



Not Your Usual Itinerary

Nam Ho Travel was founded in 1957 primarily to offer coach tours to Malaysia and Thailand. As one of the longest-established travel and tour agencies in Singapore – if not *the* longest-established – the 64-year-old grande dame will have you know that she still has a lot of captivating ideas to deliver unique, memorable experiences to intrepid explorers. That creativity and entrepreneurship would be the main pillars of growth for the company was apparent from the very beginning, when the company founder, the late-Ooi Kim Thong, set up Nam Ho Travel to enable people to realise their aspirations to visit foreign lands and get acquainted with unfamiliar cultures.

Mr Ooi had lived in China, Taiwan and Malaysia before settling in Singapore in the 1950s. As he often found himself answering questions about the places he had been to, the carpenter-by-training seized upon the opportunity to satisfy people's fascination about new places and experiences, and also help himself earn a living – and Nam Ho Travel was born. From two- to three-day tours across the causeway to two-week-long trips to Chiangmai in Thailand's far north, the business quickly took off, bringing excited travellers abroad.

Mr Ooi and his small team managed the agency's day-to-day operations, doing everything from taking reservations to driving the tour coaches. As such, they knew first-hand what worked and what didn't, and one of their customers' most common grouses was the discomfort of travelling in the tropical heat. "Imagine being in a coach with no air-conditioning for hours, and negotiating narrow, bumpy roads in the outskirts or through the kampongs," says Marshall Ooi, Director of Nam Ho Group and the late founder's son.

At that time, air-conditioned coaches were available from Japan but the price was formidable. "My father 'co-invented' the first air-conditioned coach in Singapore," relates the 43-year-old Director, of his father's creativity and knack for business. "Working with a bus manufacturer, they basically took out a window and put in a residential aircon unit and generator."

Going overseas and in particular, travelling in air-conditioned comfort, caught on in such a big way that "the company could afford to buy a new coach almost every month", Mr Ooi divulges. Owning a fleet of 70 to 80 coaches, Nam Ho quickly became the frontrunner in the business.

With the passage of time, travel became more affordable and new generations of travellers emerged, with expectations very different from their predecessors'. Creativity and entrepreneurship continued to drive the company's development as it adapted its business models to align with the changing circumstances. Today, Nam Ho Travel prides itself on providing a comprehensive range of personalised and creative travel services to both the corporate and leisure segments. "With our huge customer database and strong relationships with industry partners, we get the allotments of airline seats and hotel rooms which enable us to offer the best deals to our customers."

In 2016, Mr Ooi set up Nam Ho DMC, a full-service destination management company (DMC), with his father's blessings. With two sister offices in India, the DMC operates on an innovative hybrid model where 100 per cent of its sales team is based in India while the company is headquartered in Singapore.

“Our sales team, which numbers around 80, can service any travel agent in India,” declares Mr Ooi with a hint of pride. “Just give us a day or two, and we’ll have someone who can communicate in the local dialect visit the travel agent.” This is no mean feat given the [many languages and dialects spoken in India](#). Nam Ho DMC soon became a leading tour operator for incoming groups and independent travellers to Singapore. “[We had the largest fleet of vehicles in Singapore for any DMC serving the India market, and the biggest room inventories in Singapore by any offline DMC,](#)” he informs. Sadly, the senior Mr Ooi did not live to see the DMC’s success. “He would have been very happy to see the many Nam Ho-branded vehicles on the roads.”



Nam Ho Travel 2020 CNY Dinner (Pre-Covid)

The alchemy of travel

In 2020, Covid-19 reared its ugly head in Singapore, effectively shutting down the entire travel industry. Jobs and livelihoods were on the line and the team had to think and act fast to arrest the inevitable plunge in business.

Putting their heads together, the management team and staff worked as one and almost overnight, Nam Ho DMC pivoted to a new business – in logistics. Leveraging its large fleet of vehicles, it became the delivery partner to e-commerce players such as Amazon, Lazada and Shopee. “From port to warehouse to last-mile delivery, we were doing them all,” recounts Mr Ooi. “Everyone chipped in to do the heavy lifting – loading and unloading the goods, and moving them from one location to another. We also provided school runs for an international school in the north.” The logistics operation was sufficiently successful for the DMC to add a full-fledged logistics division to its travel brand, invest in new vehicles and hire more staff – despite the pandemic having wreaked havoc in Singapore and beyond.

Technology played a big part in the company’s transformation when Covid-19 struck. While Singapore had rolled out [five Budgets in 2020](#) to save jobs, help businesses and support families, in India, companies and workers alike had to scramble for alternative sources of income. “We developed an online B2B marketplace for non-travel products – [Nam Ho Mall](#) – primarily to help our travel agents as they were diversifying to make ends meet,” says Mr Ooi. The platform was very well received. The

number of buyers and sellers increased, as did the categories of featured goods and transaction values. But due to the surge in Covid-19 infections in India from mid-March 2021 and the consequent movement restrictions and lockdowns in various locations, trading activities have dwindled.

In addition to Nam Ho Mall, the company launched an e-commerce platform called [Buy Beyond Borders](#). “As Singaporeans could not head overseas, we wanted to bring the experience – and perhaps replicate some of the magic of travel – to them through items like food and beverage, condiments, beauty products and other travel-related accessories. These are the things that they may buy or encounter during their travels,” shares Mr Ooi. Buy Beyond Borders also operates as a store in online malls including Shopee, Qoo10 and Lazada.

Piping hot and delicious

Food is something of a national obsession for Singaporeans and for food-loving Mr Ooi, it was the craving for tasty hot food that sparked another business idea. The way he describes it, he was at the hospital with his wife and newborn, at the height of the pandemic in 2020, and tucking into an instant meal that was bland, dry and cold. “Why can’t we have instant meals that are hot and tasty?” That outburst would go on to spawn an innovative self-heating pot that brings “convenience” and “piping hot food” to consumers. “The food will retain its original moisture and flavours,” he asserts enthusiastically.

Today, the self-heating pot is a mainstay of the packaged food items on the company’s e-commerce site. The innovation is also used to differentiate the company’s new food delivery service, [Just Cheetah](#), which caters to customers in Tuas and Jurong some 33 to 40 kilometres away from the city. The food is packed fresh by the seller, placed in the self-heating pot, shrink-wrapped and delivered. When the customer is ready to eat, he/she can just follow the simple instructions to heat up the food, which will be ready in 10 minutes. “With the texture and taste intact, it’s an authentic experience – just like dining at the hawker centre,” he affirms.



Co-Founders of Nam Ho DMC and Just Cheetah

Going places while staying put

Covid-19 has quickened the pace of technology adoption by many organisations including Nam Ho Group. While tapping on various government schemes to upgrade and reskill company staff during the lull in the travel business, Mr Ooi himself signed up for the one-year [Enterprise Leadership for Transformation](#) (ELT) programme. Organised by Enterprise Singapore, it is aimed at supporting business leaders of promising small and medium-sized enterprises to develop business growth capabilities. In particular, he credits the ELT programme for opening his mind to how technology can help his business beyond just having a website and for bookings fulfilment. “I learnt how technology can extract value from our extensive database. For example, we can tailor an itinerary or a marketing initiative based on a customer’s past travel record, profile and preferences so that it is targeted and relevant.”

While some travel and tourism players are going fully online, Nam Ho Travel wants to build on the strength of its legacy of excellent service delivery – with the human touch – while using technology to enhance its overall operational efficiency. “Technology cannot talk,” he states simply. “When you meet with a problem, you want to be able to speak to someone who can address your concerns immediately.”

Staying put in one place has given the company the impetus to explore new ideas, innovate for growth and spearhead future development. Whereas others in the same trade have had to pull down their shutters – being victims of the times – Mr Ooi and his team have hinged their sustainability on new ventures that continue to prove their worth, and utilised technology to strengthen their core business. Thanks to the group’s deep-steeped penchant for creativity and business, and with the enduring support of its staff, it will be announcing another new product soon – a concept of travel that is designed to capture the imagination of a new profile of travellers.