



The painful lesson from this sorry Encounter

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FOR the hundred or so young travellers who were on a trek holiday with **Encounter Overland** last week, there was a surprise not advertised in the brochure.

A message went out from the company's head office in London's Brompton Road, telling the drivers of all expedition trucks to 'go to a safe place and close down'.

From Kathmandu to Kenya, Encounter customers were hastily ferried to the nearest base and told their trip of a lifetime was at an end.

The exact details of the abrupt financial collapse of Encounter a company which began in the Sixties offering trips along the Hippy Trail to Kathmandu will take some time to surface. But as some of the company's holidays last for many weeks (the London to Kathmandu via Cairo trip takes nine months), the disruption caused to stranded travellers is certain to be of nightmare proportions.

Colby Hayes sent this plaintive message from a Ugandan Internet cafe to Earls Court-based Antipodean magazine TNT: 'I started the London-to-Kathmandu tour on September 30 thinking that I would be doing the trip of a lifetime up until the end of May. This fell short by almost 20 weeks, as on Thursday night our driver broke the news, saying that the company no longer exists.'

At the moment Colby is 'struggling to make some decisions about my life and money'. She said: 'The last thing I want to do is go home. As a last-ditch attempt, the six of us who are affected, are just about to send a group email to many overland companies to beg for help. What else is there left to do? I am angry and out of pocket and no one seems to care, least of all the creditors who have taken over the Encounter office and haven't replied to our queries.' Malcolm Clarke had booked a tour to Everest Base Camp: 'I was suddenly informed that Encounter Overland had gone into liquidation. I had paid a deposit of 107 back in August.

Luckily I hadn't paid the balance for my trip but apparently others were not so lucky and had paid full price for trips.' Despite having been in business for 35 years, Encounter wasn't bonded, as its unhappy customers are now discovering. It was not a member of ABTA (the Association of British Travel Agents), the Association of Independent Tour Operators or any of the other trade associations with a bonding scheme that guarantees refunds after financial collapse.

Only those who made payments with a credit card (Visa or Master- card, not debit cards) for sums in excess of 100 will be fully compensated as they can recover their money from the card company. All other travellers who have lost money are unsecured creditors and should contact BDO Stoy Hayward, Nile House, Nile St, Brighton BN1 1JB.

AS A gesture of goodwill Trailfinders and STA Travel are offering anyone who booked an Encounter holiday through their offices reimbursement or an alternative holiday. But if anyone booked an Encounter holiday through an ABTA agency there is no compensation here, the ABTA bond exists to refund the travel agency, not the customer.

Colby Hayes says she paid directly into Encounter's bank account.

'Apparently there is no way for me to get my money back. I took out full insurance, but that seems not to cover bad management leading to the breakdown of a company that has been running for nearly 35 years.' 'Am I bitter?' she concludes. 'Yes.

Very bitter.' And, no doubt, wiser. The lesson is clear: never book any travel arrangement with a company that has no bond. If in doubt, ask the company and then double check their claim with the relevant association.

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