

Case Studies

Windrose Fernreisen Touristik GmbH: Luxury tour operator lays foundations for succession

"Travel is the only suitable means against the acceleration of time", author Thomas Mann observed, way back. When travelling with Windrose Fernreisen Touristik GmbH, the world will probably revolve even somewhat slower: The Berlin-based enterprise offers deluxe travels - well beyond package tours and mass tourism. After 35 years in the trade, Dr. Peter Holzinger, co-founder and managing partner, is making preparations for his succession. To this end, he has contracted the help of financial investor Waterland Private Equity, as of April. **The beginnings: study trips to non-European destinations**

A safari in Namibia, a cruise on the river Jangtze, New Zealand's natural beauties, the Mayan heritage in Guatemala or the unique fauna of the Galapagos archipelago - Berlin-based luxury tour operator Windrose Fernreisen organises trips to the most remote and beautiful corners of the planet. But it is not only the destinations which are exquisite: Windrose entices customers with out-of-the-way places of interest, selected hotels, limousine service, gourmet restaurants, or even with a private rendering of an orchestral performance, in an opera house of world renown.

Windrose was established in 1973, initially as a tour operator for study trips to non-European destinations. The company was founded by Dr. Peter Holzinger (today a managing partner) and three of his friends. Windrose's offering was focussed on highbrow cultural trips, carried out in co-operation with universities, museums and foundations, as well as readers trips, in co-operation with respective media partners. Only recently, Holzinger revealed to the press, that their business had experienced a stiff head wind, during the first few years: "It was a definite problem to offer expensive travel under an unknown brand name." The situation improved, when Windrose secured the Berlin zoo as their strategic partner, in 1975.

Off the beaten track: Beyond mass tourism

In the mid 1980s, the tour operator opened a branch office in Vienna. In Berlin, large corporations such as Mercedes or Telekom were looked after by a division named "Business Travel". "We began offering the first luxury trips in 1987, when long-distance travelers showed a growing interest in travelling in comfort, but without the usual confines, anxiety and crowds", Holzinger remembers. In 1996, finally, the company sold the division for business travel to Kuoni, from Zurich.

Since then, the company has focussed on comfort travel. Since 2007, the travel programme is presented in two distinct catalogues: "DeLuxe Reisen", custom-tailored to the needs of private travellers, and "LebensArt auf Reisen", designed for small groups, with fixed travel dates. The tour operator seems on safe ground in its market niche well beyond mass tourism: In 2007, the company achieved a turnover of 21.9 million euros, which constitutes an increase of more than 20 percent, compared to the previous year.

Nowadays, tours are marketed and sold via travel agents, via the internet and – as in the beginning - through co-operations with publishers, universities and science centres. Amongst Holzinger's customers are wealthy people unwilling to take risks but interested in the world's culture and natural wonders. Most of them are at an age beyond 50 and have a liking for comfort and individuality. Holzinger has not fear of running out of customers, even in times of an economic downturn – quote: "There will always be rich people." 5,618 of them booked a trip from Windrose, in 2007.

The succession: A buy-out by Waterland Private Equity



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Today, at the age of 63 years, Holzinger has begun to think about retirement, especially since he wants to spend more time travelling, himself. This is why the native Austrian has set the course for his succession and contracted the help of financial investor Waterland Private Equity: In April, the investment company acquired the majority of Windrose by purchasing it from the four partners - only Holzinger has kept a minority interest. "Windrose is the market leader for luxury tours ,with content'. This is a particularly exciting market segment: Contrary to the tourist industry, this is an altogether rapidly growing segment and earning attractive margins", Jörg Dreisow, Principal at Waterland, justifies the involvement. This financial investor also holds an interest in the golf course operator Golfrange, amongst others.

Holzinger will remain the managing director of Windrose, for at least two more years. From then on, he will retreat, a bit at a time, until a successor has been found. "Holzinger is a veteran in this industry and knows all its facets. Also, we share the same vision with respect to continuing his life's work. Nobody will push ahead Windrose's growth, like him", Dreisow explains.

For the current year, Holzinger expects yet another increase in turnover, especially because of the newest attraction from his catalogue: A luxury air cruise, arranged in commemoration of Windrose's 35th company anniversary. Travel-lovers will experience "South America's magical places", by cruising through seven countries - with a private jet. The air cruise is available from 34,990 euros, per person in a double room.