

# How to avoid the domestic pitfalls



With international travel grounded, many agents are keen to escort their own domestic tours. But with border closures a constant threat and client confidence low, how do you go about it?

In this exclusive article for *Traveltalk*, three Travellers Choice members share what they've learnt from their COVID-inspired excursions.

TRAVEL AGENTS are smart marketers, know their products and are close to their clients, many of whom, having seen COVID scupper their overseas trips, are open to exploring Australia.

That should be a recipe for success when it comes to agent-led small group domestic tours. And success stories are certainly not hard to find.

In South Australia, Naracoorte Travel n Cruise's first escorted tour to Kangaroo Island last October attracted 15 clients, five more than the agency anticipated. And its Norfolk Island tour, which departs in August, is already sold out.

"We were aiming for 10 but we've got 22 people booked," said owner

Kate Harvey, "so we're doing a second departure."

On the other hand, a seven-day Flinders Ranges tour including the Barossa and Clare Valley that was originally planned for April is being pushed back. And the agency is this month taking a smaller-than-hoped-for group on a *Murray Princess* cruise.

Harvey says her agency's mixed experiences reflect some of the challenges facing agents who are trying to pivot to domestic tours during the pandemic.

"One of the reasons we're having to push back our Flinders Ranges tour is because we've found the market right now is simply saturated with South Australian product.

"In the current climate, it's more important than ever to monitor the competition, because there is just no point putting something out that everyone is doing.

"As always, the key is to find a point of difference. With some destinations that means building a tailored itinerary, perhaps around a theme, but with others, if we are selling into an existing tour, we'll add things before or after to create a more boutique experience."

That is precisely the approach Travel & Cruise Castlemaine in Victoria has taken with its first escorted domestic tour, which is due to take a group of 18 clients on *The Ghan* to Darwin in August.

"In our region people are interested in *The Ghan* but many have done it before," said owner Fiona Oliver. "So we had to think of something a little bit different.

"There is a lot of interest in aboriginal culture among our clients, so we've incorporated a day trip to the Tiwi Islands, where the group will visit an aboriginal community to learn about their culture and in particular their artwork."

Both owners say that regardless of how well products resonate with clients, given the ongoing threat of interstate border closures as well as regional and city lockdowns, it's vital agents are highly adaptable and flexible in terms of destinations and departure dates.

Cathy Hewett, owner of Tewanin Travel in Queensland, says agents must also be pragmatic, which means

acknowledging that Australians are understandably reluctant to venture beyond their state, at least until a COVID vaccination is rolled out.

"Given the border closures, people are simply gun shy at the moment," she said. "So if we can keep them within their state and focus on low-risk areas we are a lot better off."

It's a rule Tewanin Travel observed late last year when Hewett promoted her first domestic escorted tour – a nine-day rail excursion to the Gulf Savannah, a region of woodland and grassland surrounding the Gulf of Carpentaria in Queensland's north west. The venture was a success, with 10 clients travelling across the state on the *Gulflander* and *Savannahlander*.

"All of those on the tour were existing clients, several of whom had international bookings that were cancelled and were keen to use the funds for a domestic journey," said Cathy.

"We're now looking at following up with a tour of Queensland's grain silos."

While staying close to home is sensible, no product is entirely without risk at the moment.

"With people too nervous for cross border travel, we were finding South Australia was starting to sell quite well last year," added Harvey.

"But as soon as we were hit with a lockdown in Adelaide [in November], we went suddenly to nothing."

Regardless of the potential for disruption, Hewett believes agents shouldn't entirely stop taking risks. That's one reason why – despite Western Australia's particularly hard-line border stance – Tewanin Travel is now promoting an escorted tour to WA in August.

"There is a chance it won't get up but we want to be positive, be in the market and give our clients the opportunity. And if the borders were to close quickly, we'd just have to be prepared to react accordingly."

Harvey agrees: "It's clear people are going to be slow to get their confidence back and some tours are not going to get away. But you have got to still give it a go, persevere and not get disheartened."

She also advises agents to seize every chance they get to let clients know they are still active.

"Even though our *Murray Princess*



Cathy Hewett from Tewanin Travel (front) escorted a group to Queensland's Savannahland region

cruise didn't get enough clients to get an FOC for our escort, we decided to absorb that additional cost and still travel, because it provides us with an opportunity for promotion on social media and digital channels.

"It is showing customers that we

are still out there escorting tours and it will generate interest in future departures.

"The good news is that once you get one tour away, clients will start pushing you for more."

■ [travellerschoice.com.au](http://travellerschoice.com.au)

## Some Choice advice:

**Customise** – escorted tours need a point-of-difference, one tailored to your client base

**Track competitors** – avoid destinations that are saturated with competing product

**Be adaptable** – border closures require agents and clients to be flexible

**Be pragmatic** – focus on lower risk destinations and regions

**Persevere** – some tours will fail to attract required numbers, don't be disheartened

**Low-cost marketing** – Travellers Choice agents use their group's email marketing solution, TC Mail, to promote to their existing databases, as well as social media and word-of-mouth.

**Ask for help** – Travellers Choice agents are supported by their head office marketing team, who produce eDMs and flyers, and some are working together by selling into each other's tours.