ECTAA: Leading Recovery & Restoring Travel Confidence

In a period of uncertainty and difficult times, where traveling abroad is complicated, the travel agents and tour operators' community of Europe strongly believes that it is high time to adapt to the "new normal". People need to travel for leisure and business, enjoy new experiences and discover different places, expand their knowledge and broaden their outlook. After weeks of partial or total lockdown, the demand for traveling surged back in June and July this year of 2020, only to be stopped by uncoordinated regulations from some governments, restricting the free movement of their citizens. All the restrictions have affected how businesses operate and how they serve their customers. Furthermore, airlines and hotels are unable to reimburse tour operators and travel agents, who are then in debt to their customers. Tourism's long value chain touches upon multiple sub-sectors that all suffered the consequences of the recent pandemic, and the measures that are not nearly sufficient to restore travel confidence.

Tourism, being one of the most effective engines to deliver sustainable development in Europe, supports employment across all areas and demographics, contributes to well-being, and generates revenue needed to preserve community identity, culture and heritage. Lack of tourism during the past 8 months has led some businesses to either bankruptcy or suspension of their operations until further notice. However, not everyone knows that there are many organizations that are lobbying in support of tourism's revival and brighter future, helping such businesses cope and recover. One of these organizations is ECTAA – the European Travel Agents' and Tour Operators' Association.

ECTAA
THE EUROPEAN TRAVEL AGENTS' AND TOUR OPERATORS' ASSOCIATIONS

THIS IS ATHENS

GREECE

DESTINATION GREECE
HEALTH FIRST

HATTA
HELLENIC ASSOCIATION OF TRAVEL & TOURIST AGENCIES

ECTAA regroups the national associations of travel agents and tour operators of 28 European countries and represents approx. 80.000 enterprises that provide consultancy and sell transport, accommodation, leisure and other tourism services, as well as combined and packaged products to leisure and business customers. Active since 1961, ECTAA is recognized as the main representation of both Travel Agents and Tour Operators on the European level and is an esteemed consultation partner on any policy that may have an impact on Travel Agents' and Tour Operators' activities.

ECTAA's activities range from European Union policy affairs (tourism policy, consumer protection, visa policy, standards) and IATA matters, to destination matters (promotion of selected destinations, dealing with destination issues, such as health and safety and travel restrictions). With the current COVID-19 crisis, ECTAA has been an impeccable support to its members and their voices.

Since TourPressClub is very passionate about contributing to tourism getting back on track, we as Traveling Journalists were invited by ECTAA to participate in their 121st semi-annual meeting in Athens, held in October 2020.

Following ECTAA's mutual agreement with GNTO (Greek National Tourism Organization) to promote Greece as the Preferred Destination for the second half of 2020, it was decided to hold ECTAA's general assembly in Athens. The organization of the annual meeting of ECTAA in Athens was the result of the fruitful cooperation between ECTAA and GNTO.

It was an occasion for the national delegates and Members of ECTAA to get acquainted with the measures aimed at making the tourist experience and travel both, safe and enjoyable.

By meeting altogether in Athens, the European umbrella association of travel agents' and tour operators' community sent a clear message that traveling is safe, if the well-known hygiene and safety measures are respected.

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The main objective of the meeting was to agree on key points that can revive tourism in Europe, and share experiences and best practices of the various markets that the members represent.

The meeting was hosted by HATTA (Hellenic Association of Travel & Tourist Agencies), with the support of the GNTO and the ADDMA (the City of Athens Development and Destination Management Agency).

Out of 40 ECTAA members, 18 Member Associations were present in Athens in person and the rest joined the meetings and discussions virtually.

The assembly took place at the Electra Palace Hotel, which is part of the Electra Hotels chain (www.electrahotels.gr). A two-day program was full of business meetings, discussion sessions, idea exchanges, as well as the historic elections of the President of ECTAA.

The networking events were also attended by the Greek officials and one of them was the Mayor of Athens - Mr. Kostas Bakoyannis who gave an inspirational speech about Greece being a good example in terms of its management of the COVID-19 crisis. There was a positive and dynamic note to his speech mentioning efficient health protocols that made journeys safe and holidays enjoyable. The Mayor also thanked ECTAA for being an essential partner in the travel and tourism promotion program outside of Greece, and he wished everyone to enjoy the beautiful City of Athens; the cradle of democracy.

The assembly benefitted from a full day of meetings, with the attendance of the delegates representing Member Associations in person, and virtually. Many great ideas were exchanged and hopes for a better tomorrow.

The official program consisted of the presentation by GNTO, of Greece being the preferred destination, and was followed by the presentation of ADDMA. They focused on the objective to nurture the image of Greece as one of the safest and most attractive destinations in Europe.

Afterwards the delegates took turns speaking about their destinations, issues and challenges their tour operators and travel agents were facing.

Common challenges that delegates shared were about uncoordinated restrictions that their governments were implementing at a very short notice, and their governments' division between health and economic implications, as well as giving mixed instructions about travel. The issue was that instead of promoting the concept of "travel responsibly", more and more governments were sending out the message to "travel with caution" which did not help restoring travel confidence.

Many delegates mentioned the devastating downside of tourism which, depending on the country, was down 85- 95% in comparison to last year.

The discussion was also focused on airlines' charge backs and refunds, including some governments putting pressure on airlines to pay back tour operators and travel agents, and ongoing court cases against airlines.

Overall, delegates agreed that all of the countries they represented shared the same problems with just minor internal details.

Other main topics circulated over how since the start of the pandemic, Europe has lost about 10% of its GDP, companies were closing down, and people were losing jobs. ECTAA stood for helping to bring economic activities back on track and encouraging businesses exchanges and making new deals.

ECTAA members also discussed the need for a better-coordinated travel protocol and replacement of quarantine with PCR testing.

Mr. Eric Drésin - Secretary General of ECTAA - said that "further work was required to safeguard the free movement within the EU", and mentioned that ECTAA had urged Council Presidency to make "further progress and help Member States to follow the recommendations, to consider substitution of quarantine with testing and to continue development of testing."

Delegates also spoke about how fast the Package Travel Directive (PTD) can be amended. PTD protects European travellers' rights when booking package holidays. Unfortunately, in these extraordinary circumstances, such as the COVID-19, tour operators and travel agents can't meet their refund obligations. Absolutely agreeing that consumer rights must be always upheld, the delegates called upon a revision of the PTD during these critical times, to rebalance the responsibilities and obligations of all actors in the travel and tourism ecosystem, making sure that tourism can be more sustainable and resilient following this crisis.

Delegates also discussed the Special Recovery Program which consists of specific funds allocated to Member States, to revive their economies, and the urge by ECTAA to EU members to submit their plans by March 2021, to qualify. Additionally, they touched on the topic of the importance of investment into the skill development of people working in the tourism sector.

The discussion was concluded with the presentation of Croatia becoming ECTAA's Preferred Destination in year 2021.

The assembly also enjoyed the visit by the Greek Minister of Tourism, where Mr. Harry Theoharis spoke about the EU travel protocols being "coordinated but not harmonized."

Photo by: Paterakis Dionisios

Minister Theoharis also spoke about Greece in regards to the management of COVID-19, and the success with their targeted testing at the Greek airports, saying that: “By testing 25% of people, our results were as if we tested 40%”.

“I am dedicated to lobbying on national and European levels the introduction of PCR tests instead of quarantines. PCR tests consist of 4 important factors: cost (which will be no more than 15 euros), speed (it will take no longer than 20 minutes to get results), accuracy and supply. You get tested before boarding the plane and you travel safely to your destination country,” added Minister Theoharis.

The visit continued with the speech by Mr. Lysandros Tsilidis - Board Member of FedHATTA (Federation of Hellenic Associations of Travel & Tourist Agencies)

Photo by: Paterakis Dionisios

- who highlighted the diversity of travel and tourism products that the mainland and the islands of Greece have to offer, ranging from UNESCO World heritage, beautiful nature, to a vibrant cultural scene, fine gastronomy as well as many conference and meeting venues. He also thanked ADDMA for sponsoring the general assembly of ECTAA in Athens.

President of ECTAA, Mr. Pawel Niewiadomski, was presented an award for fostering strong relations between Greek incoming agents and ECTAA’s Members.

“Considering the current difficult period, we are confident that our cooperation will be a positive catalyst to bring tourism back to Greece,” said Mr. Niewiadomski.

Mr. Niewiadomski also added that this event in Athens was the first meeting in person of the organization since the outbreak of COVID-19, and it was made possible thanks to the commitment of

the Greek authorities and professionals of the tourism industry. He thanked Minister Theoharis for his strong support to travel and tourism and his backing to replace quarantines with tests, in order to promote safe travel.

Lastly, there were the elections of the President of ECTAA for the period of 2020 – 2022.

Historically, there would be no elections of the President, rather each Head of the respective Member Association, in alphabetical order, would take on the realm of ECTAA for a two-year term.

Following the voting by the Executive Board of ECTAA, Mr. Pawel Niewiadomski was re-elected as President for a second term. Additionally, Mrs. Eva Blasco Garcia was re-elected as Vice-President. Mr. Marios Kammenos from HATTA was re-elected Treasurer and Mr. Jan Van Steen became an Executive Board Member.

Mr. Pawel Niewiadomski said that he was very honored to be re-elected and added that the tourism industry in Europe was facing many challenges in the current global health crisis. “My priority will be to work with political leaders and industry partners on setting the right framework for our industry for a speedy recovery. A prerequisite for this is a coordinated approach on travel restrictions within Europe! And the second one is a quick fix to the Package Travel Directive, which is not adapted to the current endless extraordinary circumstances,” said Mr. Niewiadomski.

As part of the cultural program, there was an introductory bus-tour around Athens on a City Sightseeing Hop on - Hop off Bus.

The 2-hour tour helped all the observers experience the best of Athens - from its ancient relics to contemporary streets.

There was also a walking tour in Athens for all interested delegates. It was led by the Athens Walking Tours' (or AWT's) co-owner and the Operations Director Mrs. Despina Savvidou - the driving force behind the AWT and a guide herself for over 30 years. Despina was very passionate and enthusiastic about guiding the delegates around the oldest streets of Athens, telling the story behind the ancient city then and now.

Being one of the businesses that suffered the consequences of the COVID-19 crisis, AWT offers various tours: virtual tours, gastronomy tours, cultural and historical tours, and many more.

In conclusion, it must be said that ECTAA is a strong advocate of a common approach to travel restrictions. The ECTAA organization and its team work tirelessly to make sure that travel agents, tour operators and the entire ecosystem of tourism's value chain are given support and help in being able to do what they do best – providing safe and enjoyable travel and restoring travel confidence.

ECTAA stands for three core values and pillars of the European Union – Free Movement, Free Trade and No Discrimination among the Member States.

The editorial staff of the TourPressClub would like to once again thank ECTAA's Secretary General Mr. Eric Drésin, Deputy Secretary Mrs. Christina Russe and ECTAA's President Mr. Pawel Niewiadomski for inviting us as guests to their semi-annual meeting, and being so open in showing the work they do to make sure tourism is back, and this time more resilient and sustainable.

By Inara Kyazimova & Dario Zoric