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Crisis Planning and the Volcanic Ash Cloud

By Leo Jakobson
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Planners can prepare for many things going wrong on an incentive trip, but a long-dormant, unpronounceable Iceland volcano eruption, which spewed ash that shut down much of Europe's airspace for six days, isn't one of them. However, they can be prepared for the unexpected.

Creating the worst disruption of air travel in modern aviation history—the September 11 terrorist attacks only led to a three-day shutdown of U.S. airspace in 2001—the Eyjafjallajökull volcano sent a continent-wide cloud of ash 36,000 feet into the atmosphere on April 14. Volcanic ash is very sharp and hard, and can cause plane engines to clog up and shut down. Most of continental Europe's airspace reopened on April 20, and Britain's on April 21.

St. Louis-based Maritz Travel, one of the largest incentive houses, had only one European program seriously affected by the ash, according to Meg Proskey, division vice president of air, registration, and technology. "The timing, for us, was fairly good," she says. "We were mostly between operations."

That program was for 600 participants of a U.S. financial services firm. The group was originally scheduled to depart for Athens, Greece, on April 21, arriving

on the morning of April 22. Most of the group had been scheduled to return on April 26, with a top tier of 160 attendees scheduled to move on to Crete for an extended program.

But that client had been preparing for a possible disruption well before the volcano's eruption, as a strike by Greek air traffic controllers had been scheduled on the program's first day, Proskey says. "We were working through that, changing itineraries," she says. "The client had asked us to reach out to individuals, asking if they wanted to come in early, if they wanted to cancel, if they preferred to reschedule and do a second trip. We worked intensely with the client for three days."

"We really do plan for this," Proskey says. "We have a broad mix of agents who can pull in resources."

The volcano eruption "was like a one-two punch," she adds. Even though it had the ironic effect of keeping Athens airport open during the week of the scheduled incentive trip, as the strike was canceled

when air traffic controllers realized that Greece was one of the few European countries where all flights were not grounded by the ash cloud, and stranded travelers were flocking there to get home.

In the end, the financial services firm officially canceled the Athens portion of program, but went forward with the smaller group in Crete. Participants were offered the ability to use their originally scheduled flights and hotel reservations in Athens, and a cash stipend to make up for the lack of events, or wait for the program to be rescheduled at a U.S. destination in a few months' time. About 140 chose to go to Athens. Maritz Travel rescheduled arrival flights for those who flew directly to Crete.

"We really do plan for this," Proskey says. "We have a broad mix of agents who can pull in resources." Likening the situation to a larger version of a snowstorm in Chicago, she adds, "We can contact the participants, help the client get messages to them. We are in contact with the airline. When Delta added flights to Athens because other [European] cities were having issues, we knew about it in advance so we were on the lookout," for the flight to come up in the reservation booking system. "We had people circling," she adds.

"Crisis management is an area in which we excel."

Maritz isn't the only incentive planner that makes that point.

"As far as the widespread air travel disruption, we are able to rely on the strong relationships we've built with airlines to work things out for our clients," says Barry Wegener, senior director of Carlson Marketing, another large incentive company. "Fortunately, we had just a few programs scheduled in Europe during the affected weeks. Never underestimate the power of building strong relationships, whether it is with your partner suppliers, your employees, or your customers." Carlson Marketing had one client cancel and reschedule an April 19-22 trip for 250 participants to Paris, and another client go forward with a program for 234 to Barcelona, as much of Spain was open for stretches during the eruption.

Maritz's Proskey adds that with incentive travel, a planner's goals go beyond just communicating with clients' employees and rescheduling flights. "We make sure we are still providing something special for the participants," she says. "An incentive is not a trip where just getting there is a win. It still has to be a special experience."



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