

# FRIENDS IN NEED

## HOW RELATIONSHIPS UNDERPIN THE WAY THE TRAVEL INDUSTRY DOES BUSINESS

Last month three Australian travel agents – Anne Rogers of Wings Away Travel, Trevor Jones of Hawthorn Travel and Visnja Pearson of Eltham Travel – found themselves quarantined in Shanghai because of swine ‘flu fears. The events that subsequently unfolded provided Anne Rogers with a powerful lesson in the value of travel industry relationships.

By Anne Rogers

BACK in the days when we would sit in (for me) Traveland conferences, and hang on every word of the “guru du jour”, the emphasis was always on: going the extra mile, up-selling, on-selling, selling the sizzle, wowing our clients, adding value, empowerment and so on.

Invariably we would be shown a training video from an organisation which exemplified all of the above, and two corporations always featured: Neiman Marcus and Ritz Carlton.

So in that context, it may be no surprise at all that it is Ritz Carlton which features in this story.

But, there is a preface.

Exactly one year ago I was in Shanghai to attend the Asian Luxury Travel Mart (ALTM) and stayed at the Portman Ritz Carlton, as a hosted buyer. In that sense, I was not paying, and so was staying where I was put – obviously no hardship!

Some 20 years previously I had stayed at the hotel in its former incarnation as the Portman Shangri-La, so this is not a new property by any measure.

But, as often happens in cases where the “hardware” wasn’t built yesterday, the “software” takes over, and the guest experience is superb.

My personal experience of the Ritz Carlton policy of empowering their staff began as every traveller’s nightmare – a burst suitcase. As the bellman was struggling to put my (admittedly well and truly overloaded) case in the boot of the cab, it burst.

No time to buy another one, what to do?

Jerry, the young man in question disappeared and returned with a “spare” case from the hotel luggage room.

It was big, bright green, and very well used however it suited my needs perfectly. Contents were (embarrassingly) transferred right there in the driveway and I was on my way.

On my “to do” list when I got home



Image credit: www.photolibrary.com

was to write to the general manager to commend Jerry for saving the day. Did I do it? Of course not, and it remained on my list for approximately five months – a fact of which I am ashamed. But, in the end I did write, and as it happened, the general manager received my note on the very day of a major staff function, and he delightedly planned to recognise Jerry in front of his peers.

In March this year, I returned to Shanghai, and took the case with me, and returned it to the hotel to be replaced in the luggage room for the next similarly unlucky soul, and in the intervening year I have praised the hotel many times for saving my bacon (absolutely no pun intended in context of the following!)

Fast forward exactly one year, and I am on my way to Shanghai for ALTM

again, with two of my agent colleagues from Melbourne – Visnja Pearson and Trevor Jones.

Our flight landed and on board was a young man with a high temperature.

Very long story short, those of us who were sitting within three rows of him on the aircraft were quarantined for seven days, in a “facility” an hour out of Shanghai, which would struggle for a one-star rating.

We were confined to dirty rooms, with food deliveries three times a day. Unfortunately the food on offer was inedible – even for intrepid, well travelled souls like us. The rooms lacked amenities, and into the bargain, smelled terrible.

Enter the conference organiser – Reed Exhibitions of London, with Peter Conway in charge. Peter arranged for the Ritz Carlton to accept an order from us each day, and to deliver it late afternoon.

Our requests were for items as diverse as air freshener, tissues, and toiletries, to wine, cheese, chocolate, paper and sticky tape. We also needed cutlery, and glasses and cups.

Each day our delivery would be delivered by hotel car (a feat in itself, given traffic and distance), and we would eagerly pounce on the contents, and dine well.

A hand-written note from the hotel manager accompanied one delivery, apologising that our Ritz Carlton experience had to be while we were in quarantine, and hoping that the goodies assembled by the F&B staff were enjoyable.

The days wore on, until one day before our release, when an email arrived from the executive assistant manager, food and beverage, Jerome Colson. He asked if there was anything he could do.

We just said thank you and that we were looking forward to spending three nights at the hotel, upon our release. How could we possibly stay anywhere else – ever!

To that he replied that we were to

call him when our release time was known and he would send a hotel car to collect us.

This we did, and the liveried driver arrived with a chilled bottle of Moët and three glasses in hand, and served this to us on the steps of our "facility" – to the certain consternation of those being ferried to the airport in buses to a completely uncertain fate because most of them had booked on the internet, but I digress.

We remained at the hotel for the next three wonderful days, and can never begin to repay the kindness we received, nor the myriad of thoughtful gestures which regularly occurred during our stay.

This was a wonderful example of the "cultural" behaviour which makes a truly fine hotel, and the Portman Ritz Carlton is a shining example of this – within its own chain and among hotels everywhere.

Peter Conway from Reed Exhibitions, despite a killer schedule of his own, arranged for laptops to be purchased for those of us who were travelling without them, and these became a treasured possession for all of us.

He called and emailed daily, and despite our predicament being in no way an issue for Reed to resolve, he took

it upon himself to see us completely taken care of.

Even after the conference ended, and he was off duty, airport transfers, accommodation and flights home were arranged for us.

Also on day one, we received a call from David Allardice from Eastern Journeys, based in Hong Kong.

He was keen to do anything he could, and arranged for us a supply of DVDs, and also some flowers and a cake on Trevor Jones' birthday.

This underscores the pleasures of having gotten to know, and dealing with a quality DMC/ground operator such as Eastern Journeys.

Operators like David are never off duty and always stand ready to go the extra mile for our clients, and as things turned out this time, us as well.

Large buying groups, and our mass market wholesalers can never understand why we direct business to these specialist operators – this is why!

All of us were delighted and humbled to receive so much unsolicited offers of support, and assistance from our industry friends – a wonderful illustration of the importance of relationships in our industry, and why it is very difficult to function without them.

## The benefit of building relationships with small, independent wholesalers

LIKE many other agents, we spent hours – indeed, days – dealing with the fallout from the disruptions caused by the Mumbai terrorist attack and the Bangkok airport blockade earlier this year.

In our case, the focus was on a group of 19 who were cruising on a charter from Rome to Singapore, and for whom we had arranged a private side-trip to India.

It provided an object lesson in the benefits of dealing with niche/boutique operators.

A possible "Plan B" (actually it was about Plan J!) for our group only became evident after close of business on a Friday.

I had no choice but to call Trevor Fernandes of Wildlife Safaris, with whom our Indian arrangements had been made, and ask him to be available over the weekend, to place some alternative bookings in India for us. He agreed immediately, and mobile phone numbers were exchanged.

The situation was finally resolved overnight Saturday/Sunday, but we could not exchange confirmations and invoices

in the usual way, and nor could I remit funds (a very large amount) to Wildlife Safaris – even if I did have an invoice.

So, there was considerable trust required between ourselves, Wildlife Safaris, and in turn their Indian operator.

That we were dealing directly with the chief executive of a niche wholesaler; someone who immediately understood our situation, and with the nous and authority to help us, saved our bacon.

Trevor's preparedness to take my calls out of hours, and to ask his Indian operator to do likewise were key.

Like many other like-minded agencies, we increasingly deal with boutique operators, with whom we have a personalised relationship, such as our own with Wildlife Safaris. I am confident that we would receive the same level of assistance from any of them.

It is this kind of meaningful support when the chips are down, which means more to an agent in the situation I was in, than a few free drinks at a sponsored conference dinner.



### LOST CIVILIZATION

10 night holiday including 7 nights  
cruising on board the new Jayavarman

from \$3099\*  
pp

**Includes:**

- Return Economy Airfare to Saigon and from Siem Reap with Malaysia Airlines
- One night accommodation Victoria Hotel, Siem Reap with Breakfast
- Two nights accommodation Caravelle Hotel, Saigon with Breakfast
- 7 night river cruise onboard Jayavarman and touring per itinerary
- All meals & entertainment on board the ship with select beverages
- English speaking Tour Guide on board
- Port charges, air and government taxes

**Itinerary:** Saigon; Cai Be; Chau Doc; Phnom Penh; Kampong Cham; Wat Hanchey; Kampong Cham; Kampong Chhnang; Tonle Sap; Siem Rep

## Explore CRUISE



### SOUTH AMERICA PASSAGE

13 night fly/cruise holiday with  
12 nights cruising on ms Veendam

from \$4975\*  
pp

**Includes:**

- Return Economy Airfare from Sydney to Santiago returning from Buenos Aires with Qantas Airways
- One night pre cruise accommodation at Crowne Plaza, Santiago
- 12 night cruise on ms Veendam
- All meals & entertainment on board the ship
- Port charges, air and government taxes

**Itinerary:** Santiago (Valparaiso), Chile; Puerto Montt, Chile; Darwin Channel Chilean Fjords; Amalia Glacier Canal Sarmiento; Strait of Magellan; Punta Arenas, Chile; Cockburn and Beagle Channels; Ushuaia, Argentina; Scenic Cruising Cape Horn; Pt. Stanley, Falkland Islands; Montevideo, Uruguay; Buenos Aires, Argentina

\*Terms and conditions: Prices are indicative only. Jayavarman cruise price advertised is based on travel dates 03.10.17.24\* Jul 2010 and 14.21\*.28 Aug 2010. Veendam cruise price advertised is based on travel date 30 June 2010 and on a inside stateroom category mm. Prices are per person on a twin share basis and are correct at the time of printing. They are in Australian dollars, are subject to change without notice. This may occur by reason of matters outside our control which increase the cost of the product or service. Such factors include adverse currency fluctuations, fuel surcharges, taxes and airfare increases. Please contact a Consultant for up to date prices. Fares include all discounts. Valid: Until sold out. Taxes are included, are correct as at 06 Jul 09 and are subject change. Cancellation and amendment fees apply. Check with your travel agent for booking conditions. Any additional accommodation required pre/post cruise due to flight schedules is not included and is at an additional cost. The cruise line reserves the right to deviate from, amend or cancel any published itinerary without prior notice. Malaysia Airlines: BNE/SYD/MEL/ADL AUMH 63208/5 PER AUMH63208/12 S Class. BNE add \$20 pp, ADL add \$30 pp. Qantas Airlines: AUQF61950/69 ex SYD. Other ex points: BNE add \$95 pp, MEL add \$105 pp, ADL add \$292 pp, PER add \$449 pp.

For these fantastic Cruises book with Explore Cruise on 1300 789 187