

SHOP TALK

REHO TRAVEL

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Reho Travel is a well established, if not high profile corporate agency, but its offshore charitable arm reveals another impressive dimension to the company. Phoebe Tilelli sat down with managing director Karsten Horne to see how Rehope is making a difference in a distant corner of the globe

MALAWI FACTS:

- The republic of Malawi in Southeast Africa is referred to as "The warm heart of Africa". It was once called Nyasaland when it was colonised by the British and consequently most people living there speak English as well as local dialects.
- Malawi is a small country when compared to its larger African neighbours, covering just 118,000 square kilometres, making it about half the size of the state of Victoria. Despite this it has a population of around 15 million people.
- Malawi is a developing country, considered one of the poorest in the world. It remains heavily reliant on aid from outside governments and non government organisations. Charities like Rehope are thus vitally important to the country and its small communities.

It's not every day you encounter a business with a head office in Melbourne and an outpost in a remote village in Malawi. But Reho Travel is not your ordinary travel agency. Its charitable arm Rehope is based in the small African country and over the last five years it has quietly been making a difference.

The Reho Travel team take their duty of care very seriously, with the wellbeing of their clients a key priority for the business. Although the operation is around 80% to 90% corporate in nature it also consists of various other divisions including Reho study tours for university students and leisure arm Veta Travel.

The company initiates its corporate responsibility in its Sydney office, providing fresh fruit for staff and an ergonomic workplace. Charity clearly starts at home at Reho Travel.

And while most of us are waiting to knock off on a Friday afternoon to enjoy a few drinks at the end of the week, you are more likely to find the Reho team hitting the gym.

The impetus for the company comes from managing director Karsten Horne.

"I try to lead by example, with the aim of providing structure and healthy options within our clients' travel plans," he said. It is this can-do mindset that has lead him to developing Reho's successful charity organisation.

Rehope is essentially a microcredit agency that provides loans to local people in Malawi who wish to further develop their own small businesses. The charity provides this money directly from Reho's profits and creditors pay it back slowly over a six month period on a low interest rate. Each year two Reho employees are chosen to spend a few weeks in Malawi with Karsten working on the various projects.

It all started back on a warm day in 2007 when Horne was travelling through Malawi on an overland truck expedition. Along the way he came across a man named Alick selling hand-drawn postcards on the side of the road. After getting to know each other, Horne commissioned Alick to design Reho's yearly Christmas card. The relationship that was established with Alick planted the seed that soon blossomed into the Rehope charity.

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 Reho Travel

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Pictured clockwise from left: Building Rehope's office in Nkhata Bay; some happy locals; landscape scenes of the lush terrain of Malawi

In the developing world business loans are hard to come by so the company sought to provide opportunities via finance, basing the operation in the village of Nkhata Bay. Shortly after setting up shop a local man said "In Malawi Rehope means restoring hope" and this became the charity's mission statement.

When thinking of Africa, what often comes to mind is a dry, barren landscape where people walk long distances over cracked earth in search of food and water. However, Malawi's terrain is, in the main, vastly different. Rehope's office in Nkhata Bay is built on fertile soil and surrounded by lush, green scenery, free from the pollution of major cities. "We visited some areas that looked like the hills of Scotland and then suddenly a Zebra would appear," Horne said.

The Rehope office has two rooms. The first is used to discuss loans and teach business planning. The second room is being turned into an education and resource centre where pictures and diagrams will be provided to teach sustainability concepts to the local people.

Rehope receives many generous donations of clothes and money from clients and fundraisers who contribute to the project. However, the Rehope team aren't just about giving handouts. Their main goal is to educate the people in the use of their resources to achieving the best outcomes. Learning the skills to develop their businesses and to make the most of their assets is an invaluable resource the charity can provide the locals with.

The Rehope charity are setting an example by using the land outside the office to grow vegetables that aren't yet present in the market, such as avocados. "There's a perception that these people have nothing. They don't have tap water or electricity but generally they're living in clean fresh air, in a nice rural environment with an agreeable climate, so why can't they make the best of it?" Horne said.

The loans have been offered to several hundred people with around fifty thousand dollars being invested over the last two years. One recipient is a woman who raises chickens to sell at the market. Originally she could only afford ten chickens and

by the time she'd raised and sold them she wasn't making a profit. She couldn't even afford a chicken coop so squawking of fowls filled the rooms of her home. "In a two room little mud hut, you look behind the TV and there's all the chickens running around. They were only little but God help her when they grow bigger," Horne said. With a seven hundred dollar loan from Rehope she now has one hundred cooped chickens and is able to sustain herself.

Another group of people who were starting up a honey selling business also approached the Rehope team. Although the honey was ready for harvest they hadn't worked out how they would extract it safely. They had no money to buy protective clothing so Rehope has provided beekeeping suits that are rented out to different people in the community when needed.

When Horne last visited in March, they completed various projects. These included painting the school, building a verandah and even teaching a geography lesson to the children. The school consists of around



800 kids with eighty to each class. The classrooms are outdoor thatched huts without walls. Horne said that the one thing that surprised him most about Malawi is that everyone appears so happy despite the obvious privations. Families support each other, kids support each other and the community is very welcoming to outsiders.

Many people would expect to feel uncomfortable in a country with a culture so different from ours. However Horne has never felt threatened in Malawi. "When we went to the school they just overwhelmed us with smiles," he said.

Contributing to a charity like Rehope can be very gratifying but it hasn't always been smooth sailing. Establishing the operation was a long process and the team has faced many setbacks along the way. The local people are enthusiastic and helpful when it comes to the project but they often spend a lot of time talking about the issue and not acting on discussions and plans. Rehope team members have at times been frustrated by the lack of progress.

Horne explained that when working on a project the people don't evaluate costs effectively which leads to problems down the track. "It appears

that nobody is thinking about 'what if' and then they're surprised when 'what if' actually happens." The job requires a lot of patience and determination.

Horne's suggestion to people who want to start their own charity is to choose a community and a cause that they are passionate about. "Don't do it just for the sake of ticking boxes, do it because you really believe in it. This will make it easier when encountering roadblocks."

The key goal of Reho as a business has always been to make a difference in everything they do. Rehope has undoubtedly had a positive effect on several hundred people's lives through the loans. This is some achievement considering it started with the sponsorship of one man to make Christmas cards.

And it appears that Horne and his team won't be leaving Malawi any time soon. Their future plans are expanding in scope beyond short term loans. One idea is a safe taxi for the locals, using a car they have bought. Honey production, possibly for export, and solar powered lights are other initiatives in the pipeline.

Although Reho is now quite a large business with offices located in Sydney, Melbourne and Perth, its main focus was never necessarily about making



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Above: Reho Travel's outpost in Nkhata Bay in Malawi

money or growing. Horne is firm in his view that business is about doing the right thing and doing it well, which by default attracts like-minded people to work with you. At times it can be hard to see a way to contribute when there are so many areas in the world that need attention, but you have to start somewhere. "I guess we can't solve the whole world's problems, but if we can just solve a few and someone else can solve help somewhere else then it all adds up," Horne said. ●

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