

TRAVEL MATTERS *CLAPHAM, LONDON*

A travel agency that offers its clients a free meal at a Michelin Star restaurant to celebrate its 10th anniversary can't be accused of keeping its head down during the recession! But then travelmatters' has plenty of regular clients that expect the best. The shop is located in the so-called 'Nappy Valley', in South-West London, where, apparently, there is the highest concentration of nannies in the UK. Thus the agency's two staff members, Karen Simmonds and Catherine Murphy, deal largely with an affluent client base that knows exactly what it wants – and they make it their business to provide it. Catherine tells us how they balance babies and beach balls.

Details: 10 Blandfield Road, London, SW12 8BG; Tel: 020 8675 7878

What's the company's ethos?

We pride ourselves on our service and knowledge. We have a huge repeat client base because we offer a unique product. Predominantly, we use small independent tour operators because they know their products and we can deal with them on a much more personal level, meaning we get the best for our customers.

What areas do you specialise in?

Definitely family holidays. We've carved out a niche market for ourselves because our customers are very specific with their needs and we know



where to find the child-friendly beaches, good crèches and interconnecting rooms. But in terms of what kind of holidays we sell, it's a really mixed bag. Last year we sold a lot of activity-based holidays to the US and Canada.

How are you managing to cope with the recession?

A lot of our customers work in the City and have been severely affected by the recession. We've noticed that a lot of families who would previously have booked five to six holidays a year have really cut back, to around two a year.

However, this April was our best on record. And although forward bookings are down for the moment, the

confidence is still there so we're not overly worried.

What's challenging right now?

Other than the credit crunch, probably finding the time to get out there and sample what's on offer. There are only two of us in the office but we try to find the time to go on educationals and fairs because they are invaluable. You can't beat being able to describe a room or kids' club with personal details.

What's the competition and how do you combat it?

We have lots of competition! We even found them doing a leaflet drop in our area. Other businesses offer cheaper

products to try and compete but we don't do gimmicks or discounts. If we know our customers can get something cheaper on the internet, we'll tell them, and they appreciate our honesty. We recently held a coffee and cake morning asking clients to bring a friend; our website has just had a re-vamp and we have an e-newsletter going out once a month.

Any new plans for the future?

We're about to embark on a new venture which will focus on responsible tourism. And we already have a scheme in place where we award £10 per person on each booking, which we give to the school of the family's children.