

Military OneSource Podcast — American Forces Travel Podcast

Episode transcript:

Intro voiceover:

Welcome to the Military OneSource podcast. Military OneSource is an official program of the Defense Department, with tools, information and resources to help families navigate all aspects of military life. For more information, visit militaryonesource.mil.

Bruce Moody:

Welcome to the podcast, I'm Bruce Moody.

Traveling home to see the family or traveling for a vacation is expensive. We know this, so we generally plan our trips by getting online and shopping for the best bargains that we can find. Among the options out there is American Forces Travel, and we'll talk about that today because American Forces Travel is an official Defense Department service that you can use to book your travel, your hotel, your cruises, the whole vacation package. We'll talk about that today with our guest, who is Ken Sorg. Ken, welcome to the podcast.

Ken Sorg:

Hi, Bruce. Thank you so much for having me.

Bruce:

Yeah, it's good to have you with us. Let's just begin. Tell us a little bit about yourself and where you work.

Ken:

Thanks. I am in the Office of Military Community and Family Policy, specifically Morale, Welfare, Recreation and Resale policy. If you're inside the fence line, we call that MWR. And I am the program manager for americanforcestravel.com.

Bruce:

All right, we'll get into that because, again, we're going to foot stomp that there are a lot of imitators out there; there's a lot of websites where you can book your travel and your vacations. And, in fact, there's a lot of websites out there where you can book travel, and it's specifically really targeted for military families. But American Forces Travel is specifically by and for the Defense Department. So, why don't you tell us a little bit about what American Forces Travel is.

Ken:

Well, you did a really good job kicking it off. I'll just expand on that a little bit. It's fairly new, but it's our Morale, Welfare and Recreation program offering eligible patrons access to leisure travel online. As you mentioned, it's the only U.S. Defense Department

official MWR online vacation travel site, with great deals and benefits just for the military community.

Bruce:

Accept no imitations because – and we’re going to foot stomp this in this episode – because there are a lot of travel websites to begin with, but then there are a lot of websites that are available to service members and their families, but American Forces Travel is the official DOD one. To kind get into that, Ken, if you were to explain who is eligible and how we find out who’s eligible in order to use the website.

Ken:

Yeah, that’s a good question. You’ll see it right at our front door. When you onto americanforcestravel.com, right away, it’s going to want to authenticate you. That’s what separates us from the other sites that look official. Again, we’re the only one that is. And we use a government platform for this authentication. You’re going to enter some sensitive information like your last name and your last four of your Social Security number, your birthday, that’s pretty common stuff if you’re dealing with the military, that’s how we identify you are you and you are entitled this benefit. That’s our front door; that’s done on a secure site. And once you’re in, you’ll get in, if you’re active-duty military, Coast Guard or retiree, a dependent, if you’re in the reserves or National Guard, if you have a disabled or honorably discharged veteran, Medal of Honor recipients, and even our DOD civilians are authorized in this website. There are many more details and those are explained on the website as well, americanforcestravel.com.

Bruce:

All right. Great, great. So, I’m retired military, so back in the day I went to ITT, which is Information Tickets or Travel, or maybe it was called different things at different installations, but the on-base MWR office where you would go to get your tickets and your travel packages and stuff. What are they in relation to American Forces Travel? What’s the difference or how do they work together?

Ken:

That’s a great question. That’s still a very valuable service, but it’s just not available everywhere and it’s not open 24 hours. If you’re in the Guard or reserves, chances are you don’t have access to a, we say ITT is. They are really connected with their local community, so, if there is a professional sports team in the area or a movie theater, chances are they got some pretty good tickets for you.

Where American Forces Travel is a little bit different is, besides the obvious, we’re online. We’ve contracted with Priceline to be our engine on the website. And with that and the exclusive deals for the military on the website, you can find up to 50% off on select hotels. You can use your Military Star Card on certain hotels, as well. You can get up to \$500 off of packages, 25% off on rental cars. There are no booking fees or split-ticket fees for flights. No membership fees or service fees on event tickets. And even cruises are a really good deal, and the company that we contract with there, they offer

110% back price guarantee on cruises. When you go on a cruise, that's a pretty big investment and they're so confident we're bringing you the best price, they're offering 110% back, if you can beat that.

Bruce:

Travel as a concept went through some radical changes in the last couple of years. So, of no fault of your own, you timed launch of American Forces Travel to pretty much precede COVID. What was that like for the customers as you were dealing with the shutdowns and the lockdowns and what has changed with American Forces Travel as a result of that?

Ken:

It was very difficult; obviously, nobody was traveling. We had just launched this and it was taking off like wildfire. The pandemic, it slowed it down. We were frankly very surprised. I think the military population is optimistic by nature because they continued to book, and now, the airlines and the different programs we have out there we're very flexible on folks changing dates, but they continued to book through this. And we always are pretty transparent on what the industry was doing with regard to any travel restrictions. And we shared that on the website. So, the people had all the information they need to make those decisions at that moment.

Bruce:

When people are booking travel or vacation packages now, are there any COVID-19 restrictions or are there any tips for people with regard to COVID?

Ken:

Yeah, we recommend folks check with the airlines specifically. We do share the information that we receive from our travel partners. But generally, if it's a new restriction, you'll see it online. Whether that's a cruise or a flight or even event tickets at a venue, the most detailed information will be with that airline, the cruise partner or the venue that you're interested in.

Bruce:

Got it. Got it. So, more about where are you going or who you're traveling with or how you're getting, yeah, OK. Any feedback, any stories? What are people saying about their experiences?

Ken:

We're beginning to track some testimonies from individuals, and Bruce, it's really good stuff. I mean where individuals that ... a lot of our service members have the Military Star Card and it's the first card that they're eligible for and that's a way to purchase on American Forces Travel. That card isn't accepted by other online travel agents or even on base at the ITT office. So, that's a pretty neat way to help a person who's looking to book a hotel or something like that; we're able to help them that way. Maybe they have

family coming in town and they can help with that. The stories that we're hearing are a way for them to organize the return from deployment from the spouse and get the family connected again, get down to Disney and pool all their travel arrangements together on one website. They're kind of heartfelt; we see some of that on our Facebook page and then we hear it online as well.

What I've seen personally with our partner on Priceline, they really go to bat for us. If somebody had an ill experience, I've seen our Priceline folks get in there and really peel it back and find out what happened and do everything they can to help our patron from that event.

Bruce:

Yeah, because our patrons have lifestyles that involve last-minute deployments and all kinds of demands on military life, some of which you can plan for, but really a lot of them not.

Ken:

Right.

Bruce:

Do you have any way of supporting people if they need to change their travel or cancel their travel or postpone?

Ken:

Yeah, all that is handled on a case-by-case basis. We're a booking platform, so again, it comes down to the individual policies from each of these travel partners and how they handle that. But you have a massive advocate on your side when you book with American Forces Travel, somebody who gets you and where you come from. And we help time and time again with things like that.

Bruce:

Excellent, excellent. Any final words, Ken?

Ken:

Yeah, I don't know if I touched on it earlier, but you can save a lot of money booking on American Forces Travel. But it's really not just that, just like our on-base Morale, Welfare and Recreation functions, when they're supported by DOD patrons, that revenue stays on the base and it goes back to them. And this program is no different. Just this last year alone, we have generated nearly \$2 million that went back through the services to support quality of life programs for service members and their families. So, even if you're out there shopping and the deal's maybe not that large or the price is nearly the same, even if you still shop with American Forces Travel, there will be a percent of that sale that goes back to your service to support those quality-of-life programs. And I would also add, Bruce, that we've got nearly a million people who have

come online, authenticated and are shopping. And just this last year alone, they saved nearly \$5 million.

Bruce:

All right. Good to know. And just one last time, since we're still here, American Forces Travel, although it's a .com, it is absolutely 100% Defense Department stuff. Once you get in there and you've been authenticated, you are in a DOD platform. No question. Ken, thank you so much for joining us today.

I want to remind you that Military OneSource is an official resource of the Defense Department. We're a call center, we're a website, we're all over social media. And we're a podcast available wherever you get your podcasts. And we're now available through the American Forces Network. You can listen to us via their AFN Go app.

I'm Bruce Moody. Thanks for listening. Take care. Bye-bye.