



SPANISH
JOURNEYS

805 Long Pond Road, Wellfleet, MA 02667 USA

Tel: 508.349.9769

Fax: 508.349.9765

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Journeys of Recovery and Relaxation

By FRED BIERMAN

FROM the ever-present airport bar to après-ski cocktails and tropical drinks at beachside bars, alcohol and traveling have always been closely linked. For recovering alcoholics, such temptations can be frightening. But as the stigma surrounding alcoholism has faded, a growing number of travel companies have found success combining the tenets of 12-step recovery with the relaxed atmosphere of a vacation.

Steve A. often took as many as four or five trips a year, but after he stopped drinking alcohol in 1980 it was six years before he mustered the courage to go on another vacation. Like others who attend meetings of Alcoholics Anonymous, including those mentioned in this article, Steve observes the organization's policy of anonymity.

"It was tricky," he said, referring to the perils travel posed to his recovery. "When you travel, people are always trying to put alcohol in your hand. In those days I hadn't done much of anything socially without a drink and now all of a sudden I'm at a beach resort, sober, and how do I participate? How do I cross that line of inhibition without alcohol?"

Finally, after going on a vacation with family members in 1986, Steve realized that giving up alcohol did not mean giving up traveling, and he began to think about combining the support meetings for which Alcoholics Anonymous is known with vacation and leisure options.

"I had done some Alcoholics Anonymous conventions and I thought they were fun, but it was just like, 'What are you going to do between meetings?' " he said. "At Club Med you go water-skiing or you go scuba diving or you go golfing or you sit on the beach and then you could go to meetings. So those ideas kind of converged, and I called Club Med and they were really interested in doing something with our group."

In 1988, Steve took 180 fellow recovering alcoholics to a resort in Ixtapa, Mexico. That was the beginning of what is now Sober Vacations International, a tour operator based in Sherman Oaks, Calif., that offers all-inclusive vacation packages for people recovering from drug and alcohol addiction. The next year the company was able to fill an entire resort with 350 travelers, and it has taken over a resort for a week every year since.

By 1995, Steve, who was working as a travel agent at the time, was enjoying such success with Sober Vacations that he stopped working with his regular clients altogether. Last year, his company took around 1,100 clients on vacations throughout the Caribbean, Mexico, Europe and Alaska.

"It's a niche that didn't even exist 20 or 30 years ago," said Joan Clark, the director of alumni relations at the Betty Ford Center in Rancho Mirage, Calif. "It's so much more out in the open now."

In the mid-1990's, Laurie P. had recently given up drinking and was working for En Route Travel, an agency in Pacific Palisades, Calif. She accompanied a large group of insurance salesmen on a cruise, who, along with many of the ship's other passengers, frequented the numerous bars on board. She felt she needed support, and sought out an Alcoholics Anonymous meeting on board. Most large cruise lines offer these meetings, but Laurie was disconcerted to find that she was the only one there.

"I certainly could have used a fellow alcoholic on that trip when everyone around me was drinking," she said.





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As a result of her experiences and at the behest of her friends in recovery, she decided to organize a cruise specifically for sober travelers. On that first trip in 1995 there were 24 passengers. It was successful enough for her to start Meetings en Route as an offshoot of en Route Travel. Last year Meetings en Route took about 2,200 passengers on cruises to such destinations as the Caribbean, the Mediterranean and Alaska.

"It wasn't something that I necessarily decided I wanted to do," she said. "It just kind of kept growing and growing until it became a full-time thing, and then I stopped managing the travel agency and started doing this full time. It's become quite successful."

Sober Vacations International and Meetings en Route are not the only operators that offer trips like these. Sober Travel Adventures, based in Georgia, offers trips to Africa and India as well as Europe. Spanish Journeys, a company based in Wellfleet, Mass., that offers small-group tours of Catalonia, is offering an alcohol-free trip Oct. 7 to 14. While many spouses or partners of people in recovery come along on these trips to offer companionship and support, most of the travelers on these trips are recovering alcoholics, according to the tour organizers.

Promoting and marketing sober trips can be difficult because Alcoholics Anonymous refuses to endorse any company and people at recovery clinics often refuse to speak about specific operators.

"You can violate the spirit of A.A. by putting your brochures in meetings, by putting your brochures on the windshields of people who go to meetings," said Steve. "I so honor the traditions of A.A., it saved my life and that's way more important than my business. But the bad news is that it's like having both my arms behind my back."

Operators must rely on word of mouth and their own connections among recovering alcoholics and drug addicts.

Sue A. of Maryland has been on 21 trips with Sober Vacations. When asked how people find out about the trips, she said: "It's word of mouth. That's exactly how it works."

There are many travelers like Sue, who go on alcohol-free trips year after year and have made lasting friendships on them.

"We've traveled with them almost exclusively since 1989," Sue said of Sober Vacations. "It was so much fun, the trips were fun, the people were fun. They became our friends. When we travel around the country we go see them, and they come and see us when they travel in our direction. It became our social life."

Fellowship has always been a hallmark of Alcoholics Anonymous, and the need for support can be even stronger while away from home. In 1935, Bill W., the founder of A.A., was on a business trip and found himself at a hotel bar trying to maintain his newfound sobriety. He called up a fellow alcoholic and, through talk about their shared experiences, he managed to avoid drinking. The success that he had staying sober that night helped lead Bill W. to create what is now A.A.

"You can walk into a room full of strangers and reminisce because you all have those same experiences," said Ms. Clark, of the Betty Ford Clinic.

As a result, companies like Meetings en Route and Sober Vacations International have high rates of repeat business. "It's somewhere in the neighborhood of 75 to 80 percent," said Laurie P. "It's phenomenally high." Steve of Sober Vacations said, "Seventy percent of my people will come on another trip. Fifty percent will come back within a year. This year 200 people signed up for next year's trip before they even knew the price or location."

For Steve, running such trips is immensely satisfying and far outweighs the rewards of running a regular travel agency.





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"What I do gives me a nice life and enriches other people's lives," he said, adding that he now gets thank-you notes from clients. When he worked for an ordinary travel agency, he said, "people would only call to complain that the guy next to them paid less than they did."

"We've had over 30 people meet on our trips and get married," he added. "And they become my friends. I feel very loved and very lucky."

Travel Without Temptation

All rates listed here are for double occupancy.

Sober Travel Adventures, (770) 432-8225, www.sobertraveladventures.com, has a Scandinavian cruise from Sept. 3 to 11, sailing from Copenhagen with stops in Sweden, Finland, Estonia and Russia. Prices range from \$2,275 to \$2,495 including air fare and from \$1,495 to \$1,695 not including air fare. There are African safaris scheduled for Oct. 7 to 17 and Oct. 16 to 27, a trip to India Nov. 7 to 17 and a visit to Germany Dec. 1 to 7.

Meetings en Route, (866) 678-8785, www.sobersailors.org, offers two Caribbean cruises scheduled for Oct. 15 to 22 and Oct. 23 to 30, and between January and June of next year, trips of varying lengths to the Caribbean, the Bahamas, Mexico, Alaska and the Mediterranean are planned. Prices range from \$159 to \$1,499 a person, and air fare is not included.

Sober Vacations International, (800) 762-3738, www.sobervacations.com, takes over an entire resort for a week each year. There are meetings and speakers as well as snorkeling, scuba diving, golf and other activities. The next "Sober Village" will be from Jan. 28 to Feb. 4 at Club Med Guadeloupe for about \$2,000 all inclusive. Sober Vacations International is also offering a golf trip in Scottsdale, Ariz., Oct. 30 to Nov. 3 for about \$1,200 all inclusive.

Spanish Journeys, (508) 349-9769, www.spanishjourneys.com, specializes in culinary tours of Catalonia, the northeastern region of Spain. It will offer its first tour for people in recovery from Oct. 7 to 14. It includes four nights in Barcelona at a hotel in the Eixample district, and three nights in a country villa north of the city. There will be an excursion to a natural mineral hot springs, a chocolate tasting and a cooking class with a Catalan chef. Most meals are included in the \$3,695 charge. Air fare is not included.

