

## Tropic Breeze



Most people travel to exotic locations - if they can afford it - to get away from the stresses and strains of work. But for Jo Plummer and Mark Fitch, who run Westcountry based travel agents Tropic Breeze, travelling to exotic locations in the Caribbean, the Maldives and the Middle East is work.

The secret for their bespoke holiday business is their unrivalled knowledge of the resorts and hotels where they send their customers. And, perhaps not surprisingly, they believe the only way to successfully sell a luxury holiday is to experience it yourself.

On the day I went to meet Jo and Mark at the Tropic Breeze offices in Modbury, I could see the attraction. The rain was relentless. I had trodden in a puddle and had wet feet, my umbrella had self destructed in the wind an hour ago and having forgotten my coat I was soaked. Oh yes, It was August and I was in Devon!

Most people in the holiday business in Devon don't like the rain because it's bad for business. For Jo and Mark at Tropic Breeze,

however, a poor English summer generally helps bookings to the kind of places they send their customers, where sunshine is pretty well guaranteed.

The first thing I noticed during our conversation was how well Jo and Mark get on. Their business skills complement each other and they share a mischievous sense of humour and clearly love what they do for a living - and who wouldn't?

Just like many lifestyle business men and women that I have interviewed over the last year, their unbridled enthusiasm for their business is both refreshing and infectious.

Jo grew up and went to school in Horsham. Her love of sailing took her to work in Salcombe, after which she spent four years teaching people to sail in Turkey. She then came back to the UK, set up a holiday cottage rental company, which she subsequently sold and then went back to her first love and chartered yachts in the Caribbean before establishing Tropic Breeze in 2001.

Just after the launch of her company came 9/11 and the terror attacks on the United States. The economic repercussions were felt by commercial organisations all over the world and Jo's company was no exception. Fortunately for Jo, this was not terminal as she had low overheads and could ride out the downturn in sales. Many other companies small and large were not so fortunate.

Her unique selling point is promoting hotels throughout the

Caribbean which she has personally checked and visited herself. As a result she is able to offer an in depth knowledge to her customers that many tour operators would find impossible. She is therefore better able to match the holiday to their aspirations. Initially she represented hotels from Antigua, Granada and Nevis and has recently added Tobago, St Lucia, St Barts and Anguila to her stable of destinations. She is looking at Jamaica, she also offers a yacht charter option and can therefore offer a two centre holiday, mixing sailing with a hotel stay, which is very popular.

Mark joined the company in 2003 to help over a busy six week period. He has been there ever since! He brought much needed IT and accountancy skills to the company, as well as a general knowledge of the Caribbean and long haul destinations of Sri Lanka, Dubai and the Maldives.

I was particularly interested to note Jo's comment that around three-quarters of her customers have done business with her before. Repeat business avoids the expense of finding new customers and, of course, happy customers refer friends and family to Tropic Breeze. Jo maintains that by staying relatively small in size (Jo has nine employees) she is able to offer a personal service and gets to know customers by name and speaks to them over the phone whenever possible rather than sending emails. She is a very flexible and accommodating tour operator; prepared to make every possible effort to tailor make a unique holiday for each customer. I can imagine this being a very welcome part of doing business with Tropic.

Jo and Mark are keen to move the company forward whilst maintaining their personal touch. 'We don't like automated call machines and have no plans to install one.' This was music to my ears, these machines are the curse of the modern age and I don't know why anyone would use them, because everyone I speak to, detests them. In fact, Jo and Mark's determination to provide the human touch and avoid the overuse of websites and technology which keeps customers at arm's length is probably one of the things their customers like best.

As I said my good byes and walked towards the car I reflected on a very enjoyable visit. I was struck by the sense of pleasure that both Jo and Mark seem to derive from their work. It's not just that they get to stay in these wonderful places as part of their job, I think they also derive great pleasure from providing a service that is much appreciated by a very discerning public in what is a very



competitive market place. When you encounter two people who enjoy their work as much as Jo and Mark do, you can't fail to be impressed and I am sure that is one of the reasons why their customers seem to go back again and again.