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Travel Advisors Deal With Torrent of Spring Break Cancellations, Vacation Swaps

Skift Take

Spring break travel is in wait-and-see mode as travel advisors field calls from clients rattled by the coronavirus pandemic. Some travelers are swapping their trips for “safer” spots like Hawaii, Florida, and the Caribbean.

— [Linda Humphrey](#)

As the spiraling coronavirus pandemic collides with spring break, travel advisors are navigating a shifting travel landscape and a State Department advisory urging Americans to reconsider travel abroad. “Our spring-break business is hanging by a thread,” said Jack Ezon, founder and managing partner of Embark Beyond in Manhattan. Even so, most clients are rescheduling rather than sidelining their trips, Ezon said. About 35 percent of clients switched from far-flung spots to the Caribbean, Mexico and Florida. Requests for private planes flying to Miami, the Bahamas, the Caribbean and Mexico (Riviera Maya and Cabo) are up 30 percent.

Sixty-nine percent of Europe-bound clients set to depart within the next 30 days have canceled, with 58 percent rebooking to the Caribbean, Mexico or the U.S. Overall, South Florida has been the

most-requested swap, Ezon said, as travelers factor in local healthcare systems.

Travel advisors counseling jittery clients should never reassure them that their destinations are safe, Ezon added.

“Clients push us to give them an answer on what they should do. Never tell anyone that anything or anyplace is safe. Ever,” Ezon said. “Who knows what could happen. Your job is to help them think through the issues and validate their concerns.”

For some travelers, a spring-break vacation feels safer than staying home.

“The arrival of the virus in our two biggest markets, California and New York, kind of made people feel better about going to an island where there are few or no cases reported,” Ezon said.

Laurie Palumbo’s clients in New Rochelle, New York — the New York City suburb at the center of the state’s largest outbreak — had canceled their spring-break trip to Turks and Caicos.

“But after several conversations with our team, they felt that it was safer to travel than to stay home,” said Palumbo, chief operating officer of ID Travel in Larchmont, New York.

Turks and Caicos, at press time, reported zero cases of the virus, while in New Rochelle, state officials set up a two-week “containment zone” on March 10, shuttering schools and other buildings within a one-mile radius.

In Austin, Texas, West Lake High’s senior trip to the Bahamas — a group of more than 80 students and chaperones — is still on, said Keith Waldon, founder and director of Departure Lounge in Austin and San Antonio, Texas.

“We have lots of individual family bookings still going to Mexico, Central America, Hawaii, and North American ski resort destinations,” Waldon said.

Hawaii and the Caribbean are key spring-break destinations for Coastline Travel Advisors’ student travel division in Garden Grove, California. So far, all trips are still upcoming, said Coastline CEO Jay Johnson. “It’s one of the few bright spots we are seeing.”

At times, Embark Beyond’s Ezon has put clients in touch with locals or other clients to check in on a destination. A client wavering on a St. Bart’s trip decided to go after Ezon put him in touch with two locals. At the time, the locals “reported that everything was just as fabulous and buzzing as always. Hotels were still at 100 percent occupancy,” Ezon said.

Just back from St. Bart’s is a family of six from New York, ID Travel’s Palumbo said. Less than a week after returning, they hopped back on a flight for another four days on the island.

In Chicago, Susie Chau, founder of Carpe Diem Traveler, said her clients are more unsettled about the possibility of getting stuck in a lockdown or quarantine than they are about catching the virus.

The threat of quarantine has Ezon’s clients on edge as well. Just as he was connecting a client leery of getting stuck in Israel with another who had just landed there, the country announced that anyone arriving from abroad would be quarantined for 14 days.

This news wiped out Ezon’s own spring-break plans. “I don’t have three weeks to burn for what was supposed to be a five-day trip for my nephew’s bar mitzvah,” he said.

Ezon’s clients, meanwhile, arrived in Israel about 18 hours before the quarantine took effect. “They’re having an amazing time. They did not

have any issues. Few lines anywhere and everything is open. I receive photos every day.”