



Wells Gray Tours president and owner, Roland Neave, started a rainy day fund for the company back in 2008. The fund is now being used to keep his staff employed during the COVID-19 crisis. Pictured, the entire staff of Wells Gray Tours at a March retreat held in Kamloops before the COVID-19 restrictions were put in place. Photo submitted

Rainy day fund keeps Wells Gray Tours staff employed

Submitted

Wells Gray Tours president and owner, Roland Neave, is staying positive during the COVID-19 crisis.

Neave, who started Wells Gray Tours in Wells Gray Park 48 years ago, knows well that the travel industry is subject to business interruptions from events like 9-11, economic downturns, political unrest, and natural disasters. The company, which typically books 95 tours every year for BC residents, has already cancelled 24 departures as a result of COVID-19.

Future bookings are down to a trickle, but all 28 staff are still working and being paid. Knowing how vulnerable the industry is to world crises after the economic downturn in 2008, Neave started a rainy-day fund to support the company through future crises.

"It is this fund that is now being tapped to pay our employees. I am lucky to work with such a great team and it was very important to me to be able to keep them on when the next downturn happened," said Neave.

"Tour directors who would normally be travelling with their groups are also being paid and are keeping busy by engaging with customers in creative ways. One tour director was scheduled to leave for Japan on March 29 and is keeping her travellers interested with a virtual tour of the trip day by day. Almost all these clients have transferred to our 2021 departure.

"Our five offices in BC", continued Neave, "are all closed to customers, however, most staff are working from home and answering the phones. The reservations staff are busy calling customers and transferring those on cancelled tours to future departures. We are getting some bookings and, when that happens, a cheer goes out across our reservations system so all can be a part of the excitement. Wells Gray Tours caters to the 55+ market and while they are among the most susceptible to the coronavirus, these are also some of the most resilient people I have ever met," added Neave.

"They have hunkered down, are staying at home and have a 'this will pass' attitude."

Neave's advice to anyone who has booked a trip through a travel agency or another tour operator and is thinking of cancelling it should explore their options first.

"If you cancel a tour before the company does," explained Neave, "there is probably a cancellation penalty and most insurance companies will not allow a claim if the reason is fear of travel. When we have to cancel a tour

due to COVID-19, we will either refund the customer's payments or transfer them to the 2021 departure of the same tour with a future credit on a different tour of up to \$500."

Wells Gray's planning department is keeping busy preparing future tours with a focus on close to home domestic travel. Neave said, "We know that our customers are going to want to get out of the house and engage with fellow travellers when the virus risk has ended. This will be a perfect

time to explore B.C. or Canada. Tours to international destinations are being planned for 2021 as it will take longer for airlines to get their schedules back to normal."

The Neave family is still actively involved in Wells Gray Park. They spend weekends (when there are no travel restrictions) at their home in Upper Clearwater. They also operate the Wells Gray Gateway Guesthouse. Roland is the author of the popular guidebook *Exploring Wells Gray Park* now in its 6th edition.

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