

A CLASS ACT IN SCHOOL TRIP SAFETY

Interview with Becki Abbott from Diocesan School for Girls



**DIOCESAN
SCHOOL
FOR GIRLS**

We recently spoke with Rebecca (Becki) Abbott from Diocesan School for Girls in New Zealand around their travel program. Diocesan carries out an average of 10 big overseas trips per annum on top of regular staff placement and other excursions throughout the year.

Becki taught for 27 years, participating heavily with outdoor education from overnight camps to overseas trips, before being appointed as the Health and Safety Director at Diocesan School for Girls in Auckland.

Q: What value have you seen from International SOS services in your travel program?

We've been with International SOS for two years now. When we discussed coming on board, it was the support and reassurance for our staff that was the tipping point. It adds another level of security that if something happened overseas, they'd have official expert support.

Though our staff is well travelled, it's a very different ball game when you're going with 30 girls to a country that speaks a foreign language and has unfamiliar travel logistics. Our teachers are qualified and very good at their job; however, they aren't medical or security experts.

Having access to International SOS provides peace of mind not only for the teachers but for the principal and me as well. Our students' parents also appreciate that extra layer of expertise. We were initially hesitant about the additional cost; however, no one in the last two years has even brought it up, let alone had a problem with it. We advertise within the trip about our membership, and no one's said a word. They're pleased we have it. And interestingly enough, a few parents' organisations are members so they're familiar with it due to their work.

Q: What impacts have our services had on your internal process?

Our membership has changed our whole travel process right from the approval stages through to the trip itself.

Before we solely focused on curriculum and the value it would provide to the students. Now on top of the learning value, we complete our due diligence around medical or security issues. We also look into the providers and companies we use while on the trip.

International SOS has educated us more on being particular about who we use instead of having a 'this sounds like a good trip, off we go' method. This has helped make our practices far more robust. For example, we've gone through and asked the travel companies for different levels of their health and safety plans, so we now have an approved tour operators and travel agents list for our staff to use in their proposals.

Another aspect that's increased our confidence in sending people overseas is having a more stringent approval process on who we accept – for both students and teachers.

Q: How has your approval process changed regarding who you're willing to accept and send on a trip?

We are focused on providing safe and successful school trips, which includes making sure everyone is fit for travel before leaving. There's a bit of a balancing act honouring workplace health and safety laws as well as privacy laws, but the medical experts at International SOS have helped us with those regulations.

For example, we recently had a teacher with potential medical issues that we wanted to address before sending them overseas. We worked with International SOS who advised us on asking for a GP approval and what questions needed to be asked. It helped us feel more comfortable sending them as a trip leader to watch over the girls.

Q: How do these additional factors affect your process for approving students as well?

If students also have existing medical or mental health conditions, we might ask for medical clearance too. Additionally, we now review the list of potential students with appropriate staff. Along with medical conditions such as anaphylaxis, there are students who have medication for other conditions which we handle well at school with the appropriate support on site but our trip leaders aren't trained to give professional support or advice in those situations alone.

With this in mind, the teachers themselves might have been reluctant to take those kids because if a child has some sort of medical issue – physical or mental – it takes one of our staff members away from the larger group. Like most schools, we have a ratio of staff to students approved in the proposal. If you take one of them out for one student, it can really disrupt the trip. And when kids are paying so much for a trip, we want to carry it out without any disruptions.

Now our teachers are much more confident that if issues do arise, they have access to medical professionals straight away that can advise them.

Q: Do you use your International SOS membership across all travel or does it depend on if you're using a provider?

We use International SOS in all our travel, regardless of location or type of trip. It's all right as rain when things are going well, but it's once something happens that you start to realise how much information goes into course correcting. Again, it's that extra layer of awareness and protection that we value.

Most of our large overseas trips are organised with a tour provider, so we discuss the level of International SOS engagement with them during the planning phase. This includes talking about who would initiate conversations if something happened or who would plan an evacuation. We cover the hierarchy of communication because they need to be on board with our ability to utilise International SOS for support, advice on medical treatment or facilities, and other courses of action. This is a different level of conversation than we used to have, but it's always been fine. In fact, some tour guides also have a membership with International SOS, which is fantastic.

If we're running a trip ourselves, then we don't have the support of an agent and work with tour guides directly. These are usually to less risky places, so we feel comfortable working solely with the support and advice given by International SOS.