

# Weathering the Perfect Storm

## *Together*

By Tom Merrill

**Y**ou walk into a restaurant. You're seated, handed a menu, and you make a selection with your waiter. A few minutes later your meal is served, you enjoy your food, and pay on the way out.

Now imagine: You walk into a restaurant. Only this time, you're planning a banquet. You're seated with your waiter and the chef, who ask what you would like. They're going to create this especially for you—the sky's the limit. It's going to take months to plan and assemble, but it's going to be amazing. Instead of paying on the way out, they need you to pay installments over time. They need to buy and stock up on the ingredients, hire the servers, arrange for the live entertainment, rent the tables and chairs, and so on. On the night of the banquet, everyone arrives and has a memorable evening.

Now imagine the second scenario, but this time—right before everyone arrives—there is a massive tornado that levels the restaurant - not only your restaurant, but every other restaurant and caterer in town. People are shocked, disappointed, and angry.

Metaphorically, this was March 2020 in the student travel industry as the COVID-19 pandemic roared into reality.

The music educators that we are privileged to serve have been nothing short of amazing throughout this crisis. You bear not only your own disappointment, but that of your students. We are grateful for your understanding of the gravity of the impact to the industry, and your grace and patience as we worked through this unfair and unprecedented situation.

We watched with you as school districts were closing and cancelling tours—figuratively, and sometimes quite literally—as buses were arriving at the school to pick up groups to depart. Local decisions evolved to statewide directives, as shelter in place orders extended closings and brought about more waves of cancellations. During a two-week span, group after group, we watched an entire year's worth of preparation work evaporate before our eyes. It was truly surreal.

Because we have been collaborating over a period of months—perhaps even years—to craft every detail for these once-in-a-lifetime experiences, you are equally invested in these tours, and we send our positive thoughts to you as we endure this difficult time together.

To paint the bigger picture, the months from March to June contain 70-80 percent of the annual business in the student travel industry. For this year, COVID-19 has virtually wiped that away. There is a dual grief that accompanies this. First, there is the loss of the experiences these students would have had that we know can be positively life-altering, often in ways we can't imagine. We share with you the massive disappointment and anger felt for the memories that have been stolen away. For us,

this isn't merely our livelihood—it's our life. Secondly—the financial toll, both for us and our clients, is truly the "salt in the wound." And while the process may on the surface seem transactional, there is an emotional loss that runs deep.

Your understanding of the bigger picture counterbalances the other side that we see—the angry demands for full refunds, the attacks on social media, the threats of litigation...reactions that tend to come from administrators and parents who perhaps don't understand the full spectrum of the process. They tend to see things like the first restaurant: they didn't get what they ordered, so why should they pay anything? They're heartbroken for their kids, and their emotions are valid.

But here's where the difference lies: In the first restaurant, everything happens at the point of the experience. In the banquet planning however, almost everything happens in the lead up to the experience. The same is true when it comes to student travel—the planning, the expertise, and the service happens before you even set foot on the bus or plane. Theme park tickets, hotel rooms, and buses—while being the vast majority of the costs—are not the sole source of costs involved. The hours spent by those writing itineraries, booking hotels, making reservations, adjusting and readjusting schedules, and preparing name lists for hotels and airlines are gone forever. The tour guides who work in a "gig economy" who committed their time to leading a group now have a gap in their schedule that is too late to fill.

While the goal of any good travel planner in this situation is to recover as much refund as possible for their client, these operational costs that lead up to the experience are sadly unrecoverable. It's a horrible situation on all sides and there are no perfect solutions.

This is where I hope sharing this story will help lead to a better understanding. The student travel industry by nature is a collaborative one. We want the best for our clients and our business colleagues. We're here to create opportunities for the thousands upon thousands of students that you entrust to us each year—and look forward to helping recover this year's missed moments next year when the storm clouds pass. We're all in this together.

The human toll and the full economic impact of the COVID-19 pandemic are still unfolding as I write this, and certainly, put in perspective, those things will be the most destructive part of this calamity. This is a tragedy that is going to dwarf anything we've ever seen. We said that when 9/11 happened in my second year as a performance travel planner. In much the same way as that horrible September day and the aftermath, this event is fundamentally changing the way we live and travel.

But all storms run out of rain. The sun will shine again soon and we look forward to venturing outside with you.