



How I got here

MANAGING DIRECTOR OF TRAVELBAG
Lesley Rollo ON HER CAREER JOURNEY

Inspired to pursue a career that would enable her to trot the globe, Lesley Rollo has spent the last 25 years working for some of the UK's biggest travel retailers, such as TUI and Thomas Cook. She joined luxury long-haul retailer Travelbag in 2019 as managing director, overseeing a team of 150 across sales, marketing, product and commercial. **I STUDIED FRENCH AND SPANISH AT UNIVERSITY, WHICH MEANT A YEAR LIVING OVERSEAS TO IMPROVE MY LANGUAGE SKILLS.** Realising I wanted a job where I could see the world, I began working for a travel agency as a product executive in ski holidays. As the person putting together the brochures, I was tasked with going out to all the destinations to organise the contracts with hotels and villas – an incredibly exciting job! **I MOVED TO BRITISH AIRWAYS IN THE LATE 1990S, WHERE I WAS RESPONSIBLE FOR THE CARIBBEAN.** At the time, it was the most popular long-haul destination and I loved the fact you could get to Antigua, my favourite island, on a direct flight from London. I spent a lot of time there and even met my husband on a flight to Antigua – he was cabin crew! I then looked after the United States and Indian Ocean and moved to Thomas Cook to oversee Asia

chief executive had a vision for a total rebrand. As a result, we shifted the customer demographic and expanded destinations to Africa and Australia. We wanted the brand to be much more service-oriented rather than a budget operator, and over the past few years, we've seen the differences in the value of bookings. When I first joined, the average booking value was £2,700 – now it's around £8,000. **AS A LONG-HAUL TRAVEL COMPANY, WE DON'T GET AS MANY CUSTOMERS ASKING ABOUT SUSTAINABLE TRAVEL AS WE WOULD LIKE.** Flying makes travelling responsibly more challenging, but there are more sustainable ways to travel large distances – some airlines are more efficient than others, for example, because their aircraft are newer and better designed. We are seeing demand growing for authentic experiences that support local economies, whether that's working with a local tour guide or eating at local restaurants. Long-haul holidays may be far-flung, but there are lots of ways to travel better. **RIGHT NOW, WE'RE SEEING TRAVEL FINALLY BOUNCING BACK TO ITS PRE-PANDEMIC LEVELS.** More than 55% of all holidays we're selling are multi-centre trips, showing us that customers want to make the most of

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and Australia. It meant that, by the time I was 35, I had pretty much travelled the world. **BECOMING PRODUCT AND PURCHASING DIRECTOR FOR TUI SPECIALIST LONG HAUL WAS A PIVOTAL MOMENT, AS I BECAME MORE ENGAGED WITH OTHER AREAS OF THE BUSINESS.** I knew the destinations better than anyone else, so I got involved in marketing, as well as training the people who sell the holidays. Then a maternity cover role came up as managing director of TUI's Hayes & Jarvis tour operator, and I got to show more of my capabilities. The managing director eventually moved on and I came back to the position permanently. **AFTER 10 YEARS WITH TUI, I BECAME THE MANAGING DIRECTOR OF TRAVELBAG IN 2019.** When Travelbag first approached me, it was best known for cheap holidays that were very Dubai-focused, but the then

their time away and see more places. Few retail industries were hit as hard by the pandemic as us – we lost our revenue overnight, and we couldn't furlough staff because we needed them to issue refunds. All we could do was try to keep our customers thinking about travel through our marketing, and I'm proud that we managed to retain our staff and customers. **WITH THE PRICE OF TRAVELLING AS IT IS, GOING ON HOLIDAY IS STILL REGARDED AS SOMETHING OF A TREAT.** Part of our job is to help customers find the value in their holidays, and there are lots of destinations where you can get more for your money. This summer is a good time to go to Sri Lanka, which is overall great value, Thailand, as accommodation is reasonable, or South Africa, where food and drink are affordable and the exchange rate is good. Things ebb and flow – the Maldives used to be considered remote, but now people don't think twice about going for five days!