



**Karen Simmonds**  
FOUNDER,  
TRAVEL MATTERS, LONDON



**I got into travel...** after leaving school. I didn't go to university. Instead, I ended up doing quite a lot of seasonal work, such as for Keycamp Holidays as a campsite rep in southwest France. I did a ski season working for a company called Bladon Lines as a chalet girl; then I was a tour escort for Page & Moy; and I also worked for Topdeck Travel as a cook on its double-decker buses going all around Europe. I ended up being an area manager in the western Algarve, working for a company called Beach Villas, and it was while there in Portugal that I thought, 'I'm going to set up my own business'.

**I started my business...** originally as a power kites holiday company called

Natural Heights. I was completely naive, didn't do a business plan and didn't know how big the market was. After about two years I got pregnant and realised that kite flying wasn't a very good market. But because of all my experience travelling around Europe, I had lots of knowledge and passion to share with people so I set up Travel Matters, based in Wandsworth, London.

**I grew my business by...** word of mouth. We're located bang in the middle of what is called 'nappy valley' so we have a high number of people who have young families. We've been here for 20 years now so I've seen clients' children go from young babies to hitting university age. And thankfully they are the ones

who are our ambassadors, spreading the word and recommending us. In the past, we've also linked up with the private schools in the area to do fundraising campaigns, which were very effective.

**The area of the business growing the most is...** family adventure. Clients want to make sure they're getting it right, especially with younger children in tow. They want to make sure there's adequate equipment in properties or appropriate health and safety.

**My proudest career achievement is...** my responsible tourism awareness campaign, Make Travel Matter. I set it up 10 years ago to educate travellers on what making travel matter might look like, whether it's economically or socially, or how you can give back, contribute and have a positive impact on the places you're going. We upload content to the website, partner with various conservation charities and also give talks in local primary schools. ●

#### THE CHALLENGE IN TAILOR-MAKING HOLIDAYS IS...

When customers say "can you break that down for us?", and you don't want to because they're negotiated contract rates. I want to be transparent with customers but if I start pulling a quote apart then I'm just giving them the tools to do it and I'm no longer needed.