

Combined front needed for tourism

Tourism operators will need to have a combined voice to combat the hit they have taken from the Covid-19 pandemic, says owner of accommodation business Waiheke Unlimited, Ed Coutts.

The island's tourism industry has rested on its laurels and needs to put a front foot forward to compete with other destinations, says Ed.

"You need to have buy-in from across the island including hire car companies, restaurants and accommodation. Maybe a few people have some time now and it may be a good time to get together remotely."

The global shutdown has had a "very negative impact" on his own business and resulted in a stream of cancellations that has had a big hit on cashflow.

"Really, that's come about due to the portals such as Airbnb and Booking.com adopting a policy to refund and step outside of cancellation fees. It's having to repay deposits for all your forward bookings for next summer," he says.

Tourism operators had seen the America's Cup events scheduled to take place next summer as a boon to the island's economy. However, in late March, America's Cup World Series events that were scheduled to take place in Sardinia this month and Portsmouth, England, in June were both cancelled due to Covid-19. It has not been confirmed whether the America's Cup events planned for Auckland from December to March will go ahead as scheduled, and Ed says his America's Cup bookings have been cancelled too.

"We were well geared up for that. The bookings relating to that were really big-dollar bookings."

General manager of destination at Auckland Tourism Events and Economic Development (ATEED), Steve Armitage, says the organisation is working with America's Cup event organisers and central and local government on planning for the 36th America's Cup while being mindful of the need to be agile enough to adapt to changing circumstances and restrictions due to Covid-19.

"We believe the 36th America's Cup can play an important role in helping to reinvigorate our hospitality, tourism and marine sectors.

"ATEED is currently working with the



Ed Coutts

Waiheke strategic broker from Auckland Council Events Team to facilitate workshops and presentations to key tourism operators and representatives from the various sectors on Waiheke. That will help identify the support they may need to derive benefit from Auckland hosting America's Cup 36.

"We're also working with a range of Waiheke organisations to support their event concepts and applications through ATEED's 2020/2021 Summer Festival Programme. We will keep in close contact with our event partners as the year progresses," says Steve.

Although the past few weeks haven't been easy, Ed has seen a glimmer of hope with some bookings coming in for October onwards

"The domestic market will travel, albeit reduced," says Ed.

Auckland Council's chief economist David Norman wrote in the April *Auckland Economic Update* that, "If Covid-19 is kept to manageable levels in New Zealand, we may see a boom in domestic tourism as New Zealanders choose or are pushed not to travel overseas by quarantine rules."

ATEED also sees domestic tourism playing an important role in Waiheke's economic recovery.

"Once inter-regional tourism is permitted, ATEED will resume promotional work to attract visitors to Auckland, with Waiheke sure to be one of the main drawcards. Prior to this, we will work to encourage Aucklanders to get out to ex-

A survey conducted in April and May 2019 by Project Forever Waiheke revealed 45 percent of visitors to the island were from New Zealand and, of those, 77 percent were from the Auckland region. The study showed that 58 percent of visitors came for a whole day, while 17 percent stayed for one or more nights.

plore beyond their backyard," says Steve.

Immediately before the lockdown, ATEED was working with tourism operators, including some from Waiheke, on a domestic marketing initiative with special offers to attract visitors to Auckland.

"When appropriate, we will re-engage with the group on the offers that they have already put forward to boost domestic visitation to Auckland."

"We are also focusing on developing, alongside industry, an overall recovery framework for Auckland's visitor economy, and the steps we need to take. The framework outlines a phased approach that takes into account the 'new normal', requiring us to think differently about how we sustainably rebuild a more resilient industry."

Steve Armitage



People on several Hauraki Gulf islands have commented that packages including transport will be needed to make tourism attractive and affordable when restrictions ease.

An Auckland Transport spokesperson says the organisation will work proactively with private ferry operators and the Waiheke Local Board to ensure that public transport can play a role in helping get visitors to the islands when tourism opens up again.

Information for businesses is available at tinyurl.com/ATEEDBusinessResources

• Erin Johnson



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