



As featured in
The CEO Magazine
For more info visit
theceomagazine.com



Talking TRAVEL

Express Travel Group has doubled its size in the past five years, and that growth looks set to continue thanks to the success of its three sub-brands—Select Travel Group, Independent Travel Group, and italktravel.

Images courtesy of Express Travel Group

Early in 2015, Orient Express Travel Group rebranded itself as Express Travel Group. By dropping the first word from its title, it was able to better represent its operations as a respected global travel organisation and reflect its broadened customer base. In the past, its core focus was on the Asian market, but today the business provides products and services to cater to a diverse range of consumers wanting to travel to destinations all over the world.

Under the Express banner are three retail travel brands. The first is Select Travel Group, whose origins lie in the ethnic Asian travel market comprising large volumes of passengers to Asia. More recently, these stores are focused on tours, cruises, and packages worldwide. All agents are multilingual and go by the slogan ‘We speak your language.’

The second is Independent Travel Group, which serves a wider client base, considering most members in this group have many years of travel industry experience and

therefore exposure to assisting their customers with journeys to traditional markets such as the UK, Europe, and the USA.

Last, italktravel is the newest addition, which was launched last year. italktravel is a growing retail travel franchise model and currently sits at 31 stores nationwide.

Owner and CEO of Express Travel Group Tom Manwaring says the name change was to recognise the evolution of the organisation. “When I first bought the company, it was primarily doing Asian travel,” he explains. “Ninety per cent of our sales were from that market. Our business concentrated on the ‘visiting friends and relatives’ element with Asian-Australians going back and forth to Asian countries. That remains almost recession proof—these people fly all the time, maybe three or four times a year.

“That was a solid base for the business to grow on, and then we have added onto that with the Independent Travel Group. This caters for more of the traditional

Australian going to Europe or the US type of client. Now we are a combination of both and we are a merging of both cultures. We have a mixture of clients travelling to all parts of the globe.”

Tom’s career was largely spent in the airline industry, with Qantas for a short time and then Cathay Pacific for almost 30 years. He spent a significant period based in Hong Kong, Japan, Taiwan, and Korea, which gave him a great understanding of the Asian market. When the opportunity to purchase what was then known as Orient Express Travel Group presented itself in late 2003, Tom jumped at the chance. With the company based in Melbourne and offices in Sydney and Brisbane, he proceeded to grow its presence and give it a national footprint by opening additional offices in Adelaide and Perth. Furthermore, he introduced new technology into the automation of systems and successfully introduced the three additional sub-brands.

“I have always loved the travel industry,” Tom says. “I have been involved with it all my life, and I >



Entertainment to keep you mesmerised.

(Okay, maybe not that guy in the new fully-flat bed.)



The new A330 Business Suite with fully-flat bed.*



*Business Suites (and Panasonic eX3 entertainment systems) are being progressively introduced on A330 aircraft in 2015 and 2016.

think the driver there is that it's a happy place to be. You are dealing with people who are going on holidays or on business, so it's a great environment to grow up in. And then owning my own business was something I always wanted to do, and that's what gave me the opportunity really to stay in the industry and to drive my own destiny to some extent.

"The other thing about it was that the business, in those days, was dealing mainly in Asia and I was comfortable in that space. At that stage, about 90 per cent of the staff were Asian-Australian, speaking six or eight languages, and we have grown it out now to 80 staff, of which about 60 per cent are Asian-Australian and 40 per cent are European-Australian. We speak about 14 languages. Most of our staff were born in Australia, but they have grandparents or parents who were born in any one of 21 countries.

"That's our business strength and point of difference, because I think we are very familiar with the requirements of a combination of cultures; we have got that whole mixture within the business. And then it also timed well with the demographic changes happening within Australia."

Tom has guided Express Travel Group through its journey of being a niche operation to becoming a travel business with global significance. He is exceedingly proud of what he has created, and has maintained the strong company ethos and great culture that has been there all along.

"Our key values are around integrity and empathy with the client," he says. "We have a smattering of every type of person in the group, and we want them to feel like they are a part of a team. We all use the catch cry 'smarter, faster, stronger'. We have had that for 10 years now, and it means we strive to be smarter in terms of the use of technology, faster in terms of our speed to market, and stronger in terms of our group. We have doubled our size in the past five

"We strive to be smarter in terms of the use of technology, faster in terms of our speed to market, and stronger in terms of our group."

- Tom Manwaring



years and we plan on more expansion in the future."

The staff at Express Travel Group are cross-trained in each internal operation area for the different sub-brands. Customer service is a priority, and employees are always willing to go the extra mile. "There is nothing new about it; you don't have to reinvent the wheel," Tom notes. "It's just about making sure there is a consistent approach to what we do or what we try to do every day in dealing with customers to sort out the wrongs. We are making sure we do right more than we do wrong.

"It has always been tough in business; there are no free kicks. But the more consistent we are about what we try and do, the better, and that means looking after our staff. I am really proud that the ratio of staff leaving is around 2 per cent, and it has been that for the past five years. We generally only lose one or two people per year going on to other jobs. So we have gone from 50 staff up to 80 now. We have been adding people gradually over the past three years just to keep up with the demands and needs of the business, but we have used a lot of technology to offset the need to be adding hundreds of staff. We are doing four times the business we were doing eight years ago, so four times the volume with almost the same number of staff. We have

been able to maximise the use of technology to grow the business further."

In an approach similar to the one with staff, Tom says that relationships developed with suppliers and other partners need to be nurtured. "We offer all of the value-added product you can think of, so it's as much of a one stop shop as we can possibly garner," he says. "We are constantly meeting with our suppliers and discussing the ways we can improve their business, which in turn will improve ours. If we can keep our suppliers happy and our agents happy, then we will be doing good business. We share the knowledge we have and we share the success."

Tom foresees that Express Travel Group will continue to grow in the coming years as more and more people travel for leisure, to visit friends and family, and for business. "I think the future is very strong," he states. "The vast majority of outbound travel from Australia is still via an agent, and I think that's a trend that's going to remain, as long as they are value-adding to the experience, are cost competitive, and have got great service and knowledge. The sheer volume of new flights, airlines, and cruise lines operating in Australia will make sure that prices are very competitive and therefore will create demand. It's a win-win for everybody." •