

Fiji-Friendly

BY JAMES RUGGIA

Piper Fenton focuses on the South Pacific destination and its suppliers

The salmon, the dominant icon of the Pacific Northwest, is famous for swimming against the current. Maybe it was the salmon that inspired one of the region's top travel agents. Agent-at-home Piper Fenton, the owner of Portland, Ore.-based Remarkable Honeymoons, chose to swim upstream when she reentered the travel business in 2002 in the aftermath of September 11. That was after a hiatus of several years, and it was a time many people were thinking of leaving what was then a "doom and gloom" industry. But the mood of that time may have actually helped fuel Fenton's Fiji business.

"There were a lot of people at that time who wanted to travel but were looking for a destination that was far removed from anything associated with war and international politics," Fenton says. "Fiji was the perfect solution for them. One of Fiji's most essential qualities is its remoteness. It's really a place to get away from it all."

Fenton began her career with Willamette International Travel almost 25 years ago. She returned to Willamette in 2002 as a home-based agent, and she also worked as an independent contractor for Fiji's Turtle Island. Fenton's relationship with Willamette is rock-solid and long-standing. It was the agency her parents used when they traveled, and Fenton chose them because they were people she knew she could trust. Willamette is in Portland's Pearl district, an area of quality restaurants, galleries and cafés that attracts upscale people.

"I knew from my parents' experiences with Willamette that in working with them, I'd be working with the best. I like having the backup that a quality host agency provides," says Fenton. "If I get a request I'm not comfortable with, I can refer my clients to someone else in the agency. It's also a big help that they have all of the reference tools I need to do my research."

The trajectory of her career has gone from generalist to ultra-specialist in Fiji and the Pacific, and now to the point where she can gradually begin to operate beyond her specialty to other Pacific islands and beyond. Unusual? Yes. Highly successful? Absolutely.

In 2009, Fenton won the Sales Award from Fiji's Matai Agent specialist program. Through her business model, she carefully consolidates relationships with suppliers to ensure having quality control over her clients' experience. "To me," she says, "the ability to be able to focus on supplier relationships is the single biggest advantage to being a specialist. It gives me a lot of control over the product I sell. I can push for my clients with people I know, and those people know what I can do for their business."

Those relationships help when it comes to upgrades and getting something extra from a general manager who has your best interests at heart. They also come in handy when things go awry. "Recently," Fenton said, "I had some clients coming in from the East Coast who had a delayed flight coming into Los Angeles, forcing a quick transition through LAX if they were going to

make their flight to Fiji. When I contacted Air Pacific in Los Angeles, they met my clients at the gate and got them through to their Air Pacific flight within 30 minutes.”

Fiji accounts for about 60 percent of Fenton’s business, followed by Tahiti and Hawaii. “I sell Fiji for a lot of reasons,” she says. “It’s a beautiful place, and it offers a high degree of luxury in a wide variety of resorts, but the biggest reason I sell it is because I know the treatment my clients will receive from the Fijian people. Fijians genuinely care about other people. If you’re looking for shopping and nightlife, it’s probably not for you, but if you’re looking for a place where the people are more than friendly, Fiji never fails.”

Fenton finds people looking for just this kind of experience from the entire U.S., Canada and even Mexico. “The Internet knows no borders, and I speak Spanish, so I get many Mexican clients,” says Fenton, who conducts 60 percent of her business online. “I also use Skype a great deal, which helps me have face-to-face meetings with potential clients. I always explain to them that I’m home-based so that they don’t get put off if they hear a dog barking or a baby crying in the background.”

Fenton always Fed-Exes clients an official document holder. “It costs extra money, but it’s very reassuring with clients, and when you’re based from home, you need to establish that security.”

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