



HEART TRAVEL PTE LTD 心旅私人有限公司

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The First Social Enterprise Travel Agent In Singapore, Helping The Community

INTRODUCTION

Heart Travel Pte Ltd is a unique setup because it is the **first social enterprise travel agent in Singapore**. Officially registered with the Singapore Tourism Board under travel agent license No.1720 on 16th May 2008, it is also the **first travel agent** that is **based in a community club**.

WHO'S INVOLVED?

The business is funded by a few successful entrepreneurs and Samaritans, who would like to contribute a little back to the community and is proudly lead by **Mr. Samson Tan, CEO of GTMC Travel** (Global Tour Management), an experienced travel entrepreneur. These investors form our pool of share holders, with some being nominated as our board of directors, whom our general manager, Mr. Sam How reports to; while he manages the daily operation. Mr. How is an experienced tradesman in the travel industry, who is specialized in business management, product development and staff training, with previous successful stints with Ananda Travel, Euro-Asia Holidays, Global Tour Management and Asia-Euro Holidays respectively.

OUR OBJECTIVE

With our HQ base in the Teck Ghee Community Club, the main objective of our setup is to **help train and create jobs for the lesser privileged, like the lower income, low-educated, handicapped, home-makers trying to immerse back into working life, ex-convicts (Yellow Ribbon), unemployed middle-aged, senior citizens, etc.**

We recruit these needies or communities and train them to become a qualified travel consultant. And after sufficient exposure of 6 months to a year, we will recommend them to the travel agencies as a qualified/experienced travel consultant **to secure better future job prospect and remuneration**. While those who remain as permanent staffs of Heart Travel, we look forward to sponsor them for tourism courses, especially IATA Diplomas (International Air Transport Association). But our ability to sponsor them for such courses will much dependent on our profitability.

WHY A SOCIAL ENTERPRISE TRAVEL AGENT?

In recent years, the travel industry has been facing difficulties in the following areas:-

1. Major shortage of Singaporeans willing to join the travel trade with a low initial remuneration;
2. Qualified candidates with relevant diplomas or sufficient experiences are asking for unjustifiable sky-high salaries;
3. Travel agency owners are struggling with keen competition, under-cutting selling rates, low profit, high operational & labour cost;
4. Too tedious, time & HR intensive to train new staffs without relevant experiences;
5. Even when an agency is willing to train a new comer, the turnover rate is very high;
6. To engage foreigners (other than Malaysians), it will be too costly with S-Pass holders requiring a minimum \$1,800 commencement salary.

And while Singapore's economy is strong and stable, there are still many citizens struggling to secure a stable income or permanent job. And at the same time, employers are also struggling to retain staffs and thus, resorting to foreign talents instead.

With our experiences in running a travel agency, Heart Travel hope to achieve our social objective by helping to **create jobs** for the needies/community; recruiting, train and nurture a good pool of them to become proficient travel consultants. And with this pool of trained consultants, we are able to help the travel industry by providing additional pool of local talents to fill the manpower shortage. Hence, our primary objective is **not to compete with the travel industry; rather, we complement them**. At the same time, we achieve our social objective, helping the community.

And if you look at the MCYS (Ministry of Community Development, Youth & Sports) Report of the Social Enterprise Committee dated 20th November 2007 (<http://www.mcys.gov.sg/web/SocialEnterpriseCommitteeReport.html>), Heart Travel is much what our government is trying to encourage, where we can be classified as a **Work Integration Social Enterprise (WISE)**.

WHY IN A COMMUNITY CLUB?

In order to reach out to the consumers, a retail outlet in a shopping mall or HDB shop house will be too costly. And rental is one of the main culprits of high operating cost. Thus, we are intentionally based in a community club in order to get closer and reach out to the heartland community directly and yet minimise our rental.

Teck Ghee Community Club, under the umbrella of Ang Mo Kio GRC, is centrally located. And it is active in community developments, with the Ang Mo Kio Com Care Network (CCN) being based in the community club too. Therefore, with the guidance and interactions with CCN, Heart Travel is able to learn more about the neighbourhood social issues and at the same, recruiting needies through their recommendations. And we were very blessed that when we approached Teck Ghee CC to propose our setup, the CC management committee was in favour of our idea. And we were given this opportunity to learn and collaborate with the CC.

WHO WILL BENEFIT?

The above mentioned needies and community will benefit from our existence because:-

1. We are creating jobs to them;
2. Although without relevant experience and/or qualifications, we will train them to become a proficient travel consultant;
3. They are paid to learn instead of paying to learn;
4. Upon completion of sufficient trainings, they will be able to command better future job prospect and remuneration;
5. For those who are retained as permanent staffs, they will be sponsored by Heart Travel to attend travel-related tertiary courses to enhance their qualifications.

WILL IT WORK?

Although we are a first for a social enterprise travel agency, we are confident Heart Travel will work and able to create a pool of successful and qualified travel consultants because:-

1. We are working towards the recommendations and guidance of various grassroots organizations, including MCYS, PA, CDC, CC, RC, CCN, etc. that are actively involved in community services and welfares;
2. The needies are people who are serious and desperately looking for stable jobs;
3. The needies are looking to secure a permanent job; therefore, most will remain loyal and not job-hop;
4. We see the potential of corporate support and patronage, especially when there are many MNCs and corporate companies in Singapore focusing on corporate social responsibilities. Thus, instead of providing financial sponsorship or funding, such companies only need to purchase their travel arrangements through us to show their support.

FUTURE OF HEART TRAVEL

As our base in Teck Ghee Community Club is only the beginning, this is a 5-year project that we hope to grow progressively. But the scale of our expansion is much dependent on the travel trade's cooperation and needs. This is because the more needies that the travel agencies are willing to accept through our recommendation, the lesser branches we will set up. But the more needies who are jobless, the more branches we will open to help create jobs for them. And we hope the latter will not happen. This is because our objective is to help the community and at the same time complement and not compete with the travel agents.

Thus, the success and sustainability of Heart Travel Pte Ltd is much dependent on the support and patronage from the community and corporate world. We strive **to create a pool of service-oriented travel consultants to complement Singapore's image as an international service hub**. And we look forward to be known as a travel agent with a corporate image and service quality and yet based in the heartlands, serving and helping the community.

The number of needies/community that we can help is much dependent on:-

1. Number of needies/community that require help;
2. The needies/community that fits the job as a travel consultant;
3. The reciprocal support of the travel industry to recruit our trained consultant, offering them a better remuneration and career prospect;
4. Our ability to maintain and sustain the business.

CHALLENGES AHEAD

Basically, being a retail business but based in a community club, we have a challenging task of creating awareness to reach out to the public in order to secure potential sales revenue. And due to the current economic slowdown, we are facing more challenges in generating such potential sales.

Currently, we have and are able to recruit only three from the community to train. In reality, there are many more that we would like to help. But we are unable to enrol more because our prevailing sales and revenue do not justify the increase in manpower.

Typically, the main culprit of **high operating cost** for a retail travel agent is advertisement, which we are trying to avoid. Therefore, we participate in grassroots-organised carnivals and dropping simple printed flyers at surrounding HDB estates ourselves instead.

Thus all, we hope with the kind assistance of various media channels, Heart Travel is able to reach out to the community and corporate world, to create awareness on our unique existence in order to help generate the potential sales to maintain our livelihood. In this respect, we hope the media could help us:-

1. Reach out to the public with free media write-ups and publicities regarding our existence in Teck Ghee CC;
2. Create awareness to the public on the purpose of a social enterprise travel agent.

HOW CAN THE PUBLIC HELP?

Unlike voluntary welfare organizations (VWO) or charities, social enterprises do not seek public support by means of donations. Instead, we are dependent on ourselves and our business module to help generate income to maintain our livelihood. Many people do not understand the mechanism and thought that we are seeking donations or creating tour packages to serve the under-privileged. But in reality, we are merely seeking the **public's support to patronise our agency for their travel needs**, which in return creates jobs for the needies. Furthermore, there is no additional cost or burden on the consumer for their purchases with us. We are providing similar products and competitive rates as most travel agencies in Singapore.

Therefore, be it an individual or organisations/companies with a keen interest in executing their corporate social responsibilities, any one who patronises our agency for their travel needs is helping us to create jobs and staying afloat.

CONCLUSION

Base on the prevailing market trend and economic environment, we are certain the travel industry needs more qualified travel consultants because many travel agents are recruiting foreigners to fill the gap. Hence, more Singaporeans are losing their career opportunities to the foreigners, while travel agency owners are struggling to recruit or train local talents.

Therefore, if we at Heart Travel have sufficient resources and consistent income, we are confident we can help train a good pool of travel consultants to complement the trade's needs. This is a **win-win solution to help complement the trade industry and yet achieving our social goal, helping the community**.

It is sad that while I am still healthy and able, I had difficulties to secure a permanent clerical job. Therefore, when I was given this opportunity to learn from Heart Travel and yet make a living, I was very happy and excited. This is because as a travel consultant, we are learning something new every day, enriching our general knowledge.

Ms. Viji (50)

I had been given some good job offers previously, but none of them was able to accommodate my need to attend to my children in the morning and work only in the afternoon when my children are at school. Heart Travel has been very understanding and created special working hours to suit my needs. Furthermore, travel consultant is a job and profession that I can be proud of.

Ms. Rachel (36)

Information Technology has always been my interest and I have been consistently attending IT courses to enhance my knowledge. But as one gets older, we cannot continue depend on our parents to sponsor our tertiary expenses and survival. Thus, it is disappointing that because of my need to attend to my evening classes on alternate days, I was only able to secure part-time or contractual assignments. And these jobs do not provide a stable income for me and my family. Nonetheless, I was blessed to have known Mr. Tan, the founder of Heart Travel and Mr. How, our GM. They recruited me as a travel consultant cum IT executive, so that I can learn a new trade, while practising and put my IT knowledge into good use at Heart Travel. Best of all, I am given the flexibility to attend my classes.

Mr. Rai (26)

The above are just some classic examples of normal and able people, not given a fair opportunity to show or prove their worth and abilities. And they had been cornered by the reality of our modern society, ending up jobless.

We at Heart Travel are very happy to be able to contribute a little to our country and help some of these able people who became needies not due to their undoing. And we are very happy that Viji, Rachel and Rai are a part of our Heart Travel family and pioneering members.

There are many more such people that we hope to assist, but every social enterprise will always have their constraints, subjected to profitable revenue, funding, time and patience required to understand and nurture the needies. Therefore, Heart Travel's ability to help more people is much dependent on the public and corporate support we garner.



Our team in action – Ang Mo Kio GRC NDP Celebrations 2008



Our recent incentive group to Malaysia, from Harriet Educational Group