



At 73, retirement is the last thing on Mr See's mind as he is stepping up to the challenges posed to the travel industry by the ease of online airline ticketing and hotel booking. ST PHOTO: DELON HO

TALKING TO ALBERT SEE

Internet is travel industry veteran's latest destination

By JOYCE TEO

THE Internet is wreaking havoc on the travel agency business but industry veteran Albert See is not going down without a fight.

The energetic 73-year-old knows that the traditional ways are being fast undermined by the ease of online airline ticketing and hotel booking.

But the man who has helped found household names such as C&E Tours, SA Tours and CTC Holidays has stepped up to the challenge by starting a new travel business aimed at tech-savvy youngsters looking for a bargain.

A1A Travel opened at People's Park Centre last July to cater to the growing budget travel market and its website will be up within six months.

Mr See, who loves to frequent Starbucks where he is often the oldest customer around, plans to open a coffee joint at the Centre. "Youngsters like coffee," he says.

It is a flurry of activity for someone who could have retired years ago – but he is not the retiring type.

"I want to work until I am 100 years old. When I am in Singapore, I go to work every day, including public holidays and Sundays. This is my hobby," he says.

Some hobby: Apart from A1A Travel, he is managing director of the major agency ASA Travel at People's Park Complex.

While ASA Travel is doing relatively well, he acknowledges that the journey ahead is not going to be a rosy one given the Internet's inroads.

"Business is getting tougher and tougher," he says. "We know the market situation and we know the young people will never follow us. Here, we get the middle-aged and older people for our tours."

Many of its customers are 45 years old and older.

"In five years, we will still be okay. But after 10 years, I think we may be gone and I may be gone," he says.

"This business will slowly go down. The old men will say, 'My children will book the trip for me', so the website travel business may grow.

"Before 2000, there was not much change in the travel industry. But this past decade, it has changed completely. People go to the websites and even the advertising has gone there."

Instead of fighting what is inevitable, Mr See chooses to join the game. "We will take a new road. We will walk the road taken by youngsters," he says.

It is also the only way to leave his legacy. The business will hopefully be passed on to his brother's children and his relatives as he is a bachelor, he says.

He expects ASA Travel and A1A Travel to record a turnover of about \$120 million this year, up from nearly \$100 million last year.

Travel clearly is his life. He still makes frequent trips for work and leisure, to China and

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ADAPT TO SURVIVE

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– Travel industry veteran Albert See, who helped found household names such as C&E Tours, SA Tours and CTC Holidays

other regional cities.

"It's a happy business," he says. "My blood is in the travel business."

Mr See entered the game in 1962 and by the 1970s, he had started the concept of mass weddings and honeymoon tours and in the early 1990s his was the first firm here to charter flights to Chinese cities such as Kunming and Sanya.

This year, he has been chartering twice-weekly flights to Nanning so clients can visit a longevity village near the Chinese city where there are residents over 100.

He also has a wholesale business that sells the extra seats on these chartered flights.

Yet Mr See's business, like one of the many flights he has taken in his life, occasionally hits some turbulence.

He was a co-founder of SA Tours in 1979 but lost everything in 1988 because of financing problems and was forced to sell it to United Industrial Corp, then headed by tycoon Oei Hong Leong, for just \$1.

He says it was the lowest point in his life but he had no time to wallow in self-pity as he was soon asked by a tycoon friend to start CTC Holidays, now called CTC Travel.

It was a successful venture. However, Mr See still spent the next 10 years repaying debts of more than \$500,000.

In 2003, he was invited to return to SA Tours. The two years there were the most profitable period for the agency, he says, but he found himself embroiled in an internal dispute that was later settled out of court.

He managed to get back several million dollars for him, his brother and a Korean partner.

Mr See and his brother started ASA Holidays (Air Sino-Euro Associates although the acronym also stands for Albert See Again) in 2006 with two other relatives.

It opened with a bang at People's Park Complex with 70 staff, a headcount that is now 130.

"People asked me why I started so big: 'Can you last six months?' But we have now lasted six years," he says.

"Besides A1A travel, we are joining hands with the Chinese authorities to do more charter flights and we'll also do more wholesale business."

There could also be another new business on the horizon. Mr See, who collects tea pots and tea leaves and whose office has a pu-er collection that cost more than \$10,000, says he may open a Chinese tea house next.

If the new ventures do not work out, he will be able to take it in his stride.

"Businessmen need to be prepared for failure. Those who are not prepared may suffer a major failure and not be able to raise their heads ever again," he says in Mandarin.

"If you have never failed, you won't know what it's like. You have no experience. But once you have failed, you can come back stronger."

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