquire about traveling to Mexico than any other destination," she says of recent conversations with clients. "Of all the destinations, Mexico also seems to be the place where people are booking."

Janet Ash, owner/consultant of HotSpots Travel Group in Windsor, Colorado, also sees positive signs for a Mexico travel comeback. In addition to rebookings and future travel credits among her clients who had to cancel trips earlier this year, she's been seeing "a renewed interest in Mexico destination weddings, which is exciting. We've been getting calls about them; I think because domestic venues are only allowing a certain number of people and their pricing is pretty expensive for smaller groups."

Of course, with COVID-19 still a major concern around the world, travel advisors must stay abreast of the rapidly evolving tourism situation in Mexico (and around the world). Various Mexico destinations and hotels have started to reopen their doors and reveal plans for safely welcoming visitors. As of press time, the land border between the U.S. and Mexico is closed to nonessential travel until at least August 20, though travelers can still enter the country by air (albeit with fewer scheduled flights currently available).

As advisors work diligently to balance client safety and fulfill travel dreams, Mexico trips may look a little different in the coming months—but there's no doubt that travelers are excited to return to one of the world's top vacation destinations.

Featuring the Best of **MEXICO**

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NEW PRIORITIES

At press time, a variety of Mexico destinations have revealed and begun implementing plans for safely reopening to tourism, from a five-phase approach in Los Cabos to the launch of a Mexican Caribbean Clean & Safe Check Certification in Quintana Roo. Top vacation destinations throughout the country have also received Safe Travels stamps from the World Travel & Tourism Council—bestowed to destinations and hotels that have adopted new protocols to protect the health of travelers—including Los Cabos, the Mexican Caribbean, the state of Jalisco, Riviera Nayarit, the state of Yucatan, Mazatlan and San Miguel de Allende.

The Mexican Caribbean has debuted a free travel advisor e-learning course. The two classes take about 30 minutes each, covering Cancun, Riviera Maya, Cozumel and Grand Costa Maya.

This is welcome news for many, as travelers are expressing increased concern over health and safety as they gear up to start vacationing again.

"Most clients are concerned about safety and exposure," says Allie Garcia, an independent advisor with Travel Edge in Santa Ana, California. "There are questions related to the state of the coronavirus in Mexico, travel insurance coverage, and planning for a safe and quick return in case of increased risk of contagion

or travel lockdowns."

Rodriguez agrees that clients are starting to plan their travel in new ways. "I think they're going

to approach it a lot differently," she says. "They're picking their destination carefully, thinking: 'If I get there and get sick, what kind of medical care will there be? And if I had to get out of here, can I?'"



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We're also creating more memorable Club Med experiences. Single-plated dishes at the buffet allow chefs to show off their culinary creativity with more picture-worthy creations for guests to indulge in. We have also expanded Club Med's *Amazing Family Program* to provide activities for parents and children to enjoy together in organized private sessions, offering a more personalized experience that respects social distancing and hygiene guidelines.

Family Adventures at Club Med

Cancún: Since reopening on July 25, Cancún has helped many families take back their vacation plans. This resort is home to amenities such as the new Aguamarina Family Oasis and authentic Mexican cuisine at the top-rated Taco Arte restaurant. For guests wanting to take their vacation to the next level, the Jade Exclusive Collection Space offers upscale amenities and a private pool and bar area, plus the best oceanfront views available.

Fun in the Sun at Club Med Ixtapa

Pacific: Named one of the world's best family resorts by TripAdvisor, Ixtapa Pacific will welcome guests back on December 12, 2020 for family fun surrounded by stunning Pacific Coast views. This resort is home to year-round sunshine and discoveries are everywhere—from watching baby sea turtles scatter into the ocean to sunset kayaking around Isla Ixtapa. Guests can also relax at the all-new Club Med Spa and indulge in an authentic Tequila Tasting offering a taste of various Mexican regions.

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To that end, proximity and ease of travel—always a selling point for Mexico's destinations—are currently more important than ever to many Mexico-bound travelers.

"I think proximity is driving people to choose Cancun, Cabo, Cozumel and Puerto Vallarta—destinations where the travel time is short from Dallas, where I'm based," explains Rodriguez.

"People are limiting their time on an airplane."

Ash adds that clients are looking for "fewer airports they have to go through and fewer planes they have to be on to decrease exposure. For us, anyplace they can get to nonstop will be more popular, like Cancun, Riviera Maya, Cabo and Puerto Vallarta."

Travelers' interests are also shifting when it comes to in-destination activities and pursuits. While the past few years have seen a major increase in cultural, adventurous and experiential travel within Mexico, the advisors who spoke with *Travel Weekly* for this article noted that most of the clients they're speaking with these days are primarily interested in simply relaxing at a resort for the time being.

Major updates have been completed at Puerto Vallarta's cruise port, Puerto Magico, including the construction of a new passenger welcome center and an expansive shopping center.

"People just want to go to the beach and see the water—that's all they want to do," says Rodriguez. "They don't care about any kind of sight-seeing or cultural stimulation right now."

"I see resort travel as a more favorable option for travelers during the pandemic, since all the necessary amenities are located on site," agrees Garcia. Ash also points out that the spacious layout of many resorts allows guests to "kind of spread out and do their own thing"—more appealing to many of her clients right now than off-site



Club Med Cancun (Now Open)

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tours and activities, which she believes "will take a little longer to come back."

NAVIGATING THE CHANGES

With the travel landscape undergoing near-constant change, advisors need to be informed—and educate their clients—on what the Mexico travel experience will be like when they go.

Garcia has been fielding similar questions from many of her clients, who want to know things like: "How will they get to the hotel? What amenities will be available to guests? How much will

they interact with staff and other guests?"

When it comes to the resort experience, health and safety measures are an important issue for many

UNDER THE RADAR

Need a few less-expected recommendations for Mexico travel? Look no further than the ideas below.

A NEW PACIFIC HOTSPOT:

On the coast of Jalisco, between Puerto Vallarta and Manzanillo, an upscale new enclave is getting ready for the spotlight: Costalegre. Major investments are being made in the area, including a new highway to improve transfers from Puerto Vallarta to Carey's—an exclusive private luxury estate in Costalegre—as well as plans for a Four Seasons resort and a new Zoëtry property from AM Resorts.

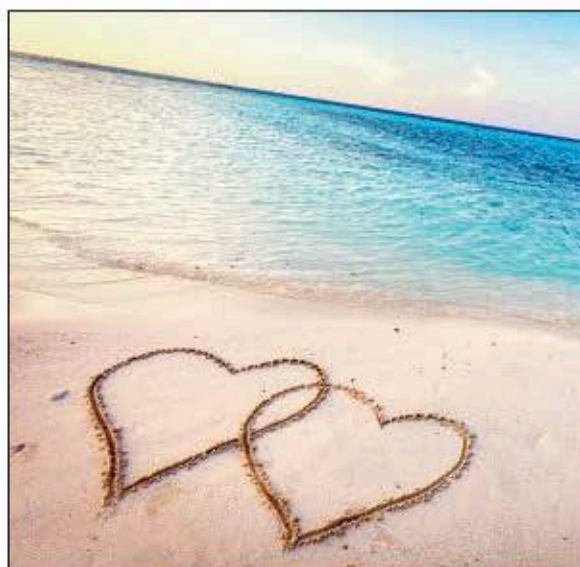
A MAGICAL MIGRATION:

From early November to April, Mexico plays host to the annual migration of thousands of monarch butterflies, a natural wonder that few get to witness. Multiple sanctuaries throughout the country offer viewing, including the Monarch Butterfly Biosphere Reserve (a UNESCO World Heritage site) in Michoacán.

A LUXURIOUS BUYOUT:

Luxury travelers concerned about social distancing can alleviate their worries with a property buyout, such as the new plans being offered at Acre Hotel in San José del Cabo, which offers exclusive access to the property's 25 acres of farmland and 11 open-air treehouses.

"I think we're definitely going to have to do our due diligence as far as research and preparing our clients for this new normal, starting with their arrival at the airport," says Ash. "Will they need to wear a mask at the airport? Are there going to be restaurants open? Are there going to be meals and drinks on the plane? All these things we used to take for granted."



ADVISOR INTEL

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travelers, and plenty of hotel companies have enacted a slew of enhanced procedures to keep guests and employees safe and well. Rodriguez feels that at this time, her travelers "will probably gravitate

toward hotels that are legislated by a national or international brand where there's a lot more protocol in place regarding the virus and keeping people safe, instead of a more boutique property."

Other client concerns may come as more of a surprise: Ash notes that in spite of COVID-related social distancing rules, many of her travelers don't want to miss out on the communal aspects of their typical Mexico vacations.

"The resorts in Mexico are very social, and people like that," explains Ash. "They don't want it to feel like a ghost town. Are all the restaurants going to be open? Will groups be able to sit together? Are they going to be able to play beach volleyball? Those are the things that they enjoy and are asking about."

Answering those questions for clients is an ongoing challenge that requires frequent research, strong partner connections, and continuous communication between advisor and traveler.

"We have to get on resort blogs, look at trip reviews from people who were just there and be in touch with concierges at the resorts to verify all this information," says Ash. "No bad surprises—that's always our thing."

"I'm staying connected and accessible," Garcia says of her plan to support clients. "I'm dedicated to getting as much education as possible to ensure I can respond thoroughly and accurately to travel concerns. Luckily, I work with excellent partners, and in most instances, I'm able to share information on the specific safety measures being taken at properties and describe how this will translate in a client's travel experience."

Ash also notes that she's eager to get to Mexico herself, "to get a good feel for what the experience is going to be like. The more we can share—'We were just down there, this is what's happening, this is what you can expect'—the more it will help our clients feel comfortable traveling too." ■

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