

## Innovative Travel celebrates 20 years of expertise

The Innovative Travel Company is celebrating its 20th birthday with functions in Auckland, Hamilton, Wellington and Christchurch over the next week.

Founder Robyn Galloway says she saw the potential for a tour business after visiting the Middle East and Mediterranean for the first time in 1987 while working for Gateway Travel. She says she was deeply impressed by the region and the warm and welcoming attitude of its people.

“I had such amazing experiences, saw some incredible sights and connected with some wonderful people; it became my inspiration to share this experience with others,” says Robyn. “Interestingly trade and tourism develop often in tandem and I received queries about developing trade links with New Zealand too, even in the early days.”

Meeting Egyptian-based Elhamy El-zayat around that time was also a key event, so when she launched Innovative Travel in 1990, Robyn asked Elhamy if his company, a leading Egyptian tourism player, would be Innovative Travel’s representative in Egypt. The answer was yes and the business relationships grew from there.

Robyn initially worked from a converted bedroom in a friend’s Christchurch B&B, and of necessity was everything - tea lady, typist and reservationist.

Having launched in April of 1990, she steadily gained a pile of bookings, only to see them all cancelled in August when Iraq invaded Kuwait and triggered the first Gulf War.

To remain solvent during that crisis, Robyn even took on the business management of a rock’n’roll band.

“It turned out to be a blessing in disguise, starting the business in such difficult times,” Robyn told *TravelMemo*. “If it could survive a war, we could handle anything.”

Around ten years after this event, Elhamy became a business partner for Innovative Travel and together they organised the successful Opera at the Pyramids starring Dame Malvina Major.

Their very effective business relationship led to Elhamy being appointed Honorary Consul for New Zealand in Egypt and during his tenure trade grew so much that in 2006 New Zealand opened an embassy in Cairo. Elhamy, as chairman of the Egyptian Tourism Federation, and with expansive tourism and trade connections in the Middle East and Mediterranean, continues to be a strength for Innovative Travel.

Out of these relationships enquiries have also grown for trade with New Zealand. Innovative Travel partnered with Gilpin Travel to assist with organising the recent Government Mission, led by Trade Minister Tim Groser, to the Gulf States. Like any business, the right relationships are of paramount importance, says Robyn. Innovative’s local representatives in places such as Syria or Jordan understand her company’s philosophy and offer local services to each guest in a very personal manner.

“These companies are like family to us; we have a great respect for each other and this translates into very personal care for the clients. In addition we literally have inspected thousands of hotels and cruise boats, to offer the right choices and importantly to grade these hotels to New Zealand expectations; which are quite often significantly different to local grades and those featured on the internet. Nothing beats a personal site inspection.

“One of our key strengths is that when agents call Innovative Travel, they’re speaking to a real expert who has actually travelled to the destinations that we sell,” says Robyn. “It’s a very different type of operation to the call centre style and that’s something that continues to differentiate us as a company.”

Innovative Travel’s team has grown and under its Ancient Kingdoms Holidays brand now offers a vast array of holiday product. The boutique wholesaler also represents a number of quality operators like Croisi European River Cruises, the Eastern European and Russian Travel Centre, CIT Italy and Ski Max.



Robyn Galloway says she plans to see Innovative Travel retain its boutique nature in its third decade : “It is important to have measured growth, so that the original culture of the company is maintained and the team remain specialists, to offer the expert advice so often required in planning the holiday of a lifetime in the ancient kingdoms.”



**Pictured at the 20th Birthday Party in Auckland, (L to R) Warwick Hawker (NZ MFAT), Elhamy El-zayat, Michael Chilton (ex Foreign Affairs and now with Innovative), Carol Wisker (Innovative sales & mktg mgr), Robyn Galloway, Rene Wilson (NZ Ambassador to Egypt), and Polly Otte, (opera singer and protege of Dame Malvina Major)**