

Bloomberg

Group Travel Companies Are Still a Thing. How?

For both the companies selling and the travelers buying, group travel isn't as unthinkable as it sounds. Broadening the appeal, however, offers a real pandemic paradox.

By [Fran Golden](#)

After several trips with boutique tour company [Mango Africa Safaris](#), including a custom tour to Madagascar last year, Irene Bowers and David Register were intrigued by an email newsletter inviting them on a group travel experience closer to home. The pandemic had scuttled other, farther-flung plans by the retired Oregon couple, so they decided to get in the car and drive to Montana for a “safari” on the Yellowstone River—complete with such “glamping” accoutrements as a real bed in a private tent, bathrooms with hot showers, and gourmet meals from a top local chef.

On their trip, in August, they were rewarded with views of grizzlies, black and gray wolves, and ravens feasting on a bison carcass. Plus, there was a rafting excursion on the river—which they shared with nine strangers and a handful of guides.

These are tough times for group tour operators who cater to a U.S. audience. American travelers are weary of close contact with others, and the world [is weary of them](#).

Some operators have shut down operations, at least into the fall. Those still seeking business have experienced year-on-year losses from 40% to 90%, according to a survey of 590 multiday and day-tour operators by [WeTravel.com](#). Companies are making up the difference through domestic trips, especially to U.S. national parks. For Mango co-owner Teresa Sullivan, that very strategy has shaved the year's losses, from 90% to 78%.



Scoping out wildlife in Yellowstone National Park, with Mango Africa Safaris.
Photographer: Yellowstone Wolf Tracker

Dire as that may sound, it's a wonder that group travel hasn't fully come to a halt in the current climate, given that groups and travel have been largely canceled by the pandemic. Conversely, this type of business could have a leg up on the rest of the travel and cruise sector because of the extreme precautions that group settings require and the category's emphasis on outdoor adventuring.

Bowers and Register and all their travel companions, for instance, were required to have Covid-19 tests prior to taking the trip, a tactic some cruise lines are also using. They also had to practice social distancing and wear masks whenever they couldn't distance (as when seated together in vehicles). The couple paid additionally for the precautions afforded by a private bathroom, dining table, and vehicle with driver; standard options clustered travelers into pods of up to seven persons. Still, they enjoyed the camaraderie.

"After dinner, there was always a nice fire going in the fire pit, and folks could linger on into the night as the stars and a beautiful full moon came into view," says Register. "Our friends and family alike were very supportive—and perhaps a little envious."

The State of Group Travel

The year 2020 was supposed to be a good year for the roughly 150 member brands of the United States Tour Operators Association (USTOA). In December 2019, the trade group bragged that its members represented nearly \$19 billion in revenue and provided tours, packages, and custom arrangements for some 9.8 million travelers. Nearly half the members were forecasting a “boom year,” with growth of at least 7% to 10%. It hasn’t worked out that way, to say the least.

“I am hoping I don’t have to think about the year 2020 for very much longer,” says Tom Hale, founder and chief executive officer of active-adventure travel company Backroads. “It’s been challenging for everybody. And we are running more trips in the U.S. than anyone else.”



Group travel is inherently complicated in Covid-19 times.

Photographer: Klaus Vedfelt/Digital Vision

Backroads is among a subset of group tour operators that forgoes double decker buses, guides with microphones and sign posts, and matching T-shirts for shared, upscale adventures in pristine settings. It typically hosts about 50,000 guests each year in 65 countries and restarted trips in June with a sole focus on biking, hiking, and multi-adventure trips within the U.S. With an average group size of 10 and only a few trips a week, compared to the 150 weekly trips it had been running, Backroads anticipates only 5,000 guests this year—of which 2,000 traveled in January and February, before the pandemic onslaught.

Putting together the domestic trips has not been easy. States and counties have their own travel restrictions and Covid-19 protocols, such as quarantine requirements for certain out-of-state visitors. While Backroads has had success sending groups to Yellowstone and the Grand Canyon, a trip to Glacier

National Park was canceled at the last minute when local policies changed to limit the visitable areas. “We understand we have to roll with the punches,” Hale says.

Backroads has instituted its own Covid-19 protocols, which include temperature checks on arrival, mask wearing, fewer people in shuttles, and more options to split from the larger group. But Hale says Backroads is lucky. “All day long, we are traveling outdoors. We are social distanced. It’s up to you as to whether you hike or bike with someone else.”

Sue and Matt Dow of Buffalo, N.Y., aged 50 and 51, respectively, were on one of the company’s first post-Covid-19 outings in late June: a one-week hiking trip to the Great Smoky and Blue Ridge mountains that they had booked last fall.

“We both needed a break,” Sue says, noting that Matt, a teacher, had just wrapped up the school year. They were located within driving distance of the trip’s starting point, a key factor in their decision to go ahead. “We had been looking forward to it for so long,” Sue adds.

Before agreeing to be pandemic guinea pigs, they called Backroads for more details about the company’s Covid-19 protocols.

“I work in health care and asked what the policy was if someone refuses to wear a mask,” Sue says. “They reassured us [that mask wearing would be unilaterally enforced]. And the people on the trip were compliant.” Nobody required a warning about proper mask wearing, she explains, with everyone respectful in shared spaces. The couple stayed in hotels and traveled with four women from Indiana, but used separate tables—both indoors and out—at restaurants along the way.

Back of the Pack

Other tour companies are having limited success. Luxury boutique outfitter Classic Journeys tried to persuade U.S. clients to switch to Alaska in lieu of Iceland, which normally is one of their top-selling destinations but this year has undergone border closures and requirements to quarantine upon entry. The company operated three Alaska trips, all for private groups.

Likewise, the North America division of Abercrombie & Kent has run about a half-dozen trips, also for private family groups. Its European offices have been similarly quiet, though the company now plans to operate its first group trip, a small venture for Americans heading to Tanzania who are interested in summiting Mount Kilimanjaro, in early October.

Jeri Clausing, senior editor at trade publication Travel Weekly, says a lot of U.S. tour companies scrambled to put together domestic itineraries, but many did not happen, due to summertime Covid-19 surges and confusion over rules regarding the crossing of state lines. “The result is: A lot of traditional operators aren’t doing much this year,” she says. “They will be one of the last travel segments to recover.”

Mango African Safaris is undeterred. In October, it will be taking guests to Ted Turner’s private 550,000-acre Vermejo Park Ranch in northern New Mexico for a wildlife experience that includes staying in the new 10-bedroom Turner House lodge during elk mating season (from \$4,295 per person). Meals will be offered in the dining room and on the patio, based on the weather, with cocktails promised “around a crackling fire.”

As the African-focused company works to retain some business during pandemic times, its owners are also trying to do well by Africa, donating funds (\$500 for each guest booked) to support camp staffs, guides, anti-poaching patrols, and local communities across the Atlantic that are missing crucial tourism income. Separately, the company's online fundraising effort has raised \$20,000 for community relief, so far.



The Yellowstone “glampsite” that was organized amid the pandemic by Mango Africa Safaris.
Photographer: Yellowstone Wolf Tracker

Backroads' Hale says demand is keen for 2021. His latest round of bookings prioritizes places currently inaccessible to (but beloved by) Americans, including the Canadian Rockies, Italy's Dolomites, and France's Provence. Whether it will be a good year for tour operators is “anyone's guess” and will depend on the availability of a vaccine, he says.

Hale asserts that group travel has one unique quality that people are certainly craving in a post-lockdown world: conviviality. “We have some very thankful guests out there, who are thrilled to be out doing something,” he adds, especially in the company of others.