

COVID-19 Q&A

Many groups have had their plans uprooted over the last year or so and, despite the lifting of restrictions, many of you will still be anxious moving forwards too. As an independent family owned and managed company, we have considered every group on an individual basis. In such a way, we have worked hard to find the best solution in every instance - whether that's been to reschedule a trip, facilitate a cancellation, defer to next year or to offer a refund where appropriate. Here are some of the frequently asked questions and hopefully, some helpful answers too.

Is it true that the DfE guidelines restricting school travel have now been amended, allowing us to plan, book and undertake trips once more? Yes, the latest guidance from the DfE allows you to travel both domestically and overseas once more, which is obviously good news for all of us.

We are thinking about booking a trip for 2022/2023 and are unsure on what the cancellation policy would be and want to check before we can commit – where can we find out more? Please refer to our Covid-19 Guarantee - which should be read in conjunction with our Standard Terms and Conditions. But we're always happy to be as flexible as possible too. The travel insurance that is included in our packages should also give you confidence. Please refer to the Travel Insurance notes and links in the Travel Aware section of this website.

Will travel insurance cover us if we want or need to cancel after we have made a booking? Travel Insurance will cover individuals who are unable to travel due to testing positive for Covid-19 prior to departure but will not cover any disinclination to travel for individuals or as a group. Please see answers on 'disinclination to travel' and 'travel insurance' for further details.

What if one or more of our party tests positive a few days before we travel, or pupils or staff are required to self-isolate and cannot travel? These individuals will be covered as part of the travel insurance that is included in the packages that we offer for school and youth groups. There is even a clause to help you replace a Group Leader if necessary, too. Please refer to the Travel Insurance notes and links in the Travel Aware section of this website and read the policy wording carefully to ensure it meets with your requirements.

What if some of our group cannot meet the entry requirements to travel to our destination (because they have not had vaccinations or are unable to get the vaccinations that they need in time) for the dates we have booked to travel? The entry requirements of another country are outside of our control and where these do not influence our ability to deliver the tour, remain a consideration for those travelling, rather than for the tour company. If it is a requirement to be fully vaccinated to enter a country, then just as it is a requirement to have a valid passport or perhaps a valid visa, this must be adhered to. These are not requirements imposed by us. As such, any cancellation for non-compliance with these regulations will not entitle you to a refund and our standard terms and conditions will apply. The effect of any cancellations within a group (reducing the numbers travelling) is also likely to have an impact on the price to be paid by those still travelling (by way of small group supplement) which is another consideration. As such, our best advice is to check carefully with everyone in your group to ensure they can meet the entry requirements and requirements to undertake the activities once they are in destination and discuss any concerns with us at the very earliest opportunity.

Who is responsible for any Covid-19 testing (PCR or other) in this country or overseas?

Any arrangements and costings associated with any Covid-19 testing is the responsibility of the individual travellers and the rules are both varied and subject to change. We will help to facilitate testing overseas and the purchase of reduced-price testing kits if available, but these do not form part of the tour/trip package and any testing requirement or Government restriction is ultimately outside of our control. See <https://www.abta.com/tips-and-advice/travelling-during-coronavirus/covid-19-your-holiday-questions-answered> for more advice.

What if one or more of our party tests positive whilst away in destination and is unable to return with the rest of the group?

These individuals will be covered as part of the travel insurance that is included in the packages that we offer for school and youth groups. See your Confirmation for details. Please refer to the Travel Insurance notes and links in the Travel Aware section of this website and read the policy wording carefully to ensure it meets with your requirements.

What if we are still scheduled to make a trip, but FCDO guidance advises against all but essential travel to our destination?

If the FCDO guidance advises against all but essential travel to your destination and your departure is imminent (this would usually mean within 1-2 weeks prior to departure) then we would work with you to reschedule to another destination, defer the trip to a future date or failing that - to offer a full refund without delay, in accordance with the Package Travel Regulations.

We booked our trip a long time ago but are now getting worried about staffing and safety procedures and don't know what to do?

Any uncertainty is understandable. We are always here to discuss your options and to help in any way. If you booked your trip pre-Covid 19 advices not to travel, your school insurers (the RPA or other commercial providers) might cover you if you decide to cancel now. However, you would absolutely need to check with them first and to liaise with us to request a Cancellation Invoice if appropriate. We can discuss a deferral to a future date if that proves to be the better option for all concerned.

In what circumstances would Absolute Travel cancel our trip and what would happen if it were to do so?

We are only likely to cancel your trip if the FCDO advises against all but essential travel to your destination a week or so prior to departure - or should your programme be wholly unviable (closure of your ski resort or the cancellation of your football tournament for example) and any attempt to reschedule or defer between us, had proved impossible at the time. If so, a full refund would be made without delay.

Do we get a refund if the FCDO guidance does not prevent travel to our destination but the DfE re-imposes restrictions and once more advises against residential trips?

In principle, no. Tour companies are bound by the Package Travel Regulations and by the ABTA Code of Conduct and a refund would be facilitated if the FCDO advised against all but essential travel to your destination and an alternative was not agreed. However, any reimposition of DfE advice against school residential and trips does not preclude us from providing the trip and no reimbursement is required. In practice, we would work with you to agree the best way forward, to minimise the risks and to mitigate the losses. We would try to defer the trip to a future suitable date, but if you wished to cancel our normal terms and conditions would apply. If a deferral is not possible or you would prefer not to defer, then we will be able to offer you as much of a refund as we are able to secure from our suppliers once our expenses have been met. We are hopeful that the DfE will not introduce restrictions once again and rather, will reply on FCDO advice as definitive in the future.

What if we/the school/Trust decide not to travel, although FCDO advice allows us to continue with the trip as planned? If you decide for whatever reason that you do not wish, or feel unable, to take the trip as planned - and wish to cancel your booking at any stage (what tour operators and the insurance industry often refer to as ‘a disinclination to travel’, then our standard terms and conditions would typically apply. However, as long as your payments are fully up to date at the time and the decision not to travel is based on genuine substantiated Covid-19 concerns, we’ll still work with you to defer your trip and to liaise with our suppliers to ensure the best possible arrangements on your behalf. Please bear in mind that unavoidable additional costs may be imposed. If you wish to cancel instead, then we will offer you as much of a refund as we are able once all our expenses and overheads have been met.

If the country we are visiting has a Government “amber” or even “red” travel code in place, can we get a full refund because of any restrictions, self-isolation or testing costs and requirements? If you decide for whatever reason that you do not wish, or feel unable, to take the trip as planned - and wish to cancel your booking at any stage (what tour operators and the insurance industry often refer to as ‘a disinclination to travel’), then our standard terms and conditions would typically apply. Any additional requirements and restrictions such as self-isolation, PCR testing (and associated costs) or other restrictions that don’t prevent us from operating your trip or tour. ABTA has a easy to read, impartial Q&A for youth groups on their website so feel free to have a look at the following: <https://www.abta.com/tips-and-advice/travelling-during-coronavirus/covid-19-your-holiday-questions-answered> In reality, as long as your payments are fully up to date at the time and the decision not to travel is based on genuine substantiated Covid-19 concerns, we’ll still work with you to defer your trip and to liaise with our suppliers to ensure the best possible arrangements on your behalf. Please bear in mind that unavoidable additional costs may be imposed. If you wish to cancel instead, then we will offer you as much of a refund as we are able once all our expenses and overheads have been met.

And what if parents no longer wish to pay trip instalments or want to withdraw a pupil from a trip? The best advice is always to keep up to date with your payments (both individually and as a school) as not to do so would be a breach of contract and any tour company would be entitled to deem a place (or indeed the trip) as cancelled by you if payments are not paid on time. While any disinclination to travel might be understandable in the circumstances it does not entitle the customer (either individually or collectively) to a refund. If numbers reduce in a group booking, the added complication may be that the trip price for those still travelling needs to increase – especially if you are travelling by coach. Again, it’s always best to drop us a line for some advice or to simply call us to discuss, before coming to a decision on the best way forward.

What would happen if we have to isolate as a group on arrival in our destination? We’ll look to amend your itinerary to best meet any local restrictions that may have been put in place and to work within the parameters that we can. We’ll happily look at the viability of deferring the trip and to discuss any possible implications together if the duration of the quarantine impacted significantly on your trip. Please bear in mind that unavoidable additional costs may be imposed. If you wish to cancel instead, then we will offer you as much of a refund as we are able once all our expenses and overheads have been met. We will not be responsible for any refund or deferral, should any quarantine be the result of your failure to meet the entry requirements of a destination country (i.e. your non-adherence to vaccination requirements for example).

And what would happen if we are required to self-isolate or quarantine for any number of days on our return to the UK after the trip? It may be that a 'quarantine' or 'self-isolation' ruling is in force in conjunction with FCDO advice or due to entry requirements in the country you are travelling to as continues to be the case for certain destinations. However, if the trip can still run as planned, then quarantine regulations don't require us to cancel even though they may prove to be a substantial inconvenience. We'll always discuss your options prior to any decision on the best way forward in these circumstances. Please bear in mind that unavoidable additional costs may be imposed. If you wish to cancel instead, then we will offer you as much of a refund as we are able once all our expenses and overheads have been met. ABTA has a easy to read, impartial Q&A for youth groups on their website so feel free to have a look at the following: <https://www.abta.com/tips-and-advice/travelling-during-coronavirus/covid-19-your-holiday-questions-answered>

What extra checks are you putting in place to ensure our safety? As fully Assured members of the School Travel Forum (STF), our Managing Director also sits on the STF committee. The committee has invested a considerable amount of collective time and energy into ensuring the best possible guidance and support for school travel moving forwards in conjunction with ABTA and other industry health and safety partners. We'll also be able to help you with Risk Assessment templates as required and any up-to-date travel advice as well. Our standard audits for accommodation, transportation and other elements are now the subject of supplementary Covid-19 audit checks so that we can monitor the measures that have been put in place by our suppliers and ensure the highest possible safety for our groups. We are happy to share this documentation with you too. What's more, we'll continue to work with our suppliers including ski providers, sports venues and attractions to ensure that you are always well informed.

What extra flexibility do we have if we are considering a new trip for 2022 or 2023? We are committed to working with all our group leaders, to agree the most sensible and workable payment schedules and to offer as much flexibility as we can. This includes reduced deposit commitments whenever this is viable and extension to payment dates whenever this can be negotiated with our suppliers. This needs to be a team approach and we'll always promise to be as fair and as transparent as possible. We are best served by all working together to find the best way forward in every scenario, and we're always here to help. As a small, independently owned and family managed company with thirty years in the business, we treat our customers as individuals, not numbers, and you can always reach us to discuss any concerns or challenges in person.

What will be the impact of social distancing on our trip? Hopefully, social distancing restrictions will no longer be impactful on your trip or tour in the weeks, months and years to come. However, as regulations and restrictions vary greatly from one destination to another and are subject to change at any time, we'll keep you updated prior to travel and will attempt to minimise any inconvenience as much as we possibly can. There's no definitive answer I'm afraid. However, we can reassure you that all our trips will respect local regulations in force at the time and that any amendments to your itinerary and inclusions will be discussed with you prior to departure. Should this have a substantial impact on your trip and we're unable to deliver your package as agreed without major modifications, we'll work on deferring the trip to a later date or another destination instead.

Do you have a group travel insurance policy in place and what is the Covid-19 cover as well as other elements that are included? All the packages that we offer for school and youth groups have travel insurance included in the price. You can opt out if you wish. Please refer to the Travel Insurance notes and links in the Travel Aware section of this website for further details. Please read the policy wording carefully to ensure it meets with your requirements.

Are we able to book trips now for dates in the future, say for this year, 2023 or beyond? Yes, the DfE recognises the significant benefits that these opportunities offer children's educational development as well as their mental health and wellbeing. Our experience to date shows that there is huge demand for school trips and youth club tours (sports, performance and other) to run again and groups are already busy planning and booking for future trips (both domestic and international) and looking forward to the chance to travel again. If you have any questions or concerns, then the best advice would be to call us for a chat. We can talk through the options and work out a plan together that's going to make sense for everyone moving forward. Each trip (and each group) is unique, so you won't be treated like a number. We're always here to help.

Finally, playing devil's advocate, what if we have booked a trip or tour for a future date and have monies allocated to a booking Absolute Travel and Tours is no longer trading? Not a very nice question, but a sensible one to ask. We set up back in 1992 and in 2022 we are celebrating our 30th anniversary. While our financial stability, independence and experience are invaluable, your monies are safe regardless. As members of ABTA and in accordance with their Code of Conduct, all monies paid by you for a trip are fully protected by ABTA (for coach tours) and ATOL protected by the CAA (for flight inclusive trips), so that's something less to worry about of course!

Absolute Travel and Tours Covid-19 Q&A, updated 18-January-2022