

Amaral at ARI discusses re-opening under Trans-Tasman travel bubble



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Following the launch of the Trans-Tasman travel bubble between New Zealand and Australia, Aer Rianta International (ARI) re-opened The Loop Duty Free at Auckland Airport. To learn more about its re-opening process and ongoing recovery, *Asia Duty Free & Travel Retailing Magazine* connected with Nuno Amaral, Chief Operations & Business Development Officer, ARI.

As a global business operating in many countries with different routes of recovery, Amaral says ARI will not be able to facilitate a full recovery at a steady rate. Moving to the Ireland pre-COVID, he is based at the company's head office in Dublin, where retail, entertainment and travel is still limited. For those on the other side of the world living within the bubble, it's mostly back to business. Residents of New Zealand and Australia have pulled back safety measures and tucked away their masks in accordance with their COVID-19 response.

Compared to most other countries, New Zealand implemented a different, more aggressive approach to travel in order to reduce the spread of the virus. With the exception of specific reasons such as repatriation, New Zealand quickly and completely shut down the country to internal and external visitors. As a result of this extreme travel ban, Amaral says ARI shops at Auckland Airport closed their doors for more than one year, whereas shops at other airports across the globe continued to operate with low passenger numbers.

A celebratory message

According to Amaral, the re-opening in Auckland generated a genuine sense of excitement among ARI staff members at all levels, brand partners, airport officials and travelers. To offer support and reassurance, the airport retailer has vaccinated all of its frontline workers at the airport. Described as a team effort, he states that the successful re-opening is a testament to ARI's strong work ethic and immense dedication from the shop floor to the back office.

Leading up to the re-opening, ARI launched its integrated marketing campaign, *Welcome Back*, which₂

is specific to Auckland Airport and aims to unify all members of the travel community. The celebratory message of *Welcome Back* has been amplified via visual merchandising, internal communications, digital channels and local and international media.

“The initial passenger segment to return among the Trans-Tasman bubble was mainly fueled by people visiting friends and relatives. This immediate rush to book personal flights was followed by a small percentage of business travel and tourism. Initial passenger numbers were 15 – 20% of 2019 passenger traffic – a massive improvement compared to early 2021,” reveals Amaral.

Provincial responses & snap lockdowns

Since New Zealand and Australia are both determined to remain at zero COVID-19 cases, the travel bubble is designed to be executed on a province-to-province basis. This means if a single case is detected, the province will implement a “snap lockdown” for several days to assess the situation, explains Amaral. He goes on to comment that if the case is found to be a community transmission – as opposed to an isolated case – the province might extend the snap lockdown. Within one week of launching the Trans-Tasman bubble, a snap lockdown took place in Perth, Western Australia, followed by a second one in mid-May in Sydney, New South Wales.

With provincial management working effectively and the prompt handling of snap lockdowns, Amaral says the Trans-Tasman travel bubble provides good proof of conception and execution. Although the federal government on both sides of the agreement have been mindful in regards to making announcements and commitments, he notes that a generic roadmap exists to lead a gradual, phased re-opening.

ARI’s staff engagement model

Amaral believes that ARI’s staff engagement model is the reason for its success in New Zealand. During the national lockdown, the retailer strategically managed stock, minimized downsizing and established alternative work positions and revenue streams. In addition to opening pop-up locations in the domestic terminal at Auckland Airport and downtown Auckland to maintain engagement, the team prioritized constant dialogue among management and sales associates via ARI’s online training platform, The Knowledge Hub. Featuring informational content, the user-friendly platform highlights product knowledge, brand experience and retail engagement. He says it’s because of this approach that ARI was prepared to fully re-open when allowed to do so.

“The customer is at the heart of ARI’s strategy and we possess enough consumer insight to allow us to shape our offer accordingly. Going forward, this will become more relevant. At the same time, we are completing internal work and re-visiting our customer value proposition to assess the temporary and permanent impact of COVID-19 and address how we are going to engage with passengers during this new normal,” says Amaral.

Although ARI is still trying to find “the sweet spot” in terms of post-pandemic retail business and engagement, its brand promise “Experience is Everything” continues to hold. The recent update of ARI’s Environmental, Social & Corporate Governance (ESG) strategy and its three main pillars: people, planet and product demonstrate the company’s embracing of digital acceleration and sustainable living.

Visit the following link to learn more about the re-opening at Auckland Airport:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=t6a3onjJ26g&t=4s>