

Sustainable tourism

‘Why responsible holidays matter’

For agent Karen Simmonds, responsible travel has grown to become a huge part of her business. The owner of Travel Matters in south London described her journey at the second TTG/Travel Foundation Green Think Tank, held last week. **Philippa Jacks** reports



Most agents return from a fam trip with some newly-gained product knowledge, a few souvenirs and a four-day hangover, but Karen Simmonds came back from a fam trip to India in 2008 with a determination to change the way she ran her business.

“We visited Varanasi, which is very

spiritual, and I suddenly realised — after all these years of serving customers with holidays — I wanted to give something back.”

When she returned to her agency in Clapham, south London, she set up a campaign called Make Travel Matter and has been raising money for charities, and encouraging her clients to travel in a more responsible way, ever since.

Wind of change

The Kirker fam trip may have been the catalyst for change, but Simmonds’ interest in responsible travel was ignited long before she became a travel agent. Having previously run a power-kiting company in the Algarve, she saw first-hand the environmental and social impact that unsustainable tourism can have.

“The thing that I was really aware of was the lack of water supply to villages, yet golf courses were everywhere,” she explains.

Her campaign centres on encouraging her clients to use resources such as water sparingly on holiday, to respect local cultures and practices, and not to buy souvenirs that have a damaging effect on the environment.

Transport tips

She encourages clients to reach their destination by rail where they can, although she does not discourage them from flying. “Yes, long-haul flying creates carbon emissions, but it’s often the only way to get to the areas of the world that entirely depend on tourism,” she points out. The Travel Matters website features a Carbon Friendly Flight Search facility so clients can find the airline which creates the lowest amount of carbon emissions on a given route. Simmonds and her staff also encourage clients to take less baggage, and to choose routes with the smallest number of stopovers, since taking off and landing are the most carbon-intensive points during a flight.

Choosing from the bewildering list of

Research tools: Organisations that can help

Resources, as recommended by Karen Simmonds:

The Travel Foundation

The travel industry’s own charity. Offers an online training course about sustainability, which takes 30 minutes (see ttglive.com/ttgknowledge). The site is packed with information on holidaying responsibly, including tips for training staff, destination guides for customers, and an activity book for kids.

■ thetravelfoundation.org.uk

International Centre for Responsible Tourism

Based at Leeds Metropolitan University, the site has informative papers on responsible tourism.

■ icrtourism.org

Responsible Skiing

Offers consultancy on making ski holidays more sustainable. The website describes the issues involved and has useful tips to pass on to clients.

■ responsibleskiing.com

Tourism Concern

A charity campaigning against exploitation in tourism. The site has useful information on human rights issues and tips for avoiding a “guilt trip”.

■ tourismconcern.org.uk

Travel Matters

Find out more about the campaigns that Travel Matters is supporting on its campaign website.

■ maketravelmatter.co.uk



worthy charities to support can be difficult, and Simmonds initially toyed with the idea of creating her own. “I did want to set up my own, but when I realised all the red tape involved, I decided against it,” she says.

Charity collaborations

Eventually, she came across Travel Pledge, which enables her customers to donate directly to a specific project, with an achievable target. Travel Matters and its clients are currently donating to a bicycle maintenance project in South Africa, and the Family Holiday Association.

Travel Matters has also partnered with Trees For Cities, a charity which plants trees in urban areas in the UK and worldwide. If clients make a £4.50 donation, Travel Matters will match it, paying for one tree to be planted.

Simmonds has also tied up with a company called Green Rewards to offer her customers an innovative loyalty scheme. Clients receive “green points” which they can spend on items such as eco-friendly toiletries and organic chocolate from an online store.

The agency educates the next generation about sustainable holidays too, by going in to local schools to give presentations. “It’s been great – the kids have really engaged with the message,” says Simmonds. She also puts a “Journey Journal” in the document wallet for clients with children: a booklet designed to help children engage more with the destination they’re holidaying in.

Three years after her fam trip to India, Simmonds says her decision to make sustainable travel a key part of her business is bearing fruit, with clients enquiring about sustainable holidays and choosing to support the recommended charities.

Clockwise from left: Travel Pledge in South Africa; school activities; getting the children onboard; the Trees For Cities charity; and Simmonds speaking at last week’s TTG Green Think Tank



If you’d like to make sustainable tourism a more important part of your business, where should you start? Here are the four key steps in Karen Simmond’s own journey to change.

1 UNDERSTAND THE ISSUES
Find out what is meant by “responsible tourism”, “sustainable tourism” and “ecotourism”. Understand the positive and negative impacts that tourism can have on people and places.

2 DEVISE YOUR OWN CSR POLICY
Assess your own business first, and devise a clear policy for making your premises as sustainable as possible. “You have to make your own corporate social responsibility policy before you can know what message you want to give to your clients,” says Karen. “There is help out there,” she adds. “Julie from The Travel Foundation came to my shop and helped me put a policy together.”

3 TRAIN YOUR STAFF
Spend time helping staff to understand and appreciate your motivation and objectives. “My colleague’s definitely onboard with it, and very much engaged in the tree planting and so on. She’s been converted!”

4 COMMUNICATE YOUR MESSAGE TO CLIENTS
Use your website, newsletters and pre-departure information as well as chatting to clients to educate them about sustainable travel and to shout about your achievements. Karen says that social media, and particularly Twitter, has been invaluable in communicating her message. “Twitter took a while to grasp, but now it’s very useful and I’ve definitely got bookings through it.”

■ **Don’t miss next week’s TTG for more from the TTG Green Think Tank, which took place at the Responsible Partnerships Exhibition (organised by TTG’s parent company UBM)**