

6 November 2020

## Creating opportunities in a not so COVID Normal

On 23 October 2020, the Australian Government released its national policy to 'open Australia': a '3-Step Framework for a COVIDSafe Australia' - to nationally reopen to a state of 'COVID Normal'. At this stage, WA has decided not to join the rest of National Cabinet in support of the COVID Normal Plan.

It is possible that, by December 25, the whole of Australia (except WA) may have open quarantine-free domestic borders and all Australians will be able to socialise at any venue, at any time, at a distance of 1.5m (not the currently prescribed 2 and 4 sqm rules). Australians may also be permitted to engage in low risk international travel, but I am yet to be convinced of this.

So - what is COVID Normal? Well - as I understand it - our 'new normal' is:

- outbreaks are managed through a swift public health response
- no domestic border restrictions
- physical distancing (1.5m) and personal responsibility to hygiene and covid-testing
- all businesses to have a 'COVIDSafe Plan'.

So - what places are COVIDSafe? – Any state or territory that sustains a green light in a complex matrix of traffic lights called the "Common Operating Picture". The 'picture' measures state and territory performance on managing COVID-19.

So - what other places are COVIDSafe? Well - outside of Australia - it remains as New Zealand only. The recently announced in-principle agreement between Singapore and Hong Kong to establish a two-way Air Travel Bubble (ATB), is an interesting development to be closely watched. The ATB allows travel between both cities without quarantine, with certain conditions such as travellers testing negative for COVID. It is clear to me however, that our coach sector cannot rely on any international borders opening anytime soon.

The latest tourism statistics (provided by ACCI in September) tells a compelling and painful story for our coach tourism sector.

1. International visitors for 2020 likely to be around 1.8 million versus 9.5 million last year - buggered if I know where the 1.8m visitors are coming from.
2. Domestic Interstate travel in June down 82% compared to last year with overnight spend down to \$404 million compared to \$2.9 billion in June 2019.
3. Hotel occupancy rates in August/September in key capital cities down around 30-35% compared to 75-82% last year.

The August results from Tourism Research Australia show that regional areas are faring better than capital cities (Sydney for example down 85% compared to August 2019) but regional Qld, WA and SA are all on the way up.

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## View from Canberra



However, I believe there is a strong opportunity for our coach sector in both regional *and* urban tourism. The BIC has long advocated to industry and governments for people to travel across Australia not over it and connect regional visitors to our cities and vice versa. State regional visits are not dissimilar to a regional coach tour in Europe.

If this new COVID Normal Plan pans out, coach operators need to crank up the engine now and start talking to the state tourism agencies and local governments to grow a new and unique service in Australian tourism. There is more to local coach tourism than young back packers and grey nomads. Not trying to tell operators how to suck eggs here, but I believe we need to expand the market opportunities across the board not just the traditional markets (charter school bus as an example). Why not try something that offers an experience for a family to see and experience our regions and cities?

The BIC and the Bus Australia Network are doing our bit to ensure that support for the sector is on the agenda of all Ministers in transport and tourism – including providing a 10 year strategy for coach solutions for land transport tourism. We are also currently holding discussions with the Deputy PM Michael McCormack and National Cabinet to support a number of initiatives to encourage industry diversification, business investment and tourist incentives.

The bureaucratic task moves slowly most of the time, but I think the national COVID Normal Plan, if adopted by all states and territories, is an extremely positive step for industry and there-in lies an opportunity for coach operators to flick the switch to new ways to deliver a tourism product.

Keep safe and well. Stay informed at [ozebus.com.au/covid](https://ozebus.com.au/covid).

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