

Government and UK CAA launches largest repatriation in peacetime history after collapse of Thomas Cook

Following the collapse of Thomas Cook and the cancellation of all its flights, Transport Secretary Grant Shapps has announced that the government and UK Civil Aviation Authority (CAA) has hired dozens of charter planes to fly customers home free of charge.

All customers currently abroad with Thomas Cook who are booked to return to the UK over the next 2 weeks will be brought home as close as possible to their booked return date.

The flights will start operating from today (23 September 2019). All the details of each flight will be posted on a special website, thomascook.caa.co.uk, as soon as they are available.

The government and the UK CAA aim to fly people as close as possible to their booked return date – so customers are being strongly advised not to cut short their holiday or go to the airport without checking the website for information about their return journey.

The UK CAA is also contacting hotels accommodating Thomas Cook customers, who have booked as part of a package, to tell them that the cost of their accommodation will also be covered by the government, through the Air Travel Trust Fund/ATOL cover.

All Thomas Cook customers wherever they are around the world, will be brought back to the UK on special free flights or booked onto another scheduled airline at no extra cost. The dedicated website will provide all the information customers need to access these flights. A small number of passengers may need to book their own flight home and reclaim the costs.

For flights back to the UK, it doesn't matter whether customers are ATOL protected or not, or what their nationality is. Everyone on a Thomas Cook holiday with a return flight to the UK within the 2 weeks will be brought home.

Under normal circumstances, passengers who are not ATOL protected would be asked to find, and pay for, their own way home. However, given the extent of the disruption the government is stepping in to assist impacted passengers and get people home.

Hundreds of staff from many government departments and agencies, including the UK CAA, the Department for Transport (DfT), and the Foreign Office (FCO), will be deployed in call centres and at airports to help people.

Customers who haven't already left the UK, should not go to the airport, as

there will be no further outbound flights operated by Thomas Cook. The dedicated website will let customers know how to get their money back.

The Transport Secretary, Grant Shapps, said:

Thomas Cook's collapse is very sad news for staff and holidaymakers. The government and UK CAA is working round the clock to help people. Our contingency planning has helped acquire planes from across the world – some from as far away as Malaysia – and we have put hundreds of people in call centres and at airports.

But the task is enormous, the biggest peacetime repatriation in UK history. So, there are bound to be problems and delays. Please try to be understanding with the staff who are trying to assist in what is likely to be a very difficult time for them as well.

Following the announcement that the company has been put into compulsory liquidation, various support schemes have been set up to assist UK based employees and customers – including a dedicated government webpage and helpline to advise on rights and protections and the Jobcentre Plus Rapid Response Service.

The Insolvency Service is taking steps to prepare for payment of statutory redundancy to employees (except in Northern Ireland where different rules apply).

The government also intends to convene a cross-government taskforce to support employees, alongside local stakeholders. The taskforce will consider existing support schemes and will also monitor the impact on local businesses.

The Business Secretary will write to the Insolvency Service to ask them to prioritise and fast-track their investigation into the circumstances surrounding Thomas Cook going into liquidation. The investigation will also consider the conduct of the directors.

Business Secretary Andrea Leadsom said:

This will be a hugely worrying time for employees of Thomas Cook, as well as their customers. Government will do all it can to support them. I will be setting up a cross-government taskforce to monitor local impacts, will write to insurance companies to ask them to process claims quickly, and stand ready to provide assistance and advice.

I will also be writing to the Insolvency Service to ask them to prioritise and fast-track their investigation into the circumstances surrounding Thomas Cook going into liquidation.

The government has held a series of meetings to plan the operation, which is codenamed Operation Matterhorn. Further ministerial meetings will be held today.

The operation is led by the UK CAA but also involves DfT, FCO, the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (BEIS), the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP), and other departments.

There are more than 150,000 holidaymakers abroad with Thomas Cook who are booked to return to the UK at some point over the next 2 weeks. The vast majority will not need to return today.

The operation is modelled on the successful repatriation of passengers after the collapse of Monarch Airways. The final cost of that operation to taxpayers was about £50 million. The repatriation effort with Thomas Cook is about twice the size.

All the charter aircraft meet full UK safety standards.

A minority of passengers will be returned to a different UK airport from the one they left. Where this happens, we will provide coaches and taxis to get passengers to their original departure airport.

Thomas Cook's financial problems are substantial, long-standing and well documented and government financial assistance would not have resolved them.

The operation is only intended for passengers who were due to return to the UK within the next 2 weeks.