COVID-19: Educator Resource Guide for Student Group Travel
Message from the SYTA CEO

Dear SYTA Friends,

I know this is an incredibly difficult time for many of you—a global disaster that no one could have predicted, and that we are all struggling to comprehend and manage. I want to assure you that the entire Student & Youth Travel Association (SYTA) leadership and staff are here to support and guide you. We will all work together to get our students back to the life changing experiences of travel, as soon as it is safe.

We have developed this resource guide for parents, teachers and school administrators to help you feel confident about the group travel process. We have included detailed information about why it is important to use a professional SYTA tour operator to plan your travel, an explanation and infographic to illustrate the process of booking group travel and information about keeping our kids safe on the road.

We have appreciated your patience and understanding throughout these past months of heartbreaking cancellations, as we have been working together to determine the best solutions for Spring travel plans as well as for the safest and most financially secure way to provide travel experiences for our young people in the future.

The members of SYTA want to be your trusted partners in providing travel experiences for students, which are proven to improve their classroom experience, increase their self-esteem and increase their tolerance and understanding of new cultures. These will be important tools for our young travelers as they navigate a very different world, post COVID-19.

In good health,

Carylann Assante, CAE
CEO
Student Travel & COVID-19

The ramifications of COVID-19 began in early 2020 when SYTA members began to be notified of school closings and subsequent postponement and cancellations of student trips. Our tour operator members took immediate action in the face of this unprecedented global disaster to protect our student travelers and teachers with whom they had worked so diligently to plan their trips.

The priority was and is to ensure the safe travel of student and youth travelers across the country and around the globe. The SYTA leadership coordinated with industry and consumer groups to ensure the safe return of traveling students and the financial security of our members and their customers.

Working with a coalition of industry groups, SYTA has been active in pushing the United States government for financial support that will help the travel industry and its customers. We have been sharing information about SBA loans to keep tour operator companies and small businesses that supply group travel afloat, which in turn will help operators continue to work on behalf of their customers.
The Group Booking Process

During this pandemic there have been incidents where some groups have not been able to receive full refunds for trips planned, and we understand the frustration you may feel during this very confusing time.

We would like to clarify the process of group travel booking, to help you better understand how and when your funds are spent, and how we are advocating on your behalf to process your refunds or reschedule your trips.

First, we all want to assure you that we are staunch consumer advocates for you and your students. As the single point-of-contact for clients, tour operators work each day to streamline a complex process.

From the first call with a teacher or director inquiring about a student trip, the tour operator sets in motion a process of setting educational goals for the group, presenting travel options, checking availability and making presentations to the school administrator, teacher, director or parent booster group. Some of the considerations that must be discussed and decided on from the start include:

- What are the ages and experience of the group?
- What are the educational and skill building goals?
- Are there specific performance venues, festivals or destinations that you will consider?
- Are there special needs within the group of students?
- What are the budget parameters of the group, per student?

Once these basic questions are answered, the tour operator must begin an intensive, time-consuming process of responding to these needs. They will be in touch with their vendors, which include accommodations, restaurants, motor coach companies and airlines, festivals and performance venues, theme parks and attractions, and tour guides and directors.

Reservations are usually made 2-4 months after the contract is signed with the “client” (that’s you), then the tour operator must make deposits to hold those contracts. These payments are typically made from the deposits required upfront, but sometimes are paid in advance by the tour company.

Just as securing your reservations and other bookings takes time, it also takes time for operators to individually request refunds from each vendor on any given trip. Each vendor has different terms and conditions that vary depending on the contract, and tour operators work with as many as 20 or more vendors per trip.

This is why we continue to ask for your patience as tour operators do everything possible to best serve your interests and needs. Each tour operator wants to work with you again once this crisis passes and are doing everything they can to return to the business of changing students’ lives through travel.
Benefits of Working with a SYTA Tour Operator

The Student & Youth Travel Association (SYTA) is the premier organization for businesses dedicated to providing young people with life-enhancing travel experience. The association of 140 tour operators, and more than 900 suppliers and destinations, sets the student travel industry standards to help students, parents, educators, performance leaders and directors experience travel’s social and educational value.

One of the greatest advantages to using a tour operator, rather than plan a student group trip on your own, is benefiting from the relationships operators have with the various vendors, such as hotels and attractions. Operators cultivate these relationships over many years through networking, conferences and meetings with associations such as SYTA. As a result, the tour operators build volume over time and that means leverage in securing group rates, VIP access and tickets that an individual would not be able to get on their own.

These relationships have proven their value during times of crisis – particularly the COVID-19 national emergency. As destinations and attractions have closed, and airlines cancel and reduce flights, the tour operators have been able to take advantage of their relationships with vendors to get faster, more accurate and better resolutions to problems.

It’s also important to note that the majority of SYTA members are former educators or their families have been in the business for years. Providing student travel is their sole focus. SYTA members are passionate about the impact travel and experiences have on youth and often travel with student groups to guide and provide expert assistance.

SYTA members are trusted professionals, and use best practices through SYTA’s advocacy, education, training, and networking opportunities. They attend conferences, meet new vendors and learn about new destinations, attractions, restaurants, and hotels that provide further customer options. They participate in conferences and virtual learning to improve their safety, crisis, and emergency response plans; they are equipped with the knowledge to lead and support your group during an emergency and provide critical support to youth and their families. They know where emergency and medical facilities are located, at all points along your travels.
Student Group Travel Moving Forward

We know students are going to be traveling again, and SYTA members are here for you when that planning begins. The safety and wellbeing of our student travelers is our top priority.

In light of the ongoing pandemic, we are fully committed to providing continued safe guidance, expertise and travel assistance for you when you begin to reschedule travel plans affected by the coronavirus. We hope that the information in the following pages will be helpful to you as we all move forward together.
Frequently Asked Questions

Group Cancellations & Refunds

We encourage all parents and faculty to consider postponing rather than cancelling the educational experience to ensure your child still receives the benefits of travel. If that is not possible, please note the following information.

Q: What are my options for refunds of cancelled or postponed trips?

A: If rescheduling or postponing a trip is not an option, tour operators will work on your behalf to secure refunds from vendors where possible. Please note the section above on the booking process, and understand that this is a time-consuming process, and one in which not all of the funds you may have deposited are still in the tour operators’ hands, and some fees have been incurred to pay for the booking process.

Q: Who is responsible for ensuring I get my money back? Why can’t I get a full refund right away?

A: The tour operators are your advocates, working on your behalf to secure refunds for your trip. Payments are made in advance by the tour operator to the vendors. Itineraries include multiple vendors and each vendor has a different refund policy. The full refund amount might vary based on the terms and conditions of our contract, and any non-refundable deposits outlined in that language.

If you booked parts of your trip yourself, you will need to request refunds directly from the vendors.

Q: If I can’t get a full refund, can I get a partial refund?

A: In most cases tour operators can secure at least a partial refund. Each situation is different and must be viewed on a case by case basis as terms and conditions vary with each vendor.

Q: Why isn’t the refund process easier?

A: Under normal circumstances, cancellations and refunds would have been easier. Now with shutdowns, furloughs, and layoffs by vendors, operators are working with changing cancellation and refund policies that are out of their control.

In some cases, there is no one working at the vendor to process the refunds. Operators paid these vendors with the deposits and payments from clients and do not actually hold the funds.
Frequently Asked Questions

U.S. CARES Act / Stimulus Package

Q: Now that the government has passed the CARES Act, how does this affect our ability get a refund for my trip?

A: The United States Congress recently passed the Coronavirus Aid, Relief and Economic Security Act (CARES) for small and mid-size businesses. Loans secured through this act are primarily operational for small businesses and are not allowed to be used for the purpose of refunding money to customers for things like student trips. The loans are restricted to items such as payroll, salaries, rent, insurance, etc. In addition, the U.S. Government has awarded $25 billion to airlines for bailouts of their businesses, which we are hopeful will increase the probability of a more generous refund policy, although that remains to be seen. While it would seem that these new financial aids would speed the process of determining possible refunds to our customers, the application and receipt of loans and bailout benefits is extremely long and complicated, and tour operators are asking customers to continue to be patient while they continue to find satisfactory solutions for trip cancellations as a result of the Coronavirus pandemic.

Q: Now that the airline industry has received separate funding, why can’t I get an airline refund?

A: Each airline has its own refund and credit policies, which are constantly changing. At this time, we do not know how this funding will impact refunds and cancellations to group customers. Note that individual refunds for tickets purchased are refunded or credited very differently than tickets purchased for groups.
Frequently Asked Questions

Rescheduling Travel

Q: I am only interested in keeping some of my travel plans. I’d like a partial refund for certain activities previously planned. Is that possible?

A: It may be possible. Tour operators have negotiated special group rates with vendors that they provide to you. In some cases, these negotiated rates are part of a packaged itinerary that may not be able to be broken up into segments and refunded. There may also be contract or liability issues if the student purchased their trip as part of a school group and now wants an individual refund. Your tour operator will work together with schools to resolve these situations on behalf of their student travelers.

Q: How can I change my travel plans to a different date/location? Will the cost be affected?

A: Tour operators work in advance to develop an itinerary that meets the goals and budget needs of their group. This includes the timing of the trip, the cost of the destination and the number of students traveling. The same itinerary may vary in price based upon the time of year and new pricing that may be in place as a result of the pandemic. Operators are already working with their vendors to make travel as accessible and affordable as possible and will offer options based on your needs.

Q: Will original costs of airfare be honored, or will my flight credit only go towards the new airfare rates?

A: Airline policies are determined by each airline and change daily – especially during this global pandemic. Operators will continue to work with the airlines on behalf of their clients to get the best possible flights and rates. It is important to note that airlines extend different rates and policies to individual travelers who book direct or through online booking services. As a student group, tour operators secure special rates and group reservations so that young travelers can all travel together with chaperones and group leaders.

Q: What if airfare or hotel prices increase later?

A: Tour operators continue to negotiate on behalf of clients and secure the best possible options for future travel. They will work with you to develop an itinerary for your group that meets your budget needs.

Q: Who is my point of contact to resolve my travel plan concerns?

A: Your tour operator will continue to be your point of contact and work on your behalf with vendors to secure refunds and credits.

Q: When will the travel restrictions be lifted? What if we do not feel safe to travel for another school year? How do we get our money back?

A: Travel restrictions are determined by the government and individual school boards. If a group determines they do not want to travel for another year, your tour operator will help you to understand all options before postponing the trip again or requesting a cancellation.

Q: If we choose to rebook our travel plans later this year, will you provide masks or other resources as precautionary measures?

A: We will continue to use trusted resources like the CDC, WHO, Department of State and individual school board policies to determine how precautionary measures are implemented for a trip.
Frequently Asked Questions

Rescheduling Travel

Q: Some students are no longer able to participate in a group trip, but some can. What are the options for a partial refund?

A: Group travel arrangements are based upon the total number of students participating in the trip and are priced accordingly. The tour operator working with the school will determine what refunds are available for individual students.

Q: We are on the fence about rescheduling – why should we still go on our trip?

A: We are aware that conditions are changing constantly, and we must follow the guidelines of federal, state, and local school regulations. We will continue to monitor the situation and work with schools to rebook trips.

Our ultimate goal is to ensure that students are still able to have this important educational experience. We remain passionate believers in the impact that travel has on students, and research shows travel experiences are proven to increase independence, self-esteem, intellectual curiosity, cultural tolerance, self-expression, adaptability and even desire to seek higher education. We will work with our vendors to see what additional value or opportunities are available to groups who keep their travel plans.
Frequently Asked Questions

Insurance Considerations

Many SYTA tour operators offer trip insurance (travel protection) for their clients, and there are many options for schools, teachers and parents to purchase policies individually. Moving forward, SYTA urges you to follow the advice of your tour operator vis a vis the best insurance options for your groups.

Q: Should I purchase Travel Protection insurance for my group or my child, or is it included in the cost of the trip?

A: It is recommended that Travel Protection insurance is made available for individual travelers to purchase.

Q: Should I always buy “Cancel for any reason” insurance in light of what has happened with this pandemic?

A: As a consumer you should consider all of your options to protect your trip. Cancel for Any Reason (CFAR) often requires confirmation of purchase within a specified time period from your initial deposit. When cancelling under the CFAR provision, you may be entitled to a portion of non-refundable trip costs (i.e up to 75%).

Q: If I cancel my trip, will my Travel Protection insurance guarantee a full refund if I cancel my trip cost?

A: There are many kinds of Travel Protection and coverage will depend upon the travel insurance purchased by the individual/group.
Safety for Kids Traveling

Health and Safety on the Road
Tour operators, teachers, and group leaders should review specific processes and guidelines for traveling during a pandemic, especially those provided by official resources including local health departments and school boards. It is also highly recommended they review the standard practices for when a student becomes ill on the road and sharing that information with parents in advance of the trip.

Below, we include general information on COVID-19. Because the situation is changing daily, this information should not be considered all-inclusive; rather, it is a snapshot of what we know at the time of this guide.

Review and model basic hygiene and healthy lifestyle practices for protection while traveling
- Wash hands multiple times a day for at least 20 seconds.
- Utilize alcohol-based hand cleansers when arriving and departing locations
- Wipe surfaces with cleansers including cell phones, keys and other personal objects frequently
- Cover mouths with a tissue when you sneeze or cough and throw away the tissue immediately, or sneeze or cough into the bend of their elbow.
- Do not share food or drinks
- Maintain social distancing in public spaces
- Give fist or elbow bumps instead of handshakes or touching each other
- Add any additional guidance from school

Know the symptoms of COVID-19
The CDC believes these symptoms appear in a few days after being exposed to someone with the disease or as long as 14 days after exposure:
- Fever
- Cough
- Shortness for breath
- For some people the symptoms are like having a cold; for others they are quite severe or even life threatening.

Center for Disease Control (CDC)
http://www.cdc.gov.CONTACT/
You can make public inquiries at 1-800-232-4636 or email at cdcinfo@cdc.gov
Safety for Kids Traveling

Should a student become ill on the trip
The teacher leader, with the support of the tour operator/director or guide, will implement the crisis management plan based on the severity of the illness.

If the student shows signs of having a fever or cold
The student should be separated from the group with a teacher or chaperone until the proper medical treatment may be determined. One of the teachers (or chaperones) should confirm that the parents have been notified and gave their permission to take the student to a medical facility. The teachers/chaperones should designate who will stay with the student at the medical facility during treatment (not expected to be overnight). The group will most likely continue with the planned itinerary while the student receives treatment. It is important to communicate the situation with the other students to avoid stigma or isolation of the ill student. Once treatment has concluded, provide details to the teacher/chaperone on how and when they teacher and student can reunite with the tour group. If a student needs to miss an activity due to illness or injury, one teacher or chaperone must stay behind to address the student’s needs.

If it is an emergency:
The teachers/chaperones will contact emergency medical services (EMS) to start the medical transport, then contact the parents. The teacher/chaperone should stay with the student throughout the experience. It’s important to call the parents on a regular basis with updates from the doctor and to allow the student to talk with the parents. Every two hours is a good guide unless other timing has been determined for communication with the parents. The teacher and parents will determine if the student will return home. The tour operator will help facilitate the return of the student with the parents. The parents are responsible for the cost of the medical treatment and travel expenses home.

Travel safety and risk management resources are available at SYTA.org in the safety resource center. https://syta.org/Travel-Tools.
Economic & Social Impact of Student Travel

Global Student Travel
A growing and vital market around the world.

- The global youth travel market, according to the WYSE Travel Federation, generates $333 billion in tourism receipts and accounts for at least 20% of the global travel market.

- The United States is the #1 destination choice for student and youth travel around the world – thus benefiting from the greatest percentage of that value.

- The World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) predicted that youth travel would account for 300 million arrivals worldwide by this year – and was showing a 3% average annual growth.

Student Travel Industry
An underestimated economic driver.

- The U.S. student travel industry alone supports hundred of thousands of jobs including that of tour operators, tour guides, motor coach operators and drivers, security personnel, etc. and supports the commerce of destination management organizations and suppliers in every aspect of a trip including attractions, restaurants, theaters, special events, concerts, festivals, etc.

- The majority of student travel tour operators are small businesses, many of which are former teachers and educators.

- While on a trip in the U.S., student travelers visit an average of two to three destinations and spend twice as much money than that of adults.

- The peak season for the student travel market is between March and July, indicating that student tour operators will have lost nearly 100% of their business for the year 2020 as a result of the Coronavirus pandemic.

Social Impact of Student Travel
Travel changes young lives for good!

- According to the SYTA Student Travel Digest, 74% of schoolteachers surveyed believe that travel has a very positive impact on a student’s personal development.

- 56% of teachers believe that travel has a very positive impact on a student’s education and career.

- The Digest also shows that 74% of teachers believe that travel positively impacts students’ performance at school.

- Teachers perceive travel as a remarkable opportunity for young people to get in touch with different cultures and communities outside of their usual environment — 74% see an increased tolerance of other cultures and ethnicities. 66% believe international travel increases students’ tolerance and respect.

SYTA Contribution
Professionals with safety as their #1 priority.

- The Student & Youth Travel Association members constitute 140 tour operator companies and more than 900 supplier partners.

- SYTA tour operators move more than three million students and youth travelers annually.

- SYTA travelers generate in excess of $1.5 billion to the U.S. economy annually.
DECISION TO DESTINATION: THE STUDENT TRAVEL PROCESS

Planning a student group trip can be complex, which is why tour operators are your partners—streamlining the planning and contracting process, collaborating with teachers and administrators to achieve trip educational goals, and ultimately providing students with life-changing opportunities and experiences. Student tour operators work behind the scene to ensure your trip is a success.*

Client Engagement: 1 month

Initial Planning: 1–2 months

Coordination with Vendors, Securing Reservations: 3–4 months

Itinerary Confirmation: 1–2 months

The Trip: 1–2 weeks

Tour Operator Process Percentage

10% Tour operator engages with client
30% Tour operator conducts initial trip planning
35% Tour operator coordinates with vendors and secures reservations
15% Itinerary is completed and confirmed
10% Students go on trip

KEY

Client makes initial payment to tour operator
Tour operator distributes money to vendors
Final payments: all outstanding balances due from client / all payments made to vendors

For more information, visit www.SYTA.org/Travel-Tools

Follow Us:

*Disclaimer: The purpose of this graphic is to demonstrate an example of the student travel process and does not represent all travel booking experiences. Travel timing and scheduling may vary depending on the trip, but most payments are completed at least six weeks prior to the travel date.