Precious Experience

Worldlink Travels began as a small, independent travel agency in a very competitive business. Harin Fernando meets its founders, Ahintha and Gerard Amerasinghe.



Ahintha Amerasinghe.



Gerard Amerasinghe

Ahintha and Gerard Amerasinghe started Worldlink Travels 15 years ago. Today it has built up a reputation for excellence in corporate travel. “My brother Gerard and I have brought up Worldlink Travels like a precious child,” said Ahintha Amerasinghe, the Chairman and Managing Director of Worldlink Travels. “So when we were thinking of a tag line for our 15th anniversary logo, without any hesitation we chose: ’15 Precious Years.’ Ahintha has worked in the travel started working for Thai Airways in 1979, which was my first job. In 1984, I joined Airlanka as a sales representative and I was posted to the Maldives for three years as the station representative. I returned in 1988 and joined Japan Airlines. Gerard too counts over 26 years of experience in the industry, with Airlanka, Korean Air and British

Caledonian Airlines in Saudi Arabia. Hence we share 54 years of experience between us." During the early 1990s many individuals questioned the Amerasinghe brother's decision to enter the travel trade as independents. At that time their decision to set up on their own was subject to scepticism. "We were asked," said Ahintha, "why are you opening up a travel agency when people are so negative about travel agents? I replied that we felt there was a niche market for us. There were so many companies who wanted to deal with a travel agent who acted above board. "So we opened up Worldlink Travels in August 1991. Some of our customers have been with us since our inception. In fact more than 40% of our clients have been trading with us for over 10 years." Gerard added: "Presently the market is very competitive and every day new entrants come in to the industry. We welcome them whole heartedly. But we are sometimes ashamed to
industry for 28 years. He said: "I say that we are the travel industry, when we hear about what some agents do to secure business."

Worldlink is a very focused enterprise, said Gerard. My brother and I along with our team, are prepared to offer more than what the customer wants. This has gained us credibility, honesty and integrity in the travel trade, a particular strength of our company. We are now at a stage of being amongst the top five companies on the local scene. Our goal is to strive to be the best not the largest travel agent in Sri Lanka.

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From its small and humble beginnings, Worldlink has grown considerably. "We started off with just five staff and today we have over 50 employees, working across four separate locations. We have been consistently awarded by all the leading airlines in recognition of our sales," said Gerard.

Ahintha explained: "Just last year Etihad gave us the 'Premium Class Award' that recognised our ability in marketing front end cabin seats. We were the first travel agency in Sri Lanka to be awarded such a commendation and it was the most recognised award that night. "We give the customer a 100% assurance that when they work with us, their flights are what they have to worry least about. Even if there is a problem with a flight due to some operational reason, we will look for alternatives within a short period of time and inform the passengers wherever they are.

We have found alternative flights for clients during hurricanes, now storms and even just after the 9/11 in the USA when hundreds of passengers were stranded. “Currently it is difficult to obtain seats, flight confirmations and visas. We take the worry out of these aspects. Even the emergency numbers on the travel document we issue includes my home phone number. Any time, day or night, we are prepared to meet the requirements of our valued customers. Gerard is an expert in constructing airfares, he has been able to drastically reduce fares for clients, saving them huge amounts of money over the years.”

” When we started 15 years ago,” Gerard said, “we did not have computers to do reservations or ticketing, we had to do everything manually. We had to go through books called the ‘ABC.’ Sometimes booking a single passenger on a five or six sector journey took hours. “Today we use ‘Amadeus’ one of the most advanced reservations systems in the world. We can book everything instantly; from airline seats to hotel rooms to cruises. We get a reply in a matter of seconds. The passenger can even select their seat, preflight. Worldlink has also introduced e-ticketing, heralding a new era of paperless travel. We have networked our residences with computers that we can do everything we do at office. These steps are all part of the value we offer our clients.” A substantial portion of Worldlink’s business comes from overseas, particularly from the SA. The time difference is no obstacle a they offer a 24-hour operational policy. According to the Amerasinghe brothers, global terrorism related issues have had little impact on their business. “We solely focus on the outbound market. However, when our clients suffer due to this situation then we too in the long run will feel a negative impact.” Early last year Worldlink recognised the opportunity to enter the leisure travel sector, as they discovered many corporate clients perceived Worldlink as a sole corporate travel facilitator. This lead to the establishment of Dream Holidays, dealing in outbound leisure travel and tours. The Amerasinghes are justifiably proud of the fact that Dream Holidays has taken the largest and second largest outbound groups from Sri Lanka. “Our first tour saw 375 people flying to Thailand, this was seconded only by the group numbering 325 individuals who flew to the same destination in May 2006,” said Ahintha. Dream Holidays caters to the traveller who is constantly seeking to go to extremes. They have organised cruises for families and even a honeymoon in as far off places as the Cook Islands. W orldlink Air Services are the General Sales Agents in Sri Lanka for Air New Zealand, South African Airways, Princess Cruises, Cunard Lines and Hertz. In 2002 Worldlink was awarded the ‘MVP 2002’, the ‘Most Valuable Partner’ award by Princess Cruises for their efforts in creating an awareness of Princess Cruises in Sri Lanka. Worldlink is also the

Passenger Sales Agent for Sri Lankan Airlines for the Gampaha district and they man a Sri Lankan Airlines ticket office in Seeduwa. Worldlink has another IATA accredited travel company in Seeduwa, near the airport, called Travel Zone. “This company caters to our clients in the area. All the staff who work at Travel Zone live within a short distance of the office, hence we are able to issue any tickets even during the night,” says Gerard.

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The Amerasinghe brothers attribute all their success and achievements to four special groups. “Our staff – they are without doubt some of the best in the industry. Some members of staff have been with us for 15 years. Most of them have had the opportunity of going on various airline familiarisation trips abroad and even cruises in the USA. “We have shown our staff by example that we should never do business at any cost and that there is more to business than just making profits. I am sure they value this quality in our company and hence give their best to our clients. They are like our family. We are with them both during the good and the bad times,” said Ahintha. “Our customers have been with us for years and years, we give them the assurance of nothing underhand taking place and they too value our principles. We had a few instances where we were compelled to stop trading with some clients as we found that our values and trading practices were not compatible with theirs.

“Also we owe a great deal of gratitude to our partners, specially the staff of the airlines. Over the years the airlines have helped us so much. We have gained a reputation as an honest, reliable company with integrity. Hence the airlines too have no hesitation in helping us. “Our families have been a great strength to Gerard and me throughout the 15 years. We wouldn’t have been where we are today if not for them,” said Ahintha. “The world of travel is changing every day, hence we too look at various options to take us to our next ’15 Precious Years’ being the best in the industry. But we would always treat our customers like a ‘hand made’ company not a ‘factory made’ company. We would be small enough to give a personalised service but experienced enough to offer the best.” Ahintha Amerasinghe concluded: “A client of ours will never be a just another number at Worldlink.”