

# The happy traveller

The past was a simpler, more relaxed time to see the world. But the present is not too bad, says travel industry veteran

**A**SA Holidays managing director and CEO Albert See might be 77 years old, but the travel agency veteran looks like someone in his 50s. Jolly and animated, he speaks with a vigour that puts younger men to shame. When told he was being interviewed for a special feature on entrepreneurs, he laughs, a twinkle in his eye. "Oh, but I'm not a businessman," he demurs, speaking in Mandarin. "I'm playing. I just enjoy life."

Yet Mr See is a savvy hand. Since entering the industry more than 50 years ago, he has helped found household names like SA Tours and CTC Travel. ASA itself was started from scratch in 2006. Its full name is Air Sino-Euro Associates, but it is also known as Albert See Again. Ten years later, ASA Holidays is one of the biggest outbound tour operators in Singapore. Its subsidiaries, running cruises, tour packages, exclusive chartered flights and more, dominate the third floor of People's Park Complex in Chinatown.

The travel industry might have changed forever with the advent of the Internet. But that is not getting in the way of Mr See's love for his work. "The travel business is a happy business," he likes to say. "People book tours, they are happy to travel. I take their money, I research on travel options, I travel around the world, I am happy also," he chortles.

## A simpler time

The past is a foreign country for Mr See, for he fondly recalls a time when life was simpler and travelling was more carefree. Born in Malaya, his favourite subjects in school were geography and history. After high school, Mr See struck out on his own, coming to Singapore to work various jobs in research and tour guiding. He was only in his early 20s when he got involved in his first travel venture, organising tours to Thailand and Malaysia before branching out to Taiwan, Hong Kong, Tokyo, Seoul and Manila.

In those days, a holiday took two to three weeks. There were no smartphones, no computers or faxes. Nor was there instant messaging, Skype or Whatsapp. There was just long-distance calling, as well as the archaic telegraph. It took 14 days to take a bus to Malaysia and to Thailand's Chiang Mai and back. Passengers travelled together with cargo on ships to Hong Kong. "Nobody could bother you," Mr See says, adding that the world was relatively more peaceful then with no worries over terrorism.

On a round-the-world jaunt, he would chat with the pilot and get him to sign on his map at every stop. Upon reaching a place like Cambodia's Phnom Penh, he would arrange with friends to take a

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jeep into the forest to spend the night, admiring wildlife and scenery. Today, people holiday for just eight to 10 days before rushing back. Air travel has become far cheaper, and flying to neighbouring countries takes just half a day. Messages on the smartphone are answered immediately. There are security checks everywhere. The pilot's cabin is locked. One cannot just take a jeep inside the forest without making the police suspicious. Also, there are landmines in the jungle.

## Following the famous

Yet Mr See's firm still manages to organise enormous tours of 100 people or more. Inviting famous DJs, or actors and actresses to come along for tours has become passé. Instead, ASA Holidays gets customers to follow in the footsteps of the famous.

One route is what former US president Bill Clinton took when he visited China for 10 days in 1998. He began in the historic capital of Xi'an, visited the Great Hall of the People in Beijing, West Lake in Hangzhou, Shanghai, the dramatic landscapes of Guilin, before ending his journey in Hong Kong and returning to the US.

Another recent destination is the local British pub at the hamlet of Cadsden that China President Xi Jinping went to with UK Prime Minister David Cameron when Mr Xi was on an official visit to the UK. "We just went this April and had fish and chips and a pint of Greene King India Pale Ale, just like what the leaders did," Mr See says with a grin. "We will introduce this tour to tourists when they visit Britain."

## The Internet generation

Looking ahead, he sees much turbulence for the travel business in



PHOTO: DON WONG

as little as five years. This is when the young, reared in the ways of the Internet and independent travelling, come of age.

Mr See is training his brother's children, the second generation, to take over. Travel agencies will have to consolidate and link up with bigger countries and the larger Internet firms, he says. Travel is changing from pre-planned itineraries to a more spontaneous form.

"Now whatever you want to do, you just press a button and you'll have it. You want people to help you, you want to eat, you want money, everything is on the Internet. You can change wherever

you want to go on a whim."

The biggest challenge for the industry is the competition from smaller agencies started by younger people that offer fresh packages at low prices, Mr See says. He thinks the latest hotspots for tourists are in Australia and New Zealand, though Europe and China will still be the traditional regions everybody wants to visit.

And after some 55 years in the industry, Mr See is not short of business ideas. He leans forward conspiratorially. He just wants five minutes with Alibaba Group founder Jack Ma. "I have an idea that only he can execute. I can't tell you. It's a secret for him."

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