

The Concierge

TIPS FOR TOURING HERE AND ABROAD

VIP LOUNGE

Mary Callanan on dreams of Greece and that feeling you get when you cross the Piscataqua Bridge into Maine



While performing in the musical “Mamma Mia!,” Broadway veteran Mary Callanan saw her character, Rosie, travel to an island in Greece for her best friend’s wedding. In real life, the Brighton native — who lives south of Boston with her husband, Larry Finlayson — has never been to Greece, but is looking forward to going once the pandemic is over and she and her husband have time. In the meantime, with touring on hold (she was on a national tour of the Lincoln Center Theater production of “My Fair Lady,” when everything closed down in March) Callanan has teamed up with her longtime musical collaborator, Brian Patton, for a virtual cabaret show — complete with costume changes and signature cocktails — called “Topsy Tuesdays.” She called the weekly series — which airs Tuesday nights at 7:30 via Patton’s Facebook page — a “virtual piano bar” that includes everything from Broadway show tunes to American Songbook classics. “We love it,” said Callanan, who has appeared in three Broadway shows (“Mamma Mia!,” “Annie,” and “Bandstand”). “The only thing that is missing is the audience. Without them, it’s simply a dress rehearsal — with full costume, makeup, sound, and lights. It’s just a run-through because we need the audience to share the emotional ride with us.” And even though there is no live audience, Callanan said that she and Patton enjoy receiving online feedback and song requests. “It isn’t the same [as performing live], but it’s still lots of fun.” We caught up with Callanan to talk about all things travel.

Favorite vacation destination?

Hands down, Paris. For me, it has everything: beautiful

setting, unparalleled food and drink, endless exploration, culture, history, and — best of all — romance!

Favorite food or drink while vacationing?

Depends on the time of day. Morning? Fantastic coffee and a croissant. Evening? Wine and escargot — yup, snails.

Where would you like to travel to but haven’t?

Greece, because of all the years I spent performing the Greece-based musical “Mamma Mia!” We haven’t made it yet because we would like to spend at least three weeks, and that amount of time off is very hard for us to plan.

One item you can’t leave home without when traveling?

My passport. These days, one can get anything anywhere.

Aisle or window?

Aisle. Let’s just say I “get up” more than my husband.

Favorite childhood travel memory?

Crossing the Piscataqua Bridge from New Hampshire into Maine . . . the anticipation of two weeks at the beach.

Guilty pleasure when traveling?

Unplugging. No cellphones on vacation . . . heaven.

Best travel tip?

Pack as lightly as possible. The less I carry, the happier I am.

JULIET PENNINGTON

TROUBLESHOOTER

Help! I’m still waiting for my Vantage refund

By Christopher Elliott
GLOBE CORRESPONDENT

Q. Last year, we booked a tour to Portugal and Spain through Vantage Deluxe World Travel. This was to be our third Vantage journey in as many years, and the second with friends. Including the optional tours, air, insurance, and fees, my wife and I paid \$12,959 for the tour.

This March, Vantage canceled the tour because of COVID-19 concerns. On March 16, I asked for a refund. Vantage agreed to issue a refund in 30 days.

Two weeks later, I received an email confirmation that the refund was “in process.” I have made numerous calls and three written re-

pute with your credit card company. Ask your bank to take the money back.

But with this Vantage refund, I can understand the delay. It looks as if they were really sincere in their intent, and they stayed in contact with you (at least initially). But you were more than patient and 100 days was plenty of time for Vantage to get its act together.

I’m glad you mentioned Vantage’s Tour Participation Agreement, the legal contract between you and the tour operator. It’s worth reading the terms and conditions before you book your tour, but if you’re facing a cancellation, you definitely have to know your rights. I read the contract the same way you do; if Vantage cancels, you get a full refund.

Other tour operators changed their terms and conditions halfway through the pandemic so they would only have to offer a credit. Then they applied the rules retroactively. To its credit, Vantage didn’t.

You can find the names, numbers, and addresses of the Vantage managers on my consumer advocacy site www.elliott.org/company-contacts/vantage-deluxe-world-travel/.

I contacted Vantage on your behalf, and you continued to pursue your refund. Finally, on Aug. 14 — five months after promising it — Vantage fully refunded your \$12,959. Better late than never.

So why am I writing about a case that resolved almost five months ago? My consumer advocacy organization has a case backlog, too.

Christopher Elliott is the chief advocacy officer of Elliott Advocacy, a nonprofit organization that helps consumers resolve their problems. Elliott’s latest book is “How To Be The World’s Smartest Traveler” (National Geographic). Contact him at elliott.org/help or chris@elliott.org.

This March, Vantage canceled the tour because of COVID-19 concerns.

quests since then. After 100 days, I am still awaiting the refund. Vantage is stonewalling.

Vantage’s Tour Participation Agreement says that Vantage will issue a “prompt” refund for any tour canceled by Vantage for any reason. Can you help me get my Vantage Deluxe World Travel refund?

RICK PEDERSEN,
Fulshear, Texas

A. Vantage should have refunded your tour within 30 days as it promised — and as it is contractually required to do. But it had no way of knowing what would happen in the next 30 days. In March, you’ll recall, travel ground to an almost complete halt. Every one of Vantage’s suppliers experienced similar delays. So the refund process slowed down considerably.

How slow? Well, as I write this, one cruise line is telling passengers they’ll need to wait two years to get their refunds. And let me skip right to the resolution for those travelers: File a dis-

HERE

GETAWAY IN A GLASS

Dreaming of the day when you can enjoy iconic cocktails in a place other than your living room? You’re not alone. Loews Boston Hotel and Precinct Kitchen + Bar have crafted a new cocktail, “Whiskey Winter,” to offer a little taste of Boston and PK+B to those yearning for a night on their famed Back Bay patio. The recipe, combining Makers Mark, Madeira, simple syrup, and egg, is an easy-to-make beverage for sipping in the comfort of home while winter winds swirl. www.facebook.com/LoewsBostonHotel/photos/a.270462829750293/2076646019131956/ When you’re ready for a change of scenery, the Loews Boston Hotel — located in the former Boston Police Headquarters — is touting its House Arrest Package, featuring a \$25 credit to the Sundry Shop per stay, one complimentary movie and free Wi-fi. The hotel observes strict CDC and WHO guidelines and protocols. Rates from \$159 through December 2021. 855-647-0872. www.loewshotels.com/boston-hotel/specials

FILM SERIES GOES VIRTUAL

You may not be able to travel to Vermont right now because of strict quarantine measures, but that doesn’t mean Vermont can’t (virtually) come to you. This year’s Woodstock Vermont Film Series, presented by Billings Farm & Museum, is available for viewing via on-demand streaming. Curated by Vermont filmmaker Jay Craven, the selections aim to transport visitors to a variety of cultures, critical historic moments, and destinations with a



strong sense of place. Extended through mid-April, films include “The Booksellers” (exploring the unique world of antiquarian booksellers), “River City Drumbeat” (empowering Black youth through music and drumming), “Desert One” (documentary thriller about President Carter’s failed mission to free 52 US hostages in Iran), and more. Most films are available for a four-day viewing window, Thursdays through Sundays. General admission: \$12. Multiple passes from \$36. billingsfarm.org/filmseries/

THERE

JOYFUL AND SOULFUL HOLIDAY PERFORMANCES

Gather the family to watch an hourlong original production of festive song and dance presented by Cleveland’s Karamu House, the oldest Black performing arts institute in the nation. Available online through Jan. 9, “Joyful, A Karamu Holiday Celebration” features a talented cast of vocalists and dancers in an exuberant and soulful

holiday concert with songs — new and old — celebrating cultures and traditions from around the world. Each ticket allows you the opportunity to stream the show on your favorite device, at any time of the day. Once started, you’ll have 48 hours to finish watching the show. Tickets sales help support the 104-year-old theater that has been closed to the public due to the pandem-



ic. Fittingly, the meaning of “Karamu” in Swahili is “place of joyful gathering.” \$24.99. karamuhouse.org/events/joyful

CHRISTMAS IN JULY

Christmas celebrations may be radically different this year, but who says the holiday can only be celebrated in December? Uniworld Boutique River Cruises is offering the ultimate 2020 gift: A Christmas do-over next summer when it’s (hopefully!) safe to reunite with family. The luxury river cruise company is launching two “Christmas in July” summer sailings aboard the S.S. Maria Theresa, on July 11 and July 18, with stops in Budapest, Vienna, Salzburg, Passau, and more. During these seven-night itineraries, travelers will celebrate in style with red and green festive décor. Family-friendly activities will include gingerbread house decorating, holiday cocktail mixology classes, ornament making, and photos with Santa. Dining venues will serve winter-themed cuisine and beverages. (Frozen hot chocolate, chilled eggnog, and spiced mulled wine, anyone?) Rates from \$3,499. Book by Jan. 8 and save \$500 per person, plus additional early booking discounts including 25 percent off for kids. 800-257-2407, <https://www.uniworld.com/us/themed-cruises/christmas-in-july>

EVERYWHERE

CAR REPAIR SENSOR

As road trips become a preferred travel mode this year, drivers need to be aware of their car’s maintenance needs — especially when something goes awry. The FIXD Sensor is a smart device that diagnoses potential car trouble



and whether you need to pull off the road immediately or can safely continue your trip. Just plug the device in a port under the driver’s side dashboard, start the car, and tap “scan” on the app to decode and monitor your car’s health in real time. Works with all gas-powered cars and trucks built after 1996 and diesels built after 2008. \$59. Or get a free sensor when you subscribe to FIXD Premium, which includes on-call support from mechanics, free cost estimates, and money-saving tools. \$69.99. www.fixd.com

LIQUID CHALK FOR SAFER GRIP

Calling all sports enthusiasts! Free climbers, dead-lifters, cross-fitters, and racket-swingers who are looking to get out again safely may want to consider the newest product from Colorado-based Friction Labs. Secret Stuff Hygienic Liquid Chalk is made with an 80 percent ethyl-alcohol base proven by CU Anschutz to deactivate COVID-19, and a pure magnesium-carbonate formula that keeps hands drier, longer. With less dust and mess and a formula to kill germs, Secret Stuff Hygienic aims to take “clean chalk” to the next level. \$19. NEECE REGIS