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The Long Haul

The travel industry navigates through the landscape of a global pandemic. BY SUSAN B. BARNES

It is hard to imagine that when we first heard about COVID-19 last year, anyone could have predicted the immense impact the pandemic would have on global economies and industries and the health and well-being of people all around the world.

According to the U.S. Travel Association, the national nonprofit organization representing all components of the U.S. travel industry, pre-pandemic the industry generated \$2.6 trillion in economic output and supported 15.8 million jobs. Though travel continues to come back, a year later the industry is still unpacking the impact of the stoppage of travel worldwide and its gradual return.

In its U.S. Travel Forecast released in November 2020, the U.S. Travel Association noted the total travel spending in the United States in 2019 was \$1.13 trillion; the forecast for 2020 was \$617 billion. Through 2024, the association projects the figure will climb back to its pre-pandemic figures with \$1.1 trillion of total travel spending in the United States.

These figures are U.S.-focused, but the impact affects the travel industry worldwide.

That is not to say no one is traveling, however. As people learn how to keep themselves and each other safe in their communities and workplaces, they gain confidence to get back

out into the world, too.

Here we take a look at how the industry is navigating travel during the global health crisis, a year later. Keep in mind, however, guidelines around the pandemic are fluid and can change at a moment's notice. Expert resources to check for updated information and guidelines are the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and the World Health Organization.

Additionally, take some time to check in with local authorities where you may be traveling, as well as airlines, cruise lines, tour operators and meeting and event planners to learn what guidelines and protocols may be in place.

WHEN NEWS OF THE PANDEMIC HIT, flights around the world were grounded for the most part as airlines scrambled to determine how best to keep passengers safe and healthy when they resumed flying. Most major airlines implemented requirements for traveling on board, including wearing masks and/or face coverings for the duration of flights as well as in the airport. Many airlines limited in-flight services to minimize hand-to-hand contact, and until recently, some had modified boarding procedures and blocked aircraft seats to increase distancing between passengers. Delta Air Lines announced it will continue blocking middle seats and limiting onboard capacity across its fleet through March 30, 2021.

Seemingly across the board, airlines ensured all of the aircraft in their fleets use HEPA air filters that remove 99.97 percent of airborne



particles, similar to those used in hospitals. They ramped up cleaning procedures as well and commonly include deep-cleaning procedures on each plane, from nose to tail. This includes using an electrostatic disinfectant and antimicrobial spray applied to high-touch surfaces such as seats, seatbelts, armrests, tray tables, overhead bin handles, flight attendant call buttons and onboard lavatories. For more on how your airline is keeping you safe during travel, check the COVID-19 section on its website.

The airline industry also made adaptations to change fees. Many airlines temporarily suspended change fees through 2020 to help travelers manage travel during the pandemic. Taking a step further, Alaska Airlines, American Airlines, Delta Air Lines and United Airlines eliminated change fees indefinitely, though travelers should check that policies apply to their fares and itineraries prior to booking.

CRUISING HAS CERTAINLY TAKEN a hard hit during the pandemic, with the CDC issuing a No Sail Order in mid-March 2020 that halted the sailing of all cruise ships with a capacity of 250 or more passengers and crew. The No Sail Order remained in effect into the fall, at which time the replacement Conditional Sailing Order allowed a phased-in return to cruising. Unfortunately, the first cruise to sail in the Caribbean under the Conditional Sailing Order in November had passengers test positive for coronavirus while on board the ship.

The stoppage of cruising certainly made an impact on the global economy. In December 2019 Cruise Lines International Association, the world's largest cruise industry trade association, released its "2020 State of the Cruise Industry Outlook." The report included results of an independent study of the 2018

global economic impact of the cruise industry: more than 1.17 million jobs, \$50.25 billion paid in wages and salaries, and a \$150 billion total output worldwide.

As it continues to navigate the COVID-19 landscape and how to resume passenger sailings, the cruise industry is committed to keeping passengers safe and healthy.

"The cruise industry and the CDC have a long track record of working together in the interest of public health, and we look forward to continuing to build upon this legacy to support the resumption of cruising from U.S. ports," said CLIA president and CEO Kelly Craighead last fall.

"With enhanced measures in place and with the continued guidance of leading experts in health and science as well as the CDC, we are confident that a resumption of cruising in the U.S. is possible to support the economic recovery while maintaining a focus on effective and science-based measures to protect public health," she added.

As of press time, several cruise lines worldwide announced extensions of paused operations through May and June 2021.

HOTELS AROUND THE WORLD — from boutiques to resorts to global brands — worked hard to open their doors and welcome their guests back, too.

For example, last spring Four Seasons Hotels and Resorts collaborated with Johns Hopkins Medicine International on its global health and safety program, Lead With Care. Through the collaboration, Johns Hopkins Medicine experts provide ongoing, real-time guidance on protocols and update as needed. The Lead With Care program focuses on three areas: enhanced cleanliness, height-

Safety Protocols:
Handwashing, mask wearing and hand sanitizer have become the norm.

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Get on Board:

Airlines continue to require masks.

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ened guest safety and comfort, and empowered employees. Elements of these areas include an appointed Hygiene Officer at each property; hourly cleaning of public areas and rooms disinfected daily with EPA-approved products; and Lead With Care kits placed in each guestroom providing masks, hand sanitizer and sanitization wipes, with additional masks supplied upon request.

Additionally, Accor, with Raffles Hotels & Resorts, Fairmont, Sofitel and Pullman, among many others under its umbrella, launched its ALLSAFE label. ALLSAFE represents some of the most stringent cleaning standards and operational procedures in the hospitality industry and is accredited by Bureau Veritas, a world leader in testing, inspections and certification. Accor also partnered with AXA, a global insurance leader, to offer medical support to guests at each of the 5,000 Accor properties worldwide.

The Marriott Cleanliness Council comprises in-house and outside experts in food and water safety, hygiene and infection prevention, and hotel operations to redefine the brand's cleaning and safety standards, consistent in all properties around the world.

As COVID-19 vaccines become available worldwide, many hotels and resorts also pivot to serve as vaccination sites and/or offer testing for inbound and outbound travelers.

Being a global citizen means considering the impact of travel on the communities you visit, too. In addition to issuing full refunds to anyone who

wishes to cancel their trips due to health concerns from the pandemic, REI examined its entire trip assortment to ensure operations exceed health and safety guidelines.

This examination led to adding new policies to ensure the health and well-being of all travelers. These policies include a pre-trip health assessment for all travelers and guides as well as ongoing health assessments while traveling. On camping trips, tents are assigned for the duration of each trip and cleaned between every departure; guide-prepared meals follow food-handling guidelines and are served by the guides, rather than self-served or family-style. Other guidelines include protecting local communities by closely assessing the risk to every community visited and avoiding traveling to the most vulnerable communities until it is appropriate to do so.

"During our pause in travel, we closely examined our operations to ensure that when we restarted our trips, we would be confident we were taking every action possible to ensure that our guests, guides and the communities that we visit would remain healthy," said Justin Wood, REI senior manager of adventure travel. "As news of vaccines, destinations reopening and other key developments continue to impact customer mindset for planning travel in 2021 and beyond, we're experiencing a significant increase in customer phone calls, online traffic and bookings. While a return to pre-pandemic travel frequency is presumably a while away, we are very encouraged by the positivity of



those who wish to travel and by the diligence and commitment of our industry partners around the world.”

ATTENDING MEETINGS AND EVENTS with colleagues and prospective and existing clients makes up a big part of business travel. The meetings and events industry represents yet another severely impacted by the pandemic, but it is coming back ... and safely.

One organization leading the charge of returning to meetings and events safely is Associated Luxury Hotels International, a global sales and marketing extension to a portfolio of more than 300 of the world’s most distinguished independent luxury hotels and resorts, cruise lines and destination management companies. Early on in the pandemic, ALHI gathered best practices and insights from industry partners and federal, state and local government organizations with the goal of sharing real data and trends to educate its clients, members and the industry at large to ensure confidence about the industry’s future.

In November 2020 ALHI hosted The Path Forward, an event designed to share those best practices and insights with meeting planners and its hotel members. The multicity hybrid event connected participants in person at four live events and virtually around the world; about 1,000 guests attended.

“Every company is coming back at a different rate — some are doing small meetings initially, some are not meeting until the end of 2021 — but

when everyone comes back, we want everybody to be educated, prepared and comfortable executing a meeting where health and safety is top priority,” said Katie Bohrer, CMP, vice president, Meeting Design & Experience, ALHI. “As meeting planners, your job is to take care of your attendees; you do that in every format. You tell them what to wear, what the weather’s going to be, what shoes to wear. We do that naturally as planners, and telling them how to protect themselves and the other attendees that are going to be there ... it’s another level of planning when you think about meetings and events.”

For a start, Bohrer said that for every planned event, ALHI creates a Code of Conduct distributed prior to the event so attendees know what is expected of them at the event and there is a level of buy-in.

“Not everyone is ready to travel and meet, and that has to be understood and respected,” said Bohrer. “But for those that are, we feel our work at ALHI is to chart that path forward. We’re trying to show how to do it the right way as people come back and as they’re ready to travel.”

Brands including Marriott and Hilton currently offer hybrid meeting options and allow organizers to add safety protocols, like temperature checks and testing, to events.

As we continue to navigate travel in the midst of COVID-19, it is important for all of us to remember we need to give each other grace and room to find the paths right for each of us.

Keep It Clean:
Hotels upgraded cleaning and disinfection practices.

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