

FINANCIAL POST



Shelley D'Angelo's Contessa Vacations takes small groups of tourists to Sicily and immerses them in the local food and culture.

Photo: Aaron Lynett/National Post

A plan fit for a Contessa

Suzanne Wintrob, Financial Post · December. 27, 2010

Get Shelley D'Angelo talking about Buffalo mozzarella or wine-infused gelato and the 57-year-old bubbles.

"I'm the kind of person who always has too many courses of food at a dinner party so I have to remember, 'Just stick with the plan, Shelley,'" she says.

It's that same attitude that the proprietor of Toronto-based Contessa Vacations applies to her business and has her turning a profit. Each spring and fall for the past three years, Ms. D'Angelo and her five employees have hosted small groups of tourists at a rustic 52-hectare estate just outside the city of Ragusa (pop: 68,000). While guests learn to cook from a master Sicilian chef, tour the countryside and study Italian, Ms. D'Angelo checks in with her trusted suppliers and checks out new ones to enhance the experience.

In many respects, Ms. D'Angelo considers Contessa Vacations a labour of love. For years she and her Italian husband, John, had holidayed in Europe and immersed themselves in the culture, the food and the people. But things changed the year Ms. D'Angelo, a college fundraising executive, jetted off to Provence with some girlfriends. They stayed in a bed and breakfast, where the hosts taught cooking lessons for the evening meal. It seemed just the thing she and John would enjoy doing in Italy when they retired, she said. "I did the back-of-the-napkin business plan," she says. Back home she shared the plan with her Bay Street husband. "John saw this as heaven on earth -- he could read his books and write and only have to show up for dinner," Ms. D'Angelo recalls. "It was a great way for us not to get old." John D'Angelo never got to live that dream; he lost his battle with colon cancer in 2005.

Then a friend invited her to a women's business conference in Milan where she met an American woman who hoped to settle in Sicily one day. They chatted, and Ms. D'Angelo mentioned she had created a business plan for a cooking school in Italy. The woman invited Ms. D'Angelo to check out Sicily. She did, and discovered scenery so breathtaking "I found an energy I hadn't felt in a long, long time," she says.

Back home, Ms. D'Angelo quit her job and started her research, and in May 2007, she returned to Sicily with two goals. "At the core, it had to be something that was of value, that was bigger than myself, that gave back to the community. And it had to have a succession plan built in right from the beginning."

Ms. D'Angelo toured Ragusa, chatting up the locals. She learned about employment challenges, the preference for cash and cultural idiosyncrasies (one supplier won't accept tips so she pre-pays for his coffee at his favourite cafe). Within weeks she had hired a quadrilingual operations manager, a trilingual tour guide, a native Ragusan chef and sous chef and a local driver who also owns the olive grove that produces the oil used in the cooking classes. After a successful pilot trip comprised of friends, Ms. D'Angelo and her team hosted their first group at a weeklong culinary retreat in September 2008.

Using local talent has its pros and cons, Ms. D'Angelo says. It took a while to earn her employees' trust and only now have they allowed her to deposit their salary into their bank accounts rather than pay in cash. Bonuses are based on customer feedback. She

had to promise her chef she would bring him to Canada one day, and last year fulfilled that when she snagged him a three-week cooking gig at a Toronto restaurant. She stays in touch with employees via Skype and email and encourages them to seek out new suppliers through their daily contacts. The goal, she says, is "to give them a sense of value so they stay connected" and one day take over in Ragusa while she expands her concept to other Mediterranean cities.

"To grow a business in another country, you have to be willing to listen," she advises. "Be willing to hear what they have to say and create your business around the culture of the region. Be respectful of them. Don't ask them to change because [you think] it will be easier for you or more comfortable for your clients. Help your clients understand why it works in a certain way."

Ms. D'Angelo charges 1,299 (about \$1,700) a person -- including food, drinks and excursions but excluding airfare--and needs just four guests to make a profit but will take up to eight. She encourages guests to build their own group, with discounts offered for the fifth, sixth and seventh person that can be shared any way they want. The eighth group member is free.

She also negotiates pricing wherever she goes. For example, she now buys her ricotta cheese from the farm her guests visit, eliminating the entrance fee. Likewise, a local ceramics shop doesn't charge entry because Ms. D'Angelo buys her guests "graduating gifts" there. Most of her costs are fixed, but she always builds in a 5% buffer for price increases.

Still, even the best-laid plans can go awry. Early on, she never anticipated that stationery on an island would cost double than back home and ended up paying through the roof to provide guests with itineraries and recipes. She now prints them in Toronto and carts them with her for each trip. And while she's careful to budget her travel expenses to and from Canada, last spring she hadn't anticipated an Icelandic volcano would erupt and double her airfare. But with every turn she learns a lesson.

"The road to perfection and the road to success are a journey," says Ms. D'Angelo. "You're going to make mistakes. You're going to have wonderful things happen to you that you never expected. Build on that foundation, and respect where you go."