



The Travelling Man

INSIGHT.INNOVATION.GLOBAL.PERSPECTIVE.

INSIGHT SERIES | No. 5

The Tourism Operator's Resilience & Readiness Playbook

Turning One Season's Lessons into the Next Season's Operation

“ Experience shared. Insight applied.”

John Boulding | TheTravellingMan.org
October 2026



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EXPERIENCE SHARED. INSIGHT APPLIED.

From framework to operating cycle

Resilience is not only about how an operator responds when disruption occurs. It is also about what happens afterwards: how experience is captured, interpreted and turned into stronger future operations.

October to March is not just a sales and trade-show period. It is the window in which operators should review the season just finished, rebuild programmes and prepare field teams for the summer ahead.



Use it during

October field-team reviews, winter planning meetings and March operational briefings.

Purpose of this edition

To help leadership, operations, product, contracting and field teams turn operational experience into stronger 2027 delivery.

The Resilience Playbook (Insight Series No. 2)

This publication develops themes first explored in The Tourism Operator's Resilience Playbook, published in August 2026.

“Resilience is built between seasons, not only tested during them.”

A REFLECTIVE OPENING

Every summer teaches an operator something new.

The big question is whether those lessons survive the winter.

There are moments when the visitor economy learns important new lessons in real time.

A supplier performs brilliantly. A gateway proves fragile. A guide improvises with skill because the process was not clear enough. A destination remains open, but operationally difficult.



Each of these moments contains useful intelligence. The risk is that the lesson remains with the people who experienced it, but never becomes part of the next operating model.



“The winter review is not an administrative ritual. It is the first act of next season’s resilience.”



THE OPERATING CYCLE

Operate. Review. Rebuild. Ready.

Touring businesses already operate to an annual rhythm. The opportunity is to turn that rhythm into a resilience discipline.



October - Review

Review the operating season while field intelligence is still fresh.

Nov-Feb - Rebuild

Rebuild programmes, contracts, capacity, systems and escalation paths.

March - Ready

Brief and prepare field teams, tour directors and operations teams before season launch.

Summer - Operate

Operate, observe, adapt and capture the next set of lessons.

FOUR LESSONS TO CARRY FORWARD

What the season has reinforced

The purpose is not to catalogue disruption. It is to draw out what repeated disruption tells us about how tourism businesses need to prepare.

1 System resilience

Operators depend on airports, air traffic control, rail, roads, rivers, power, communications and local authorities they do not control.

2 Spare capacity

Efficiency has value, but resilience requires enough slack to respond when normal assumptions fail.

3 Recovery decisions

Stopping, restarting and communicating geographically uneven disruption are operational choices, not public-relations footnotes.

4 Field intelligence

Guides, tour directors, drivers, hotels and local teams often see emerging risks before formal reports capture them.



“The lasting lesson is not that disruption happened. It is whether the business changed because of what it learned.”

THE AUTUMN REVIEW

The autumn operational review

October is the moment when many operators bring field crews, guides, tour directors and operations teams together after the season.

Used well, this is one of the most valuable planning moments of the year.

The review should not only ask what went wrong.

It should ask what the operation learned, which partners performed well under pressure, where processes slowed decisions and what must be different before the programme runs again.



Who should be in the room?

Operations, product, contracting, guest services, technology, destination teams, field managers, guides and tour directors.

What should be brought?

Guest feedback, incident logs, supplier notes, field observations, near misses, workarounds and examples of excellent response.

“Your field teams have just spent the season stress-testing your product. Are you listening to what they learned?”

THE FIELD INTELLIGENCE

Listen to the operation, not only the reports

Formal reporting matters, but it rarely captures the full picture. Some of the most useful intelligence sits in the gap between what was recorded and what was lived.

WHAT MANAGEMENT OFTEN REVIEWS

- ☐ Guest ratings and visible complaints
- ☐ Delay reports and supplier invoices
- ☐ Margin performance
- ☐ Programme exceptions
- ☐ Destination closure notices

WHAT FIELD TEAMS MAY KNOW

- ☐ Near misses and repeated friction
- ☐ Workarounds that became routine
- ☐ Partners who helped without fuss
- ☐ Rules that slowed decisions
- ☐ Guest anxieties not captured in surveys

Practical suggestion: *In-season workarounds are easily forgotten by October, so operators might consider a lightweight, simple method for logging them during the summer. This helps ensure on-the-ground improvisations are captured in real time without burdening delivery teams.*



“The useful truth often sits between formal reporting and lived experience.”

PRACTICAL REVIEW TOOL

The 2026 Operational Review Workshop

Use these questions with the people closest to delivery before the 2027 operating plan is finalised.

1

Where did the operation come closest to failing, even if the guest never knew?

5

What information reached the field too slowly?

2

Where did guides, TDs or local teams repeatedly improvise?

6

Which decision should have been made earlier?

3

Which suppliers became more valuable under pressure?

7

Where did we lack a credible alternative?

4

Which suppliers struggled when the programme changed?

8

What must be different before this programme operates again?

“The review only has value if it creates an action that survives into the next operation.”

REBUILD

Turn learning into the 2027 operation

November to February is where resilience competes with price, habit and convenience. This is when lessons from the season must become programme design, contracting decisions, staffing assumptions and operating procedures.

Illustrative lesson-to-action examples

1 Product & itinerary

Which programmes need redesign, not merely minor adjustment?

Lesson: Midday heat and crowding increased guest fatigue.

Action: Move outdoor walking to cooler morning periods and use midday for transfers or indoor visits where practical.

2 Gateways & transport

Where are alternative access routes genuinely workable?

Lesson: Strikes at a primary transit hub created cascading itinerary delays.

Action: Identify standby coach capacity and workable secondary gateways in advance.

3 Supplier contracts

What flexibility, escalation and substitution rights do we need?

Lesson: Upstream delays caused groups to miss rigid timed-entry slots.

Action: Negotiate wider admission windows or rebooking and substitution flexibility where possible.

4 People & capacity

Where do we need more support, authority or contingency cover?

Lesson: Head-office approval bottlenecks slowed local problem-solving.

Action: Set clear delegated spending and decision thresholds so TDs and field teams can act within agreed limits.

5 Systems & technology

Can essential operations continue if a key system fails?

Lesson: Crowding made it difficult for guides to communicate changes to dispersed groups.

Action: Ensure group communication remains clear in noisy or crowded conditions, using appropriate audio systems where needed.

6 Guest communication

Can we reach every guest quickly, clearly and accessibly?

Lesson: Mobile networks may become unreliable during severe disruption.

Action: Maintain at least one communication method that does not depend on network coverage. Plan for multilingual where relevant.

“A lesson has not been learned until it changes a future decision.”

DECISION SUPPORT

Design out single points of failure

Resilience weakens when one unavailable person, one gateway, one supplier, one system or one assumption can compromise the whole programme. Technology is increasingly important to resilience, but it should enable people and processes rather than become another single point of failure.



Dependency	Fallback to test
Gateway	Alternative arrival point, rail/coach option, realistic transfer plan
Hotel	Overflow property, agreed displacement process, rooming priorities
Transport	Backup coach operator, driver hours plan, local road intelligence
People	Deputy decision-maker, field authority, out-of-hours escalation
Systems & Communication	Manual guest list, offline itinerary, alternative messaging channels and non-network-dependent group communication.

“Ask not only what might fail, but what else fails when it does.”

PARTNERS & PROCUREMENT

Buy resilience, not only the planned operation

The lowest rate is normally priced for the programme operating as planned. Disruption exposes a different measure of value.

Criterion	Planned operation	Changed operation	Decision implication
Price	Easy to compare	Often misleading	Test value under pressure
Capacity	Assumed available	Becomes constrained	Know where slack exists
Authority	May not matter	Becomes crucial	Identify who can act
Behaviour	Hidden	Revealed	Choose partners by conduct
Flexibility	A nice extra	An operating asset	Contract it intentionally



Partner test

Would this supplier help us adapt when the agreed programme can no longer operate exactly as planned?

“Price is measured against the plan. Value is revealed when the plan changes.”

READY FOR NEXT SEASON

The March pre-season operational briefing

By March, the upcoming season's operating model should no longer be theoretical. The task is to ensure that field teams, tour directors, guides and operations managers understand how it will actually work.

The briefing should connect the lessons from October with the decisions made during winter planning. It should not simply explain the itinerary. It should explain how the operation is expected to respond when the itinerary changes.

Use this opportunity to run tabletop exercises with destination and operations teams, testing the new escalation paths alongside the updated crisis plan.



- ☐ What changed after the 2026 review?
- ☐ What are the principal 2027 risks?
- ☐ Who decides what in the field?
- ☐ What authority do guides and TDs have?
- ☐ Who is called, and when?
- ☐ What are the realistic alternatives?
- ☐ What guest messages are pre-prepared?
- ☐ What has actually been rehearsed?

“Do not ask only whether a crisis plan exists. Ask whether people know what to do when the programme stops behaving as planned.”

PRACTICAL TOOL

2027 Resilience Readiness Check

Use this check in February and again during March briefings. The final question is the most important one.



Season intelligence

Have we captured what changed on the ground?



Contract flexibility

Are contracts giving us options or locking us in?



Supplier performance

Who helped under pressure and who struggled?



Technology backup

Could we operate if a key system failed?



Gateway & border risk

Where are we exposed to gateway failure, border delays or EES friction?



March briefing

What must be understood before the next season starts?



Field authority

Do guides and TDs know what they can decide?



Decision rhythm

Who owns the next update during disruption?



Communication

Can we reach every guest quickly, clearly and accessibly, including when normal communication channels are disrupted?



Learning transfer

Have the lessons from summer changed our 2027 operation, and does the whole team understand what has changed?

“If nothing has changed, the organisation has reviewed the season but not learned from it.”

CLOSING PAGE

References & acknowledgements

EDITORIAL BASIS

This edition draws upon John Boulding's experience of international tour operating, destination management, field operations, supplier partnerships, visitor experience and leadership decision-making over more than five decades. It also builds on the original Tourism Operator's Resilience Playbook, published in August 2026.

SELECTED REFERENCES AND RESOURCESS

- Original Resilience Playbook, August 2026.
- European climate, aviation and civil-protection reference materials used in the original edition.
- Operator experience, field-team practice and supplier-partnership learning.

IMAGE NOTE

Images are representative visual interpretations and are not depictions of specific organisations, destinations, incidents or individuals. They are selected to illustrate operating conditions and organisational preparedness.

DISCLAIMER

This publication is provided for general information and leadership discussion. Circumstances and official advice can change quickly. Organisations should consult relevant authorities, insurers, security specialists and operational partners when making decisions concerning guest safety and disruption response.

THE TRAVELLING MAN INSIGHT SERIES

The Insight Series shares practical, experience-led thinking to help leaders make better decisions across tourism and the visitor economy.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



John Boulding is an international tourism leader, strategic advisor and board director with almost five decades' experience across tour operating, destinations, visitor experience and travel technology. He works with leadership teams across the visitor economy on growth, change and commercial performance, and publishes The Travelling Man Insight Series.

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