

FROM LEFT: Matt, Kate and Zoe Lines, Jen and Sam Porter.



THE FOUR SEASONZ

A SMALL-BUT-SPECIAL AUCKLAND TRAVEL AGENCY OWNED BY TWO YOUNG COUPLES HAS WON THE BIG PRIZE TO BECOME AN OFFICIAL AGENT FOR THE RUGBY WORLD CUP

WORDS YVONNE VAN DONGEN PHOTOGRAPHS JANE USSHER



THE CHANCE TO SELL NEW ZEALAND TO THE REST OF THE WORLD IS A DREAM COME TRUE



The Lines family. TOP: Joseph and Thomas with dad Matt. ABOVE: Thomas, three and a half, Joseph, one and a half, and Zoe, six weeks old, with Kate who says the good thing about working in a family business is that if you've had a bad night everyone understands if you arrive late or are unable to turn up.

WHEN THE SMALLEST travel agency tendering for the right to become the official agent of the Rugby World Cup is one of 20 winners out of 400 applicants worldwide, you know they must be offering something special. Auckland-based Seasonz is one of only two such companies which have won this distinction in New Zealand (the other is the larger and longer-established House of Travel).

Seasonz is only eight years old and its owners still in their 30s, yet it has made enough of an impression on its high-end VVIPs – business people, celebrities and royalty – to be taken seriously as a heavy hitter in this fiercely competitive market.

How has it done this? Instead of answering directly, founder Sam Porter prefers to give an example. When the phone rings at 3.00am in his or business partner's Matt Lines' households, as it sometimes does, the call is not sworn at, ignored or answered rudely even though the pair has five children under six years old between them. It is answered and dealt with promptly and courteously, no matter how seemingly insignificant or difficult the request. And that's OK. Truly. Because that is what Seasonz is all about.

As soon as a client arrives in New Zealand they are met at the airport, handed a cellphone with Seasonz on speed dial and told they can ring anytime, anywhere and request anything they like. That may mean that if the forecast is for rain the next day when they are due to fly over Milford Sound, Seasonz will reschedule the flight to that afternoon while the sun is out. As well, a Seasonz staffer will ring each client at least once a day while Matt or Sam will be sure to make contact before they depart. For such attention to detail and service, Seasonz often receives calls and emails after the client has left, telling them they had the best time ever.

These time-poor, cash-rich travellers have a choice of the dozen best lodges in the country as well as a number of private homes no one knows about. With Seasonz, they can change their itineraries

at a moment's notice. And do they? "Oh, they'll change," says Sam. "They'll change alright. But that's fine. They want to make the most of the opportunity of being here."

Both men are hugely excited about the RWC. "I don't think Aucklanders appreciate yet the festival atmosphere there will be in the city. It's going to be great," says Sam. "New Zealanders will be moving around the country like never before and that alone will inject energy into the rural and regional economies," adds Matt.

Usually their clients stay in the dozen top lodges in the country and select the activities for which New Zealand is best known: fly-fishing, helicoptering over Milford Sound and the glaciers or sampling the delights of local wineries. A few stay in private homes which come with staff such as a masseuse, chef and personal trainer as well as a pool, heli-pad and private gym. Not to mention killer views.

For Seasonz the RWC will mean an early start to their busiest period over summer. Fortunately the two men are close friends and have complementary skills. Sam is the speed-talking salesman and visionary while Matt "does all the things I'm no good at". Sam is referring to the detail and people sides of the business. Even more fortunately, both their wives have equally useful but entirely different skills. Jenny Porter has an HR background and is responsible for employment matters while Kate Lines is the marketing expert. Put them together and they have a full set of skills ideal for their business.

The chance to sell New Zealand to the rest of the world is a dream come true. Both Sam and Matt worked overseas but yearned to return home. Sam worked for upmarket Abercrombie & Kent in the UK for years, responsible for clients' private jet tours and travelling frequently himself. If he hadn't started Seasonz, he would now be in Botswana with A & K.

SEASONZ' FAVOURITE HOLIDAY PLACES

Thanks to their work, the four Seasonz folk regularly stay in the best accommodation in the world but how do they like to unwind when they have time off?

"Our ideal holiday is a bach on the beach. Somewhere simple and easy. Sam and Jen have a family bach on Lake Rotoiti. Holidays are very much family focused these days – definitely not luxury resorts. While luxury is nice for the occasional treat, it's usually for work purposes so we like to get away from that world when on holiday.

"The most magical place we have ever been lucky enough to have been is Great Mercury Island, Coromandel.

"If you're a golfer, The Farm at Cape Kidnappers is heaven. However, if you're looking for old-world charm, you can't beat Huka Lodge at Taupo.

"As I'm a surfer, give me a crib at Piha.

"One of our favourite holiday destinations has been the Tutukaka Coast. Easy to get to, great surfing, beaches, fishing and variety. Kiwiana at its best!"

HOW CAN PEOPLE MAKE THE MOST OF THEIR HOLIDAYS?

Use a travel-management company like Seasonz! These days holidays are few and far between – sometimes just one decent break in the year – so every minute of that holiday is valuable and shouldn't be wasted. The benefit of using a company such as Seasonz is that it minimizes the planning and organization and maximizes the time actually spent enjoying your holiday. You'll also receive the best advice on where to go and what to do based on your brief and you'll get the best access to local guides and operators.

Sam literally scoots from the office to the printer.



Matt's story is similar. After completing a science degree he joined UK-based event agency ILUKA, working with sponsors and other stakeholders at global sporting events such as the Olympics and the Soccer and Rugby World Cups. He too travelled frequently but longed to come home. The two had been friends as teenagers but a chance meeting a year after Sam started Seasonz saw Matt join the company in 2004. "The best thing I ever did was to have a mate like Matt here who is fantastic at what he does. Trying to grow a business on your own is not as much fun. It can get very lonely," says Sam.

Since then the two haven't looked back. Actually they haven't had time. They now employ 22 people with more staff to come over the Cup period and they enjoy the trust of 300 travel agencies in North America through invitation-only travel specialist Virtuoso. In fact, Seasonz was nominated as one of the world's top five destination management companies by the Virtuoso network last year. They're also the first port of call for renowned travel agencies such as Andrew Harper and American Express. North Americans make up the bulk of their clients but the South American and Australian markets are showing encouraging growth. The French and Germans are also coming on board, as are New Zealanders. Seasonz sees New Zealand as ripe for expansion in the luxury travel market.

Through these networks and their own contacts, Seasonz is kept busy organizing everything from incentive travel for groups and holidays for families, business people and publicity-shy celebrities. Business people tend to stay three to five days while families may stay for up to a fortnight.

The work is demanding but Matt and Sam have found a quick run out to the coast for a surf does wonders for stress relief and fitness. They could, of course, resort to running up and down the office but staff gave them scooters to skim the corridors so it would be churlish not to use them. They're also both keen sportsmen which is why, despite all the extra work and sleepless nights, they are immensely excited about the RWC. And if they don't get to as many rugby matches as they would like to, there's always the Cricket World Cup, the Volvo Ocean Race and the America's Cup to work on and look forward to.

The Porters. OPPOSITE: Jen with Amelia and with family pet Oscar. ABOVE: Four-year-old Amelia. BELOW: Five-year-old Darcy. Seasonz is turning one of the offices into a playroom for the children for when childcare isn't available.

**SEASONZ IDEAL ITINERARY FOR RWC
7 TO 24 OCTOBER 2011**

- 7 October:** Arrive Auckland – Hilton Hotel – sailing on America's Cup yacht.
- 8 October:** Hilton – RWC quarter-final 2 – trip to Waiheke Island by helicopter, Mudbrick Restaurant for lunch, wine and olive-oil tasting.
- 9 October:** Hilton – RWC quarter-final 4 – drive by private vehicle to Matakana.
- 10 October:** Fly Auckland to Queenstown – Eichardt's Private Hotel.
- 11 October:** Eichardt's – by helicopter to Milford Sound, stopping at glaciers with lunch on a mountain top.
- 12 October:** Private vehicle transfer to Glenorchy – Blanket Bay Lodge – helicopter to lunch outdoors at Lake Lochnagar or helicopter to fly-fishing on Greenstone River.
- 13 October:** Blanket Bay Lodge.
- 14 October:** Private vehicle transfer to Queenstown. Fly to Auckland – Hilton.
- 15 October:** Hilton – RWC semifinal 1 – private vehicle to Waitakeres for hike.
- 16 October:** Hilton – RWC semifinal 2 – private vehicle to Piha for quad-bike ride on black-sand beach.
- 17 October:** Fly to Hawke's Bay – The Farm at Cape Kidnappers – Best of the Bay tour – helicopter to wine-tasting, cultural visit with Maori elder at Waimarama Beach – Napier to see art-deco buildings.
- 18/19 October:** The Farm at Cape Kidnappers – golf, spa and visit to gannet colony with specialist guide.
- 20 October:** Private vehicle transfer to Taupo – Huka Lodge.
- 21 October:** Huka Lodge – either fly-fishing with guide and helicopter to White Island followed by catamaran cruise on Lake Rotoiti or heli-hangi option – pick-up at Huka Lodge, help prepare hangi with Maori elders at marae, fly to White Island while hangi cooks and return to eat it.
- 22 October:** Fly to Auckland – Hilton.
- 23 October:** Hilton – RWC final.
- 24 October:** Depart Auckland.

