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The pandemic changed the way we live.
Sometimes for the better. **6**

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DISNEY'S EVOLVING NEW NORMAL

What will stay and what will go once health protocols become less urgent? Disney has rolled out some pandemic-inspired practices that analysts and advisors believe are here to stay.

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Cruise lines' next restart challenge? How to vaccinate thousands of crew

By Johanna Jainchill

With the CDC's recent commitment to a mid-July cruise restart from U.S. ports, cruise lines are facing what is predicted to be a daunting challenge: vaccinating their tens of thousands of crew members.

It is not a challenge specific to the U.S. Cruise lines are ramping up their return to service plans in Europe and the Caribbean on ships that will launch prior to any from the States, and they must get the crew on those ships vaccinated even sooner.

But in the U.S., the CDC recently decided to allow cruise lines to skip test sailings if 98% of a ship's crew is vaccinated, and it

had previously recommended that all cruise ship crew have a Covid-19 vaccine, putting pressure on U.S. brands to do so, and fast.

In response, several U.S. cruise ports recently stepped forward to offer cruise ship crew vaccination; two have already publicly administered vaccines to crew coming off nearby vessels. Crew from Royal Caribbean's Freedom of the Seas and Navigator of the Seas were vaccinated at PortMiami on May 1, while 300 crew members on two Carnival ships, the Carnival Breeze and Carnival Vista, were vaccinated during a May 3 rally to support the resumption of cruising at the Port of Galveston in Texas.

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FROSCH BUYS VALERIE WILSON; GBT GETS EGENCIA

Mega-agency tie-ups continue as pandemic spurs M&A deals

By Jamie Biesiada

Consolidation among travel agencies was heating up even before the pandemic. And now, more than a year into the Covid-19 crisis, with margins stretched thin, cash in short supply and buyers and sellers both looking to strengthen their competitive positions through mergers, it has become

an active marketplace for agencies that have the capital and drive to grow through acquisitions.

Last week, two major acquisitions were announced. Froesch International Travel (No. 14 on Travel Weekly's 2020 Power List) acquired Valerie Wilson Travel (No. 36). Additionally, American Express Global Business Travel (GBT, No. 3) said it plans to acquire Egenicia, the corporate-travel arm of No. 1 Expedia Group, pending regulatory approvals.

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Latest luxe safari amenity is exclusive use



Left, Founders Camp, part of the Classic Portfolio, overlooks the Matlabas River in South Africa. Above, a guided walking tour with Jabali Ridge, a stylish camp from Asilia Africa in Tanzania's Ruaha National Park.

By Dorine Reinstein

Exclusive-use safari camps and villas, private air charters and even island buyouts have always been in demand for the high-end, affluent traveler seeking ultimate luxury. The Covid-19 pandemic has reinforced that demand from a much wider demographic of travelers and is opening unique opportunities for the travel trade.

"The concept of exclusive-use accommodation has always been a great concept. These types of holidays have always been popular for the ultrawealthy and even celebrity market, but the trend was definitely accelerated by Covid," said Luca Franco, founder and CEO of Luxury Frontiers.

There has, for example, been a growing trend toward longer stays where guests work while on vacation or use nature locations as a classroom, according to Wayne Nupen, AndBeyond regional touring director. Exclusive-use properties are the ideal answer to this new trend.

A need for families to spend time with the people they love and care about has influenced people's buying behaviors and the way they want to consume travel, said Karl Parkinson of African Bush Camps. This has been the driving force behind the uptick in requests for exclusive-use properties.

Marcelo Novais, general manager for North America at Ker & Downey Africa, said he has also experienced a noticeable increase in demand from small groups of friends who are seeking remote destinations that offer space, privacy and distance from other travelers.

Novais explained there are several distinct advantages that exclusive-use accommodations offer travelers. From a Covid-safety perspective, most exclusive-use lodges and villas offer clients dedicated staff who will quarantine before their arrival to ensure the health and safety of guests.

Maija de Rijk-Uys, managing director at Go2Africa, agreed, saying that as a travel

agent, she's more proactively offering private-use accommodations as a safer option, helping assuage client concerns about traveling during a pandemic by enabling them to stay in their own "safe" bubble.

But there's so much more than just the element of social distancing that plays a part in the popularity of exclusive-use properties or buyouts. On the safari front, these accommodations are not only socially distanced by design but allow for a highly personalized experience, Novais said.

"Ground operators share unique insights into each client's preferences with the properties prior to travel so that their experience can be tailor-made," Novais said. "This level of personalization can range from what unique experiences are included in their day-to-day itinerary, what type of cuisine is prepared by the villa's private chefs and even what type of wine and gin needs to be sourced prior to the guests' arrival.

"Clients can also enjoy the flexibility of a private safari vehicle, guide and tracker who will work hand in hand with them to tailor-make their safari based on what wildlife they want to see," he added.

According to Kristen Korey Pike, founder and CEO of KK Travels Worldwide (a Virtuoso advisor), this high level of personalization requires a hands-on and flexible approach.

"The ability of our safari lodge partners to cater to the most specific of requests continues to amaze me. With enough advanced notice, we can have the precise brand of Greek yogurt requested by the guest available at breakfast in the middle

of the bush!" she said.

This expectation of high-level personalization and flexibility is likely to last long after the virus has been conquered, according to a number of Africa specialists. And this offers a unique opportunity for the travel trade to collaborate more closely to create experiences that can't be duplicated.

"Personalization is essential," said Sherwin Banda, president of African Travel. He said research shows that guests will spend more when experiences are customized exactly to their needs.

"Luxury travel presents the strongest opportunity for revenue growth. Travelers are looking for experiences they couldn't book themselves if they haven't booked with an advisor," he said.

De Rijk-Uys said this "new world" has meant properties and travel service providers have had to become more dynamic and flexible to stay in the game.

"There are a lot of people adventurous enough to travel and make their own experiences, so if your offering is standard there's not a lot to set you apart from your competitors," she added.

Suzanne Bayly-Coupe, founder of Classic Portfolio, agreed, saying that now is the time for travel advisors to show their creativity.

"Craft itineraries to achieve balance and moments of immersion," she advised. "Do not be afraid to add in something unusual in an itinerary that may be the wild card and in most cases becomes the highlight of a journey."

The right communication and collaboration between ground operators in Africa and travel experts in the U.S. could also open up incredible opportunities for travelers who might have thought an exclusive-use property was out of their reach.

Charter flights are often the "cheaper"

option for groups of friends traveling together compared with scheduled flights. Meanwhile, smaller boutique hotels are often open to negotiate exclusive use of their property for large groups. "We need to work together on bookings and help each other," said Nicky Coenen, group general manager of Last Word Intimate Hotels & Safari Camps, during a webinar at WTM Africa recently.

Gordie Owles, commercial director at Asilia Africa, agreed.

"Exclusive use doesn't have to mean just private jets and lavish villas that sleep 14. Simple mobile camps also offer exclusivity, and many exclusive-use houses, if filled, can offer better value for money than booking individual tents in a camp. On that basis, off the back of sensible commercial partner-

ships, most levels of the market should have this opportunity if they wish."

Dave van Smeerdijk, co-founder of Natural Selection, added that even in prime safari locations, there are affordable options. "At Natural Selection we pride ourselves on offering different price points in the wild places where we operate. Safarihouse in Etosha Heights Private Reserve [in Namibia] is a great example of a good value exclusive-use property in a prime game area," he said.

Experts agree that the trend for exclusive-use properties is here to stay, as travelers increasingly seek to connect with each other in a meaningful manner.

Pike said most people have now become accustomed to a greater level of personal space.

"I don't see today's luxury traveler seeking crowded destinations or accommodation options where there are alternatives," she said, adding that it will be on the travel advisor to collaborate with their clients in order to provide local partners with as much detail as possible to exceed client expectations.

For a list of the latest exclusive-use properties, visit www.travelweekly.com/exclusive-use-Africa-safari