



WHAT NEXT FOR GROUP TRAVEL?

Chief Executive Mike Bugsgang reports on the Association of Group Travel Organisers' current activities

Staffing a stand at a group travel show always proves a good barometer to assess the mood of organisers, and the Great for Groups Show, staged at Kempton Park Racecourse, did not disappoint. AGTO's stand was extremely busy throughout the show, with a constant stream of visitors that resulted, I'm delighted to say, in a record number of GTOs joining the Association on a single day.

Talking to these GTOs was enlightening as it soon became apparent that a constant theme emerged - that of the UK's political landscape. Almost all the visitors admitted they were becoming 'elected out', what with the Brexit vote last year, then the local government elections and, of course, the imminent general election. GTOs were understandably wondering how the outcomes would affect the groups market.

The Prime Minister's announcement of a snap general election certainly caught everyone on the hop and, as a result, the political parties' manifestos had to be cobbled together at break neck speed. As I write this month's column, these manifestos have not yet been published, so coverage in them (if any) relating to the UK's tourism industry will have to be reviewed at a later stage.

In the meantime, it's worth looking at some of the issues the Tourism Alliance - the organisation that represents all the major travel trade associations, including AGTO - has highlighted in its recently published Tourism After Brexit, a policy agenda for the UK tourism industry.

One of the key issues the Alliance is calling on Government to address is for a taskforce to be established to examine ways to fund domestic tourism more effectively. Government funding for domestic tourism has seen massive cuts from £126 million in 2008 to just £71 million in 2017. This has made it increasingly difficult for Destination Marketing Organisations (DMOs) to carry out their activities.

The document also covers many other issues, such as the importance to the UK's tourism economy of workers from the European Union, taxation, trade tariffs, planning policies, red tape and visas.

How the Government intends to



Westminster Abbey has become an Associate Member of AGTO



Southern Branch on their recent fam trip

process EU visitors post-Brexit, and develops a co-ordinated programme of measures so the UK remains a destination of choice for travellers from the main global growth markets such as India and China, are other questions posed in the manifesto.

The Alliance is also calling for agricultural policies to recognise the close relationship between the farming industry and the countryside in maintaining a unique landscape that attracts millions of visitors every year. The abolition of Air Passenger Duty (APD) is another key issue the Alliance would like to see implemented as soon as possible.

Following the general election, representatives of the Tourism Alliance will meet with MPs and the Department of Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) to lobby for the industry's requirements as outlined in the Alliance's manifesto.

BRANCHING OUT

AGTO's branches have been extremely active over the past few weeks organising

fam trips to various locations. Western Branch visited Gloucester Docks, Southern enjoyed their day at Epsom Downs Racecourse, while Kent, on its home patch, was pleased to welcome new GTO members on a trip to Ightham Mote and Knole House.

WESTMINSTER ABBEY JOINS AGTO

Another of Britain's world famous visitor attractions, Westminster Abbey, has become an Associate Member of AGTO. Kings, queens, statesmen and soldiers, poets, priests, heroes and villains... the Abbey is a living pageant of British history. Every year Westminster Abbey welcomes over one million visitors who want to explore this wonderful 700-year-old building, and thousands more worship at the Abbey's daily services.

DIARY DATES

The AGTO Showcase Weekend will be held at the Park Royal Hotel in Warrington from 15-17 September 2017. It will bring together 200 of AGTO's group organiser and Associate Members from all over the UK and abroad to network and contribute to a weekend offering a programme of business and social events. For further information, including delegate rates, visit www.agto.co.uk.