

THE EVOLUTION OF GROUP TRAVEL

A WHITEPAPER BY LEISURE GROUP TRAVEL
IN PARTNERSHIP WITH COLLETTE



A Market in Motion

Group travel has always been about more than itineraries and logistics. At its core, it is about people — traveling together, sharing experiences, and creating connections that last long after the trip ends. Yet while the purpose of group travel has remained the same, the way it is planned, delivered, and experienced has changed dramatically.

From motorcoach day trips in the 1960s to small-group cultural immersions in far-flung corners of the world, the preformed group marketplace has continually reinvented itself to meet the expectations of each new generation. For travel planners, the challenge has always been keeping pace with traveler demand.

Few companies illustrate this story more vividly than Collette, one of the world's longest-running tour operators. Still family-owned after more than 100 years, Collette has continuously adapted to shifts in the group travel industry — and often led the way forward. Through the voices of three leaders from different eras of Collette's history — Executive Chairman Dan Sullivan Jr., President & CEO Jaclyn Leibl-Cote, and Senior Director of Product Marketing Diana Ditto — this whitepaper examines the forces that have shaped the group travel market, the lessons learned from periods of disruption, and what group planners must know to succeed in the future.



Motorcoaches & Milestones –

The Early Days of Group Travel



The modern era of group travel began in earnest in the 1970s and 1980s, when companies like Collette expanded beyond local excursions and began building national brands.

For Collette, that transformation started when a young Dan Sullivan Jr. was tasked with developing the company's sales department. "At first, I was just working with schools in Rhode Island, running short trips to New York and Washington, D.C.," Sullivan

recalls. "But then I realized there were adult groups — churches, senior clubs — everywhere. They wanted to travel, too."

At the time, Collette was still a small operation. "When I came in, I was employee number seven," Sullivan says. The office was modest, and the focus was largely on retail bookings and student groups. Yet Sullivan quickly saw that the adult market represented the greater growth opportunity. Unlike student travel,

“ Customers were discovering destinations they had never dreamed of, and we were there to make it possible.”



Dan Sullivan Jr.
Executive Chairman

which was seasonal and rarely converted into repeat customers, adult groups could deliver consistent, repeat business year after year.

This realization launched Collette into its first real growth spurt. By the mid-1980s, the company had moved beyond its New England roots and deployed a pioneering sales strategy: a national team of professional business development managers, many in their twenties, who traveled the country in suits, calling on group leaders and building relationships face-to-face. “We were on the road, living out of our cars, making 10 to 12 calls a day,” Sullivan says. “That’s how we built it.”

It was a polished, proactive approach to group sales that competitors had never seen, and it quickly reshaped the tour industry.

At the same time, the product itself was expanding. What began as day trips and regional motorcoach tours soon grew into more ambitious itineraries: the Canadian Rockies, Alaska, and eventually Europe. “That was really the golden age of group travel,” Sullivan says. “Customers were discovering destinations they had never dreamed of, and we were there to make it possible.”

Another innovation was how Collette compensated group leaders. Early on, leaders typically traveled free if they brought a group of paying passengers. Collette began experimenting with commission structures instead, giving organizers more flexibility and incentive. That model became standard across the industry.

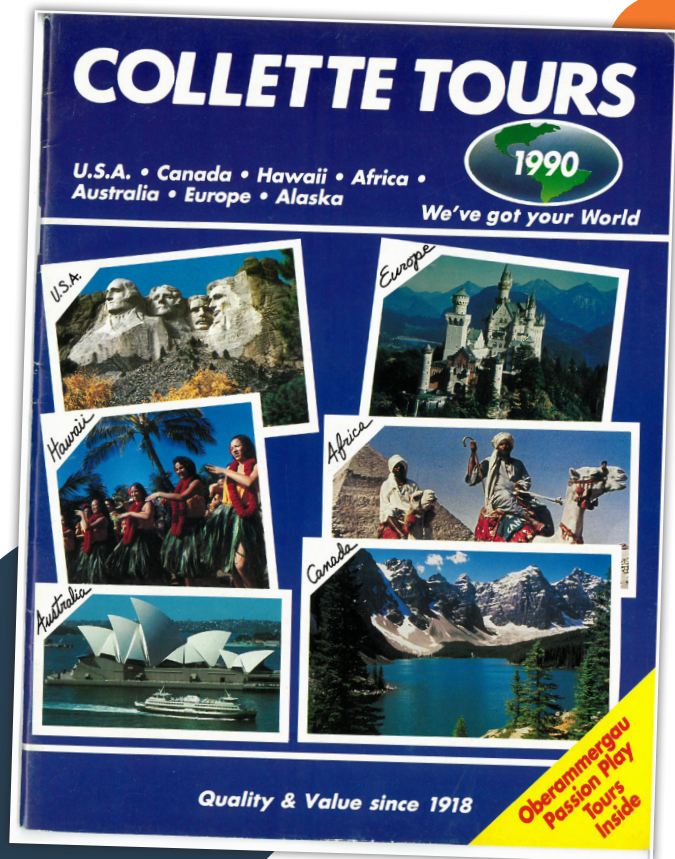
PLANNER TAKEAWAY:

Group travel has always grown by meeting evolving aspirations. Just as yesterday’s seniors graduated from local day trips to international journeys, today’s travelers are seeking cultural immersion, authenticity, and new ways to engage with destinations.

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Each itinerary was tested and refined on the ground, ensuring that every detail — from hotel partners to local guides to pacing — met expectations.



hotel partners to local guides to pacing — met expectations. This philosophy helped establish Collette’s reputation for quality and consistency, even as it expanded across continents.

The globalization of product also changed how the company served its customers. Innovations such as door-to-door pick-up services, curated marketing materials for group leaders, and an emphasis on

professional tour directors raised the bar for service across the industry.

At the same time, Collette’s acquisitions of smaller agencies helped consolidate expertise and grow distribution. By the mid-1990s, it was clear that Collette had moved from being a regional motorcoach operator to a full-service international tour company.

PLANNER TAKEAWAY:

Groups will always crave novelty. Responding to demand with fresh product is essential, but equally critical is maintaining quality and consistency as you scale.

A New Generation of Leadership

As the business entered the 2000s and 2010s, a new generation of leadership emerged. For Jaclyn Leibl-Cote, Collette's current President and CEO, the company was more than a career — it was a family legacy.

She recalls her earliest memories of visiting the office with her siblings, working in the mailroom as a teenager, and eventually joining the tour design team after gaining outside experience in the tech sector. That “outside experience” was no accident. A family rule required that each new generation work elsewhere for at least three years before joining the business — a practice designed to ensure fresh perspectives and avoid insularity.

Her leadership style, however, was shaped by a very different context than her father's. “My dad was building the business,” she says. “He was out researching destinations, contracting tours, selling to group leaders, even guiding trips himself. I stepped into a company that was already global, and my focus had to be on improving excellence across the board.”

For Leibl-Cote, that meant using data to improve customer experience. One of her early initiatives was rethinking how tour directors were assigned to trips. Instead of seniority dictating assignments, she implemented a performance-based system using traveler satisfaction scores. “It wasn't always a popular decision,” she admits, “but it was the right one for the customer — and ultimately for the guides who excelled.”

This data-driven approach reflects a broader shift in leadership qualities required in today's travel industry. Where once success depended on building products and pounding the pavement, today's leaders must balance technology, analytics, and culture. “At the end of the day, this is still a service business,” Leibl-Cote emphasizes. “Culture is critical. No matter how big we get, we have to stay connected to our people and our travelers.”



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Jaclyn Leibl-Cote
President & CEO

PLANNER TAKEAWAY:

Operational data, when combined with an empathetic, people-first mindset, can elevate the group experience and ensure long-term loyalty.

Disruption and Adaptation – Covid as a Catalyst



No force in recent history has reshaped the travel industry more profoundly than the Covid-19 pandemic. For Collette, as for many operators, it forced immediate innovation.

One major shift was in the use of tour directors. Traditionally, U.S.-based guides often accompanied groups overseas. Post-Covid, border regulations and digitalization accelerated a pivot to using locally sourced guides. “It really shifted after the pandemic,” Leibl-Cote explains. “We still have full-time guides in the U.S., but internationally, it made more sense to source in-destination.”

The pandemic also accelerated demand for smaller group sizes. What had been a niche product line

for Collette suddenly became central. Originally introduced in 2008, Collette’s small group Explorations tours had struggled to gain traction. But by 2024, they represented nearly 30% of the business, up from less than 10% just a few years earlier. “We tested, we failed, we learned, and then we doubled down,” Leibl-Cote says. “The pandemic only reinforced that this was the right direction.”

Behind the scenes, Covid also pushed operational reinvention. Collette built new digital tools for communication, created flexible booking policies, and restructured departures to accommodate fast-changing border restrictions.

PLANNER TAKEAWAY:

Disruption can be devastating, but it can also accelerate trends already underway — in this case, a move toward smaller groups, more immersive experiences, and stronger partnerships with local experts.

The Rise of the Savvy Traveler



Perhaps the most lasting change of the past decade has been the transformation of the traveler profile. As Diana Ditto explains, Vice President of Product Marketing & Growth Strategy “The pandemic forced almost everyone to become tech-savvy. Suddenly, even 55-plus travelers were doing their own research online. They knew what the must-sees were, where to eat, what experiences were possible. They became much savvier customers.”

This democratization of information has raised expectations. A decade ago, travelers simply wanted an itinerary that included the highlights, quality hotels, and smooth logistics. Today, those basics are assumed. What they value most now are authentic, meaningful experiences that are difficult to create on their own.

“They still want Big Ben and Stonehenge,” Ditto notes. “But just as prominently, they want the home-

hosted lunch, the family-run vineyard, the experiences that feel personal and unique.”

Meeting this demand has required a fundamental change in how product is designed. Collette now employs teams of product designers based in-destination — in Italy, Ireland, Croatia, South Africa, Japan, and more — who have the local knowledge to uncover experiences beyond the guidebooks. Smaller group sizes (an average of 18–22 travelers) make it possible to deliver these authentic encounters, from dining in private homes to engaging in sensitive cultural conversations. Ditto points to one particularly memorable moment: a Sarajevo tour where travelers sat down with a local guide to talk openly about religion and politics in the Balkans. “It was something you couldn’t replicate on your own,” she says. “That’s what makes group travel so powerful.”

“People want to meet new friends, share meals, and form bonds. The sweet spot is 18-24 — big enough for variety, small enough for intimacy. But larger tours deliver something different — the energy and accessibility that many travelers prefer.”



Diana Ditto
Vice President of
Product Marketing &
Growth Strategy

At the same time, Collette emphasizes that traditional group tours remain the backbone of the business. While the Explorations line has grown to nearly 30% of departures, the classic tours — typically accommodating 35 to 44 passengers — still dominate the portfolio. These larger tours provide scale, accessibility, and the ability to deliver the bucket-list icons that many groups still prioritize.

“Explorations didn’t replace our traditional programs,” Leibl-Cote stresses. “They complement them. The reality is that classic group tours are still in demand and will be for decades to come. Not every traveler wants to pay the premium for smaller groups, and the larger tours allow us to offer tremendous value while still delivering great experiences.”

Interestingly, Collette has also found that travelers still value group camaraderie. “We tested smaller groups of 12 or 14, and traveler satisfaction actually dipped,” Ditto explains. “People want to meet new friends, share meals, and form bonds. The sweet spot is 18–24 — big enough for variety, small enough for intimacy. But larger tours deliver something different — the energy and accessibility that many travelers prefer.”



PLANNER TAKEAWAY:

Today’s travelers expect both the iconic and the intimate. While small groups offer depth and authenticity, traditional groups remain essential for value, accessibility, and scale. Planners should balance both models to meet the needs of diverse audiences.

The Future of Group Travel

Looking ahead, several forces are set to define the next chapter of group travel.

Private Equity vs. Family-Owned Culture:

As investment firms enter the travel space, operators face new pressures. Leibl-Cote cautions that while capital can accelerate growth, it can also erode culture. “In a service-based business, you have to truly care about what you’re putting out there,” she says. “Culture is critical.”

Sustainability:

While not always the deciding factor in purchase decisions, travelers increasingly expect sustainable practices, from carbon-conscious itineraries to support for local communities.

Navigating Overtourism:

Perhaps the most pressing issue for tour planners is the growing strain on destinations where visitor numbers overwhelm local infrastructure and diminish the traveler experience. Collette has been proactive in addressing the challenge.

“As iconic destinations face crowding and rising restrictions, we’ve had to rethink how often we go into places like Venice, Rome and Dubrovnik,” Leibl-Cote explains. “Travelers want those bucket-list sites, but we balance them with new cities and hidden gems that offer authenticity without the congestion.”

Ditto echoes the point: “Our in-destination teams are constantly scouting for alternatives. Instead of only Florence, we’ll incorporate Lucca or Siena. Instead of just Dubrovnik, we’ll bring travelers into Split. It spreads out the impact and delivers a more personal experience.”

This approach not only alleviates pressure on overcrowded sites but also gives travelers richer, less predictable itineraries. The result is a win-win: a more sustainable future for destinations and a more rewarding experience for travelers.



Small Groups as the New Normal:

Both Leibl-Cote and Ditto point to small group travel as a key growth driver. Not only do smaller groups unlock more immersive experiences, but they also meet rising traveler expectations for flexibility, personalization, and connection.

Evolving Traveler Demographics:

While boomers remain the core market, younger generations are showing interest in curated group experiences, especially when they emphasize culture, sustainability, and connection.



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- Diana Ditto

PLANNER TAKEAWAY:

The future belongs to those who stay proactive, not reactive. By addressing overtourism, balancing small and large group models, and embracing new traveler values, planners can ensure group travel continues to thrive in a changing landscape.

A Century of Leadership, A Future of Possibility



Over the past 108 years, Collette has continually reinvented its approach to group travel — from pioneering national sales strategies to leading the charge on international group travel and small group explorations. Along the way, it has demonstrated a truth that remains constant: group travel endures because it delivers connection, community, and shared discovery in ways no other form of travel can.

For today's planners, the opportunity is to build on that legacy — to design experiences that resonate with a new generation of savvy, experience-hungry travelers. With Collette's expertise, resources, and century-long track record of innovation, the path forward is clear.

Ready to plan the next generation of group experiences?

CONTACT COLLETTE TO LEARN MORE

collette



THE COLLETTE PREMIUM EXPERIENCE

INDUSTRY LEADING SERVICE | UNMATCHED TOUR DESIGN



THE COLLETTE PREMIUM EXPERIENCE OFFERS A LEVEL OF SERVICE AND TOUR DESIGN THAT CAN'T BE FOUND ANYWHERE ELSE:

TOUR DEVELOPMENT PHILOSOPHY

DESIGNED FOR THE MODERN TRAVELER

Our tour development teams are based in destination, designing experiences that go beyond the guidebook. We leverage longstanding local relationships to amplify buying power for unmatched value. The result? Industry-best pacing, meaningful engagement with people and culture, and a standalone experience that reflects the expectations of today's traveler.

TRAVEL PROTECTION PLAN

PEACE OF MIND, BUILT IN

With our industry-leading Travel Protection Plan, travelers can cancel for any reason up to 24 hours before departure and receive a full refund (minus cost of the plan) in their original form of payment—not a voucher.

TRANSPORTATION PACKAGE

SIMPLIFIES THE JOURNEY FROM START TO FINISH

Includes roundtrip airfare, in-destination transfers, and Hometown Pickup. Plus, 24/7 emergency support means your clients are never on their own.

FINANCIAL STRENGTH

ABILITY TO MAKE TRAVELER-CENTRIC DECISIONS

We are proudly debt-free. That financial independence empowers us to make decisions that put travelers first—like issuing cash refunds during times of crisis, when others couldn't.

BOOKING ASSURANCE

MINIMIZING RISK FROM THE START

Guaranteed departures will never cancel due to low materialization. When we say we're going, we're going.

OUR PRIORITY IS:

- ✓ Designing tours for the modern traveler
- ✓ 100% focused on guided touring
- ✓ Experiences that spark happiness, understanding, learning, and discovery
- ✓ Meaningfully engaging with local people and culture
- ✓ Breaking stereotypes
- ✓ Ensuring every day is new and different
- ✓ Elevating local culture as prominently as the "must sees"
- ✓ Excellence

OUR PRIORITY IS NOT:

- ✗ Race-to-the-bottom pricing
- ✗ Filling inventory and owning ships, hotels, etc.
- ✗ Beating the competition

For more info, visit www.gocollette.com/groups,
contact your local business development manager,
or call 855.903.8687