

Miles Morgan – a huge undertaking

Where did the idea come from?

A gentleman came into one of our travel shops five years ago and mentioned the idea to us. I couldn't stop thinking about it. The more I thought about it, the more excited I became, so I discussed the idea with colleagues in the travel business as well as with friends, and decided to do it.

What has been your biggest challenge in setting up the Memorial Cruises?

Initially getting people to take notice. When you start talking about 2012 when its five years away, people react almost like you have three heads! For the first two years it was hard to get anyone's attention. Sometimes we might have gone for two months without a booking being made, and then we'd get several in the same week.

How quickly did it sell out?

It took just over three years; the ship was full about sixteen months ago. It was not a steady process but went in 'bursts' – invariably each time we received media coverage. An article would appear in a newspaper somewhere in the world, or I'd get a phone call from a radio station in, say, Sydney or Buenos Aires, and instantly we'd receive more enquiries from that country.

Did you always think it would be this successful?

I always thought it was a good idea but never imagined it would go so 'global' – we've had hits on the website from over 200 countries and bookings from 28. Without the internet this project would not have happened. When we put the cruise on sale the news travelled around the world within hours. It was just totally astonishing. We're still getting enquiries every day from people who have only just found out about it and are distraught when we tell them it has sold out. *Titanic* raises intense emotions in people. It's such an emotive story.

I can remember the first booking; then achieving the 'break-even' point; the ship becoming full – all those landmarks will be with me forever.

Given the demand, were you tempted to put on more ships?

We probably could have operated two more ships but I didn't feel that would have been right. I didn't enter into this for particularly commercial reasons; I wanted to concentrate on making it a success for everyone concerned.

Have you ever run something like this before?

No, nothing at all on this scale. The whole process has been exciting and a huge learning curve in terms of chartering a ship, something I have never done before. I always believed that it would work. That's my mindset – when I make a decision I always believe it will work. Starting my own business – Miles Morgan Travel – was the same.

Why do you think so many people have booked to travel on the cruise?

There are a number of reasons. For many it is being a part, and taking part, in such a memorable piece of history; some of these people are looking forward to tasting the meals from that time, or even dressing up in period costume to enhance the experience. Others are lifelong *Titanic* 'enthusiasts' who have devoted a major part of their lives to studying this great ship and the events that surrounded it. Some simply became fascinated by *Titanic* after seeing James Cameron's film. Then, of course, there are others – and these are very special people – who lost great, great grandparents, great uncles and aunts, and other family members all those years ago, and see this as a way to remember them.

Are you surprised no one else did it?

Not really. The sourcing of a vessel is quite difficult as they're booked a long way in advance. It is also a huge undertaking both financially and timewise. Not something you enter into lightly.

Tell me more about your background in business

I left school at fifteen and after three years producing and selling pop t-shirts and badges, I decided to join the travel industry. My first job was with Pickfords Travel as a trainee. A year later I joined Bakers Dolphin Travel in Bristol, initially as a sales clerk and then assistant manager, branch manager, area manager, sales and marketing manager – I did everything! After thirteen years I felt it was time to move on and expand my horizons and for eighteen months I was with Going Places, responsible for developing a new shop IT system for its 800 branches. It was a steep learning curve but very useful.

From there I went to Thomson, now TUI Travel, the country's biggest holiday firm. I spent a year running one of its subsidiary travel companies before rather rapid promotion saw me becoming sales and marketing director for the whole group, looking after 800 shops,

11 call centres and responsible for 7,500 staff. Two years later I realised that I hadn't joined the travel business to spend all my time in meetings and that the pleasure of working had almost disappeared.

In 2006 I left and started Miles Morgan Travel, buying ten loss-making travel agencies from Thomson. We now have twelve and every year we've grown the business, despite the recession. The *Titanic* venture has been so exhilarating, exciting – though exhausting as well. I have been at the 'sharp end' morning, noon and night – phoning the USA, dealing with enquiries and doing media interviews.

And I have loved every moment.

What has been the most difficult time during all of this?

There have been a few, but one that does stick in my mind was one evening when we were in Ipswich. We had had a meeting with Fred. Olsen and half way through discussing the events of the day Tara turned to me and said 'I'm pregnant!' I don't think either of us will forget that moment; it was one of such mixed emotion for me: total delight for her, but at the same time the thought, 'now what?'

Tara carried on for as long as she could, but a few days before she was due to give birth I took over the whole project. I quickly realised the pressure she had been working under with continual phone calls and emails, morning, noon and often at night. The time zone issues really did mean this was a 24/7 job. Calls at 3am and 5am are not out of the ordinary, and yes they were very often answered.

Many of our passengers, who had got used to talking with Tara, followed her pregnancy with great interest and were delighted – as I was – when having given birth to Grace in December, she started back in January. I almost feel that little Grace became part of the team on the project as frequently when Tara was making phone calls she had her on

her lap, and had to explain to people what the gurgling or crying sounds in the background were.

You're working with the Mission for Seafarers – how did that come about?

People from the Mission for Seafarers were on board when *Titanic* was preparing to leave Southampton, giving support to the crew; one hundred years later they are still doing the same wonderful work. It is a worldwide charity, and given that our bookings have come from all over the world and *Titanic* is a global story, the Mission is a natural fit. Like all charities it constantly needs more funds and I am so glad that not only can we help raise awareness of its work, but also are able to make a contribution from every ticket we have sold, as well from the sales of the memorabilia that we will have available on board the ship and on our website.

What are you most looking forward to?

Listening to the lecturers. I've met them all, listened to them informally over a coffee, and they're all fascinating. Also the Memorial Service itself: for many people that will be the focal point of the trip. Being in the company of those whose relatives were on board *Titanic* will make it even more poignant.

What's next for you?

My family, particularly my wife Lisa, who has given me so much support, have certainly not seen as much of me over the past six months so I am going to spend some valuable time back with them; my two young sons are looking forward to doing lots of 'dad things' again – football and bike rides. It has proved difficult to find time for such things with the hours this

project has taken. Beyond that – I'm lucky to have my own travel business which I'm heavily involved in on a daily business. Having said that, there will be a void in my life where *Titanic* has been over the past five years. As a result of setting up the *Titanic* Memorial Cruises, I've been approached by people about further projects, so who knows what will happen in the future.

What were your personal highlights in setting up the Titanic Memorial Cruises?

Without doubt I have so many amazing memories, almost all about the people we met. I felt so honoured to have met Millvina Dean, and then very sad about her passing. The outstanding enthusiasm of our lecturers is another thing that shines through: Michael Martin's complete passion for his native Cobh and all things *Titanic*; the amazing knowledge and their attention to detail of Alan and Andrew Aldridge at Henry Aldridge & Sons of Devizes; the kindness and help from Commodore Ron Warwick and his wife Kim; listening to Princess Anne extolling the virtues of the Mission to Seafarers, which made me realise what a great choice we had made in supporting it as our chosen charity; and finally the knowledge of Jack Eaton and Charles Haas and their support of this project, which has been invaluable.

These are just some of the wonderful people who I have met, who have inspired me, encouraged me and who I will never forget. I will always be grateful to one and all.