

The success story of Reiseservice Sacco

Germany's leading travel agent celebrates his company's 20th anniversary



Sandro Sacco, owner and managing director of Reiseservice Sacco. Operating under the business philosophy of bringing people together, Sacco aims to enable people to travel to their homelands affordably and at their convenience

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Reiseservice Sacco, a well-known travel agency in Germany, is celebrating two decades in business. Founded in 1995 by the then 23-year-old Sandro Sacco, its owner and managing director, the agency acquired the IATA licence in September 1996, which allows it to sell flight tickets to destinations all over the world.

Operating under the business philosophy of bringing people together, Mr Sacco aims to enable people to travel to their homelands affordably and at their convenience.

This lofty objective could only be achieved by offering flights at all times, to every destination and at favourable prices and conditions aboard reputable airlines.

“My relationship to Africa has intensified over the years. I have visited Ghana, Côte d’Ivoire, Gambia, Senegal and Kenya several times and become accustomed to the culture and the people of the continent.”

Thousands of Africans profit from the services of Reiseservice Sacco, which today has a team of about 20 employees who speak English, French, German, Italian and Spanish. And the Rosenheim, Bavaria-based travel agency enjoys good working relations with renowned international airlines.

Reiseservice Sacco, one of the top 50 travel agents in Germany, has become the market leader in ethnic travel in the country and is regularly honoured by international airlines for its high turnover in ticket sales.

In an exclusive interview with *The African Courier*, Sandro Sacco talks about the beginnings of his travel agency, his relationship with Africa, ethnic tickets, and why flights to Africa are more ex-



Sandro Sacco (right) receives the industry RTK certificate as one of the top 50 travel agents in Germany

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pensive than those to other continents, among other issues.

What does a travel agent do?

The primary responsibility of a travel agent is to make the process of travel planning easier for their clients and ensure they get the best deal possible. Simply put: travel agents book flights to all destinations in the world. It sounds simple but it takes some experience to be able to find the right flight at the best available price and at the most favourable conditions. This is why the training of a travel agent takes three years in Germany!

What led you into the travel agency business?

Actually geography was my favourite subject in school. I have always wanted to see the world's capital cities. So after my A levels, I decided to train as a travel agent instead of studying sports. I did my apprenticeship at an agency here in Rosenheim; I even had the opportunity to take over the agency later. However, I wasn't comfortable with the conditions there, which was why I decided to become self-employed by establishing Reiseservice Sacco on 1 July 2005.

What was it like at the beginning?

I started as a simple travel agent with only one employee, Andrea Müller, who is still with me today. We had an office with a show glass decorated with col-

ourful placards of holiday destinations and people just came in to book their flights. It was as simple as that.

Meanwhile, our operations have become enormously more demanding. I remember the beginnings with affection because everything was simple and the pressure was much lighter. And also because that was when I met my wife, Jane da Silva.

How did it happen?

She came in one day to book a flight back to her native Brazil. I instead offered her a job, which she accepted, abandoning her intention to return home for good. We married in 2003 and she manages the marketing department; she is my closest adviser.

Which year would you describe as a turning point for you?

In May 2008, we moved into a bigger office with a 200m² space which is divided into four departments: call centre, tourism, marketing and accounting. It was a year of particularly positive development of the company.

Reiseservice Sacco is today among the top 50 travel agencies in Germany. What would you say is the secret of your success?

Such successes as ours are a result of

teamwork. The travel agency association RTK ranks us regularly among the top 50 of the more than 3,500 agencies in Germany because of the positive development of Reiseservice Sacco but also as a result of the quality of advisory service that we offer our clients.

At this juncture, I would like to thank our entire staff for the wonderful job they do every day here. I would like to especially mention Stefan Hollfuss, who has been with us since 1999, and Emine Akpara, a marketing talent who understands Africans very well because her husband is Nigerian.

Reiseservice Sacco is the number one choice of travellers to African destinations in Germany. How many tickets do you sell to African destinations per year?

We sell more than 10,000 tickets to African destinations yearly. The biggest demands are flights to Nigeria, Ghana and Togo. The Nigerian national football team, the Super Eagles, who were trained by Berti Vogts from March 2007 to February 2008, once booked their flights with us. I would like to use this opportunity to thank our customers for their trust because without you we cannot be successful.

What is your relationship with Africa? Why did you specialise in Africa?

I once had a long-term relationship with a Ghanaian woman and we were often at African events. I still attend such events today. In 1997, I started distributing flyers with cheap offers to Africa at such events. We had one booking and suddenly the news spread like wildfire about us in the



Sandro Sacco and his wife Jane, who manages the marketing department of the successful agency

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African community and hundreds of bookings followed.

My relationship to Africa has intensified over the years. I have visited Ghana, Côte d'Ivoire, Gambia, Senegal and Kenya several times and become accustomed to the culture and the people of the continent. I met footballing great George Weah coincidentally during a trip to Côte d'Ivoire in 1998. As a football fan, that was a personal highlight of my link to Africa!

What special services do you offer your customers?

For the past 18 years, we have specialised in the so-called Ethnic Tickets; in fact, we are the market leader in Germany in that field. We offer these tickets to more than 15 destinations in Central and West Africa - from Senegal to Gabon.

What is special about Ethnic tickets?

Ethnic tickets are special tickets provided at discount prices and sold only to persons bearing the nationality of the country of destination, but who possess residence status in Germany or Austria, and their family members including their spouses. The tickets offer more flexibility for home-bound flights than ordinary tickets, often carry longer validity periods, charge lower transfer fees and offer higher baggage allowances.

Africans often complain that prices to African destinations are higher than those of destinations of similar distances in Asia or Latin America. Why is it so?

Competition! Let me explain with a simple example: 36 different airlines fly regularly to Bangkok while only four fly to Lomé in Togo. The less competition you have on a route the more expensive the tickets are. Travel agents can do nothing about it.

What problems do travellers to Africa usually face?

Ethnic Tickets are a voluntary offering of the airlines and they are subject to special conditions. It was through our personal efforts that with Air France-KLM, Lufthansa, Brussels Airlines and Turkish



Sandro and Jane Sacco are frequent guests at African events. They are pictured here with Chief Cephas Bansah and his wife Gabriele at a Ghanaian ceremony in Munich, October 2014

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What should the traveller know about these offers?

Most of the special offers, which are limited to three months, are available for a maximum of ten seats per flight. This means that whoever books first will get a seat! It is therefore understandable that such tickets are not refundable, are only conditionally re-bookable and must be paid for within a certain deadline. These are the conditions of the airlines over which we as travel agents

have no influence.

Most airlines sell tickets directly online to the flying public. Why do you think buying flight tickets from an agency is better than booking online?

Only a specialised travel agent like Reiseservice Sacco understands the numerous offerings available and how the conditions can be combined for the benefit of the customer.

There are also offers resulting from our long-term personal contacts and partnership with the airlines which are not available on the Internet platform of the airlines. You can only book such offers with us.

Also, whoever books online must pay immediately. This also applies when you have to change your booking. Researching for the most favourable alternative yourself is much more difficult than when you do it through a travel agent because you simply lack the specialised knowledge of how to do it.

Last but not least: another benefit of using a travel agent is that you have a go-to person if things go wrong. If you miss a flight, get stranded or there are changes to flight schedules, your travel agent will be on call to help you out.

No Internet booking tool can do that.

What is your message to Africa travellers?

Through their sustained demand for ethnic fares, our African customers should signal to the airlines that the market segment is and will continue to be stable for the future. I am sure that these special prices with all their generous conditions will continue to be available but also as a concession to this special group of customers. ■

Airlines the payment deadlines for Africans were extended. Now you have to pay for the tickets between four to six weeks before flying. Remember always: non-

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ethnic tickets must be completely paid for within three days of being booked!

Since 2002, Reiseservice Sacco has annually received the "Preferred Sales Partner in Germany for West Africa" award from several Airlines. Why?

My team and I are proud of this annual award. It is not automatic. We sell the most tickets for Air France-KLM, Brussels Airlines and Lufthansa because the airlines have the densest route networks to West Africa and most of our customers fly to the destinations. I would say it is a win-win situation for all involved because as a mega-seller we offer favourable, special prices for your clients which they cannot otherwise book. We are happy for the most attractive offerings we get from the airlines which we gladly pass on to our customers.

Airlines regularly make special offers of cheap prices to African destinations. But in many cases these offers are conditional.