

When travel matters

Travel still matters, even during the recession, apparently.

Six months on from when *Selling Long Haul* last spoke to the company, Travel Matters' owner Karen Simmonds and her colleague Catherine Murphy Birchall say their family-focused agency in an affluent area of South London is still attracting people who need a holiday to relax, but also those who are looking at ways to rejuvenate the soul.

Which is why the agency has joined TravelPledge, a sustainable travel charity that helps tourists 'give something back'.

After a stint in India, Karen returned to the UK revived and reawakened to the positive effect travel can have on the destinations visited.

"India really got under my skin, something many people find when they visit the country," she said. "When I got back I really wanted to raise awareness of how a holiday can support local communities, from supporting local businesses to facilitating better infrastructure."

The agency already had a 'Make Your Travel Matter' section on its website, which leads customers through to a selection of tours that make a difference in various areas of the world: from touring remote villages in north-east Thailand and supporting rural crafts to visiting fair trade projects and helping schools in Africa.

Having visited some local schools in the UK to talk about ethical travel, Karen found that children were interested and engaged in the subject.

"Even from a young age, children can

prompt their parents to follow a more ethical stance", she said. "I want people to think less of a 'fly and flop' holiday for a more authentic, heart-felt holiday where they can connect with the community."

On joining TravelPledge, Karen selected two projects which she thought would be close to the hearts of her clients. The first is based near Pretoria in South Africa and supports a workshop for repairing bikes and training locals to be more self-sufficient. "We sell a lot of holidays to South Africa and our clients are touched by the people they meet out there," said Karen.

The second project is a UK-based charity called the Family Holiday Association, which helps low-income families who cannot afford a holiday get the break they need – a poignant choice for an agency whose clients often book five to six holidays a year.

But Karen insists that Travel Matters is not there to preach. "We don't want to become a so-called 'chugger' or charity mugger!" Karen said. "It's a very personal thing to ask people to part with their own money. Most of our clients are aware of our stance from our website anyway. We often get feedback from them after their holiday and this is a good time to raise the subject of donating, when they are on a high from their travels."

In the season of goodwill, charity is a natural focus for many companies, but how does being a member of a scheme like TravelPledge work for an agency in basic business terms?



Left: Karen in Old Delhi, India, where she checked out a TravelPledge community project

"TravelPledge has been a win-win situation for us as a business, and I think more people should be doing it. Clients choose to donate, rather than us taking a percentage from every booking. It saves me sourcing worthy non-governmental organisations (NTOs) and ensures our clients' money goes direct to the cause."

As far as feedback on TravelPledge is concerned, it's early days, having only launched in October, but Travel Matters is optimistic that working with charity can boost business.

"I think our clients trust our approach and the relationships we have with the tour operators we use. They come back to us because they value our ethics and honesty when it comes to planning their travel arrangements"

"In terms of bookings, "September and October were terrific, but things have slowed a little in the run-up to Christmas." www.travelmatters.co.uk

FIND OUT MORE

TravelPledge is a registered charity which helps travellers give back to the places they have visited in a more direct and meaningful way. Travel Matters is the fourth agency to sign up to its programme since it started in January 2009. With the help of Responsible Travel, People and Places and Carbon Responsible, TravelPledge has reached its funding targets for seven projects.

To find out more or to see how your agency can join, visit the website at www.travelpledge.org or contact TravelPledge's director, Nick Chaffe, at nick@travelphilanthropy.org.uk

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