

Bob Gilbert (00:01):

Welcome to tourism heads and their tales, a podcast series that explores with travel and tourism leaders. Their take on key issues of the day. My name is Bob Gilbert, general manager for the tourism and destination marketing practice at the award-winning strategic marketing agency, Eddy Alexander, who are bringing you this podcast series. I've had the privilege to have worked with iconic global brands, including Disney choice, hotels, Yosemite and Shenandoah national parks, Kennedy space center, visitor center, and best Western international plus served on the boards of the us travel association, national tourist association, and an elected commissioner for visit California looking forward. I will be chatting with those that are helping shape the travel and tourism industry, all with unique tales to share that I know you will find both interesting and educational. So without further ado, let's get started. I'm delighted to welcome Catherine Prather who is President of the National Tour Association, better known as NTA, easier to roll off the lip. So welcome Catherine.

Catherine Prather (01:55):

Thank you, Bob. I'm really happy to be here and looking forward to the conversation we've known each other a long time, so I know we're gonna have a good time.

Bob Gilbert (02:03):

Yes, indeed. Yes, indeed. So, so let's kick off. Tell me now how long you have been with NTA.

Catherine Prather (02:11):

It has been a long time. I actually started with the association in January of 1994. So just I think about it and I can't believe that it has been that long. Uh, but it's, it's been an incredible ride. I can't imagine a, a better industry, a better organization, and so much has changed that there's never been a dull moment. That's for certain

Bob Gilbert (02:35):

Well it's, I guess it's in the genes, right? It's the passion that, uh, so many of us have that work in this industry that once it's there, it takes hold and you know, you, since 94, we've seen a lot. I mean, there has been a lot of change. There's been a lot of crises. Tell me a little bit about how NTA started. If, if I'm correct, it's been, is it almost 70 years in its present guys? Although I believe there was a predecessor, which I think was kicked off by Arthur Towell, is that urban legend or was that based in truth?

Catherine Prather (03:11):

No, that's the, that is the truth. And actually last year was NTAs 70th anniversary. It started out as the national tour brokers association in 1951. And you're correct that the, the Towell's were original founders of the association there in that very first meeting in February of 51. And the word brokers was a part of the Association's name because of interstate regulation. And that was why NTA was formed to advocate to end this. And it wasn't until 1982 with the end of interstate deregulation that the association changed its name to the national tour association. And, you know, really advocacy to this day remains a, a really important aspect of what we do for our members and particularly for our tour operator members.

Bob Gilbert (04:05):

Right? So the Genesis then was based on what is not a myth, but the reality, and it was to fight. If my memory serves me correctly to counter a part of the, I think it was the interstate commerce commission who said the whole tour operating business is illegal and, and tried to get that ruling. And it took, I think it went all the way up to the Supreme court. And then 70 years later here we are so fighting injustice and fighting for the rights of the tour operators has, is again within the DNA. So tell me with all of the changes that, that we've witnessed in the last couple of years, how is membership doing, how have they survived? You know, there are many of that hadn't survived in different industries or different segments of the, the travel and tourism industry. How are they feeling about the future?

Catherine Prather (05:03):

Mm-hmm <affirmative>, uh, I'll even preface that by saying, you know, over the years, the association grew from a U.S. based organization with only U.S. based members to one today that does have members in more than 40 countries representing travel product globally. But, you know, oh my gosh, these past two years have been devastating on our industry. And, and particularly on group travel and, and package travel because that recovery is lagging that of, of just leisure travel. And it's just been really heartbreaking the past two years to take phone calls or receive emails from companies that have been business for decades, that, you know, they have decided to close their doors. They're not wanting to do what it's going to take to, um, to move forward. But then on the other side, you have, have just an amazing group of creative, resilient tour companies and, you know, suppliers, meaning the hotels, the restaurants, experience providers, and then the destinations that have come together and are, are moving forward, are looking for ways to move forward.

Catherine Prather (06:13):

I think particularly now that the recovery is picking up, unfortunately you have things like the war in Ukraine that have hurt, uh, the international business a bit, but then you had the recent elimination of the, the pre departure testing requirement, which was a huge bonus. So we keep having this Seesaw of things. But once again, it just goes back to those top quality companies that are in it for the long haul who are continuing to make it happen. And those really are the ones too, who are inspiring and motivating to our NTA team. And to me every single day, to just keep doing what we're doing and keep the, the fights that we have.

Bob Gilbert (06:57):

Yes, as you know, over the years, I've belonged to a variety of different organizations. And I have to say that the mosaic that makes up NTA is really about the people mm-hmm, <affirmative>, it it's about the members and their willingness to share their war stories and to share their ideas and thinking, you know, the members are not, um, inward, you know, the very outward looking and, and very willing to share their knowledge at all the different events that NTA puts on in different parts of, uh, of the country and indeed of the world. I do recall being with you on a mission to China, where we met with the executives yes. Of sea trip of Ali trip, Alibaba's tourism business. And that was such a great learning for all of those who were there. But then we came back and we shared that knowledge and information with the rest of NTA members. So if we think about that learning and sharing culture, we've come out the other end of COVID. And of course, there's another shoe that dropped that is the, the price of gas. And, you know, how has that impacted the bus operators, the, the package tour operators, which is really the membership rate from, from NTA it's packaged tours, whether that be inbound, outbound, or within the continent, what is being done to try and fend off that particular attack.

Catherine Prather (08:23):

Mm-hmm <affirmative> and it's interesting that you just mentioned package travel that term. And I, I, I even, I wanna circle back on something about that I wanted to share. And I, I don't know if a lot of people know, but Keith Grafall, who was the title back then for our, our chief elected officer was, was president. And he was the president in 1998. And he really helped the association start using that term package travel because it encompasses both group and FIT, or independent travel, which we were already seeing at that time, our members offering in the late nineties. So to me, that's just, I, I wanted to throw that in as, as just an example of how I think NTAs always been an innovator and looking to be ahead of the, the game, but on what you were saying with the, um, the gas prices.

Catherine Prather ([09:14](#)):

It's, you know, it's been layer on top of layer. When you think about the challenges, you know, there was COVID and the patchwork of protocol and closures and regulations, and even that is just now beginning to level out. And now you do have the dual challenges with rising prices, the hotels, gas, motor coaches, and then there's the labor shortages, but related to gas in particular, that of course is just one of the factors that is affecting the rising cost of chartering. A motor coach that segment of the industry has not only been challenged with rising gas prices, but the labor shortage has really hurt them as well. The driver shortage, you have a thousands of motor coaches that have been decommissioned as well, or, you know, not insured because why ensure them if they're not on the road during COVID. So that is something where frankly, there aren't a lot of solutions, unfortunately, and it's kind of a real tug and pull with the motor coach charter companies that have really been suffering during COVID as well as the tour operators and the costs.

Catherine Prather ([10:22](#)):

And I know a lot of the tour operators are having to absorb those because they have to put their prices out in advance. And then, you know, some of them are having to make decisions to pass those along to their clients through increased prices. So it is a real challenge. Something that I noticed recently, I was just looking at our new profile information each year when our members renew, we get profile information from them and always had a big percentage of our tour operators who customize their tourism packages. That percentage has actually increased since 2019. And I do think a lot of that is because even more so are customizing because of changing consumer demand. And instead of creating a lot of scheduled departures, they are doing a lot more customized because they're, they're waiting to see what's coming in the door and what's needed.

Bob Gilbert ([11:18](#)):

So as a consumer, we are having to pay at the pump. So I think in terms of increased pricing, there there's a justification. It isn't, we are gonna gouge because we've lost so much money over the last few years. And I think that has a very different perception among the traveling public. And I think prior to inflation, the, the, the market was, was coming back and the, the, the bus operators were billing their buses. And of course this one now is it's, it's another challenge that we all hope will be short lived. Um, you were recently in Orlando at US Travel Associations' IPW what was the business temperature at that event? And, and it used to be a hundred percent targeted to the international inbound market. It's changed over the years. What were your key takeaways from IPW this year?

Catherine Prather ([12:19](#)):

First, it was extremely invigorating to be around so many in the industry, but also so many NTA members who were very excited to see NTAs presence, to reconnect, to hear about what the

association is doing and to hear about travel exchange, and then to be excited about that in November. So that was one takeaway to, you know, to acknowledge that excitement from the international perspective, it was very interesting in that pretty much every single appointment they acknowledged because I asked what can we do as an industry to, to help you. And every single appointment was related to the inbound testing requirement. So it's unfortunate that that happened right after the show, but I'm just glad that, that it happened. So that was a, a very happy occasion overall. It was very upbeat, but there was always just this tinge of cautious optimism, because I think that we're still not through all of the COVID madness. It, it it's, it's still lurking. And it makes me hearken back to the days after nine 11. When I, I guess for lack of better, we were still kind of, we were shell shocked. Yeah. And I don't wanna say that we're waiting for the other shoe to drop, but it's been two years, more than two years of everything that we've gone through. And we are an incredibly resilient industry and I'm sure everyone is so tired of using that word, but we also are business people and just to have to have that cautious optimism.

Bob Gilbert ([14:01](#)):

So with that optimism and looking forward, and you mentioned a travel exchange, affectionately known as T-Rex <laugh> and that's taking place in Reno, Tahoe. Yes. Um, in, um, that's November, I think, early November.

Catherine Prather ([14:18](#)):

Yes. It's November 13th through 16.

Bob Gilbert ([14:20](#)):

Okay. mid-November so talk a little bit about how the travel exchange started and what is the expectation? What, why do people need to be there and who are the audiences and who are the, the folks that want to meet, you know, what, what, what are the constituents that attend?

Catherine Prather ([14:39](#)):

Anyone who wants to improve their business? Look for business partners, you know, find their next idea, their next partner, their next opportunity needs to be at travel exchange. I think that it's gonna be perfectly positioned as, as people are maybe trying to tie up some loose ends for 2023, but even, you know, looking ahead to 2024, because we are all booking things later these days. That's why I think that someone, you know, people will still be tying up loose ends for 2023. And we have first just a fantastic destination partner. I, I spent time in Reno, Tahoe recently, and it it's such a vibrant community with a lot to offer, you know, for families or for groups or for people, you know, wanting everything from history and cultural experiences to some really world class outdoor adventure. And they are very excited to welcome NTA. And, you know, that'll be our, our tour operators.

Catherine Prather ([15:42](#)):

Um, we also have travel advisors, the hotels, restaurants, attractions, experience providers, and destinations, you know, from all of, um, like I said, members in, in more than 40 countries. So, you know, NTAs tour operators and you, you referenced this earlier. They do package travel, uh, domestically, which [unknown] that's within North America. They package travel inbound as well as outbound. So it, it is a very diverse business mix from that perspective. And we are introducing some, some changes, you know, me member focused enhancements, really trying to find that balance between tour operators who were in nonstop back to back appointments. It was very draining for them

and didn't really create a positive experience for them or the suppliers that they're visiting with. So we have created a new schedule where there are more breaks built in for everyone. So there's, you know, opportunity for a different kind of networking instead of in those one-on-one appointments.

Catherine Prather ([16:43](#)):

And we've also just lin.. Lengthened the appointment by one minute to give some walk time in between that, which is something else that we've heard from our suppliers. So just trying to look at some subtle enhancements that we hope can actually have a big impact on the experience. And we, you know, have some other things as well, but just anyone who wants to our operators need their suppliers and destinations there. We, we hear that so much. Cleveland was a great show in 21. Yet we heard from operators, they really needed to see more suppliers and DMO there. So the operators are ready to meet with partners. So we're, we're looking forward to a very robust show.

Bob Gilbert ([17:26](#)):

So some of the nuances and changes introduced into travel exchange, you have food, T-Rex the international tour management Institute, their annual symposium. Can you talk a little bit about why food T-Rex and, uh, a little bit about the symposium?

Catherine Prather ([17:48](#)):

Absolutely. I'm so glad that, that you brought those up. So I wanted to, to share that too. So we have had a long time strategic partnership with the world food travel association, uh, which was founded by Eric Wolf and focuses on food and beverage tourism, a around the world. I mean, to me, that's one of the most important things to do when I travel, which is to experience the culture and the love of the people of where I'm visiting through food and, and through beverage. And they have had food tracks, um, international for several years. And Eric came to us because he's, you know, says that I love NTA. You you're, you know, such a great organization, you know, very good people, meaning our, our, our members and wanted to introduce that in, in North America. So he will have some concentrated content on food and beverage tourism.

Catherine Prather ([18:40](#)):

We're also gonna be introducing some networking opportunity. And this is an add-on that our current Trek attendees can do. But then also, you know, anyone who would, is involved in culinary travel would want to participate in this and then related to ITMI, it's golly, they've been members of NTA for decades and, and Ted Bravos and Joan Cordell, just wonderful partners. And it is bringing such an important element into our show within symposium because you it's, you know, you can't have a great tour without a fantastic tour director or a tour guide and ITMI certifies the best. So it is it's bringing those certified tour directors and tour guides into interview with two operators, as well as with suppliers. And DMOs, they can find some fantastic employees in these, um, folks as well, and they'll have education. They're gonna be integrated into, you know, every part of, of travel exchange. So it's the perfect compliment. And I love that we have this umbrella and, um, we also have the Faith Travel Association, which is a sister association of NTA that was founded golly, probably more than, than 10 years ago. You know, people focused in faith based travel. Also, we have special content for, for them as well.

Bob Gilbert ([20:05](#)):

So as one looks from a, a holistic view of NTA, you, you are certainly an association that reaches out and you have established a relationship with the travel industry's philanthropic organization, Tourism Cares,

and you are very involved with that. Can you talk a little bit about that relationship that you have with tourism cares?

Catherine Prather ([20:32](#)):

I would love to talk about tourism cares. It is such a, a special and important organization, and it is NTAs official philanthropy. It, it actually, if people don't know came together when NTAs foundation and US TOA's foundation came together to create Tourism Cares, and it now serves as a wonderful umbrella, you know, uniting the industry to serve the people and, and places, uh, related to tourism. And, you know, has a very strong focus on responsible, meaningful travel, which encompasses, uh, diversity, equity and inclusion as well. To me, it is an organization that helps you elevate your product and your service and your mission and, and the, the way that you do, um, interact with the destinations and the places and, and the, and the people that we all that we all serve. And, um, tourism cares. They have wonderful events each year that allow everyone in the industry to come together to not only have a nice work event that can leave or give back to a community, but it is a learning opportunity for us to really understand more about decisions that we make and, uh, a positive impact that, that we can't have.

Catherine Prather ([21:56](#)):

And the association, or I should say the foundation does have corporate memberships, but they also have individual memberships. So your organization could join, but then also you, as an individual could be a part of tourism cares to receive their materials, to be a part of the webinars that they offer to get, um, special first run opportunities to, to attend their events. Um, I was just in north lake Tahoe back in May, fantastic event. And then our next meaningful summit is in Victoria, British Columbia in late September, highly recommended. It's an incredible experience that when, when you're, you know, on your way home, you just feel good about what you just experienced.

Bob Gilbert ([22:40](#)):

So with, with your involvement, I'd like to talk a little bit more about diversity equity and inclusion with DEI in a minute, but staying on the sustainable tourism track, there's a lot of conversation surrounding the next generation or the next step following sustainable. And that is regenerative travel, which, you know, its main goal is for visitors to have a meaningful impact, the positive impact on their vacation destination, meaning that they leave it in a better condition than how they found it, which is perhaps a little different, uh, than the purpose of tourism cares. But is, is that something that is being discussed at tourism cares in any of their sessions?

Catherine Prather ([23:26](#)):

Absolutely. It's interesting too, to think about and talk about many destination marketing organizations are really now moving to destination stewardship. And I think that is definitely connected with, with what you are just speaking to, and it needs to start, I think, at the professional level, but then also, you know, hopefully consumers are, are learning more about it as well. And then the two can come together when we are going to a destination that we can be mindful of the communities that we're visiting. And as we are developing destination product within a destination that we need to not only consider what the industry may need, but what does the community itself need or want and how can the two come together in a responsible way so that both are winning, that there's not a loser in that equation. And it is very important to not, I think some of the international destinations are a bit ahead of us here in the States. So this is a learning opportunity for us. And that's why tourism cares does have a global program as well as a domestic program so that there, there can be those opportunities.

Bob Gilbert (24:39):

Yeah. And it's important. I think to note that it shouldn't be a nice marketing descriptor, a niche market label, but you know, there is an impact, you know, I, I'm seeing DI destinations international. They have for a couple of years, been looking at community based marketing and involvement with, with the local community. And it's interesting to see, you know, how tourism grows and that difference between understanding sustainability and the difference between sustainability and, uh, regenerative and, and you're right there, there's far more advances being made internationally. So getting back to diversity, equity and inclusion, mm-hmm <affirmative>, um, it really is only relatively recent that the conversation has turned that not from just a socioeconomic perspective, but from a tourism perspective, uh, who do you see as the, the, the thought leaders with DEI as a, as a category?

Catherine Prather (25:46):

Ah, that's, that's a, a great question. Um, so I was just reflecting on this earlier today during the tourism cares board meeting, and we were all talking about successes, and I said, I don't count this as a success, but just feeling good about trying to do something good, which was, you know, having some really open and raw conversations, following the murder of George Floyd with several of our members to really understand how that affected them and how NTA could move forward and what the association really could do related to all of this. And, you know, from that came the creation of NTAs DEI advisory group, other extremely good conversations and meaningful connections education that we have offered to our members to help them even just open their eyes and to help them on a journey. You know, NTA is, you know, this is nation for our association and our advisory group.

Catherine Prather (26:53):

It is of course not 100% reflective of our industry, but a goal is to try and be as diverse as we can. And I have learned so much from travel unity, uh, Ronnie Weiss founded that organization, and that was a connection, an introduction through tourism cares. And they just had been very helpful. In fact, um, our NTA board based on a recommendation from our de DEI advisory group did take the pledge for the travel industry association DEI work. And now our DEI advisory group is using the guiding principles of this pledge to review NTAs mission statement. Our core values, the code of ethics, um, will do an evaluation of all of our infrastructure. And our advisory group had three meetings alone before they were comfortable with the mission statement and the conversations. I always leave the so enlightened, inspired and motivated. In fact, we have our, our next meeting this Friday, and that's when we'll start digging into the Association's core values and the group that serves on this advisory, they are so they're so committed and are very thoughtful in the conversations that they've had.

Catherine Prather (28:18):

And what will happen is that we'll take the body of their work to the board for presentation, and hopefully everything will be ratified, but it is a marathon. This is, is not a sprint. And it's just so important that we keep walking that journey and we keep walking it together. And it, that it needs our, our, our group, the very beginning said, you know, we asked each person what their goal was, what they wanted to see with this work. And they wanted it to be built into the DNA of NTA that it just, it literally became a part of the association.

Bob Gilbert (28:53):

It's, uh, an educational process within an outside of our industry as well.

Catherine Prather (29:00):

Oh,

Bob Gilbert (29:00):

Absolutely. You know, I, I always remember my, my dad telling me son, uh, God gave you, um, two ears and one mouth use them that way. <laugh> so basically do twice as much listening than, than I do yapping. And I've been known to yap, but, um, <laugh> but it's, it's a good thing to remember. You, you have a variety of outreaches, uh, different events, and I've been to a few myself contact. What is the difference between contact and the travel exchange? And I think your next, uh, contact is next spring in Cheyenne, uh, Wyoming, which is a beautiful part of the country.

Catherine Prather (29:40):

Yes. And I, I am super excited to go there because there are two states that I have yet to visit and Wyoming is one of them. So I'm very excited

Bob Gilbert (29:49):

Check that box <laugh>

Catherine Prather (29:52):

So

Bob Gilbert (29:52):

What is, what is the, what is the other one? Catherine

Catherine Prather (29:55):

Montana.

Bob Gilbert (29:56):

Oh, you've not been to Montana. Oh my gosh.

Catherine Prather (29:59):

No. I know. And they both just, you know, all the photographs I see are, they're just, they're beautiful and they're just right in my wheelhouse of gorgeous scenery. So yeah, I'm, I'm super excited.

Bob Gilbert (30:11):

Well, when, when you're in Wyoming, you're very close.

Catherine Prather (30:14):

I know. That's what I've thought about. I might, I might just have to do an extended stay and, and be able to knock them both out.

Bob Gilbert (30:21):

<laugh>. There you go. So tell me, tell me about contact in Cheyenne.

Catherine Prather (30:26):

Well, I, I love both of our events, but I guess I am a bit partial to contact because it, it, it is smaller. It, it is it's intimate. It is what we call, you know, like our, our buyer retreat, because the, um, content is focused on the, the, the tour operator and the suppliers in our destinations. They - lovely sponsors. They are there supporting that event and they love it because they have this exclusive audience that's about 99% owners of, of the, uh, the, the tour companies. So we always have a, a fantastic fam most of the time, those are pre fams, sometimes post fams and besides some fantastic education and very unstructured, but wonderful networking, you know, at, at, uh, meal events. And, and just as you're crossing the room to go to the next education, there is really good content. And a lot of time to explore the destination, we have what we call educational outings.

Catherine Prather (31:27):

So we not only have the pre famine sight scene tours, but we also do educational outings that are focused primarily on, it could be a market. So maybe it is a, a culinary tour or black heritage, or, you know, just different aspects of what the city or destination may want to, to highlight. And I, I tell you what, I mean, nothing can reinvigorate our team or me anymore than going to an NTA event, you know, light contact. And it's gratifying. It's such a recharge. And just thinking back to, to Anchorage, where we were in March to see the members, you know, shake hands and give hugs and share smiles and, and just, you know, to collaborate commiserate, which definitely happened, you know, in Anchorage and then connect on moving forward. That to me is the formula that you see at our events and, and particularly at contact, because it is a little bit more of a, a slower pace than travel exchange, where you do have all of those prescheduled appointments. It's a great opportunity for them to quickly reconnect or to connect, um, and have education and professional development in a ton of fun. But those are, are the differences between the, the two events,

Bob Gilbert (32:42):

Right. I, I always have the, the impression having been to so many different travel exchanges over the years. I think my first one was back in, oh my gosh. Um, it was the early eighties and it was a military operation <laugh> yeah. I, I do remember Jim Host, um, standing at the back of the room in the green jacket with, with a, with a, a stopwatch, making sure that everything was, um, you know, you spoke about extending the, getting from a booth to another booth by one minute, you know, that, that to me kind of harps back to, to those times that it, it was a military operation and you had to be where you needed to be at a certain time. And, but again, you know, you didn't know what was going on in the background, but running an organization such as NTA, it doesn't run by itself. You lead the organization, you have a great team, you've been through a lot of adversity and you evolve. And I think that speaks wonders that you're not closed to new ideas and you try and stay ahead of the curve and reflect and protect the members' interest and ensure that when you see what is going on, that you are open to change and have made those changes. I just wanna thank you very much, Catherine, for being our guest today.

Catherine Prather (34:06):

Well, thank you, Bob. I appreciate your, your kind comments. I mean, one thing just having been with this organization for so long, I, it is this delicate dance of having the history and the knowledge of what we have done and what maybe's worked and what hasn't, and then never wanting to be that person that says, oh, you know, we tried that and it didn't work because every single day is different and everything is moving so quickly. So it, it, it is important to be open. And just besides the, you know, the

really resilient NTA community, I, I do wanna give a shout out to two groups that helped the association, make it through the worst of the pandemic. And this really NTAs forward thinking board of directors, you know, because you need a leadership group that is not afraid to take risks and, and innovate, especially at a time when people, you know, may wanna be going in into their shell. This is the time to really build back better. And, you know, and really just the most dedicated and talented management team you'll find NTA staff, um, has more than a hundred years of experience with NTA in the travel industry. And they sacrificed a lot personally in the past couple of years, and I am beyond grateful to them and beyond grateful to you for this opportunity, I've really enjoyed it, Bob. It's great to connect.

Bob Gilbert ([35:24](#)):

Thank you very much. Uh, Catherine, and, uh, you've been a great guest on, uh, tourism heads and their tails. And, uh, we look forward to seeing you at the next event. Thank you very much, Catherine.

Catherine Prather ([35:37](#)):

Thank you.

Bob Gilbert ([35:41](#)):

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