

[Client Spotlight] Elite Havens

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Client Spotlight: Elite Havens



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It was tough to pick a video from their [YouTube page](#), so we went with the most recent, Pandawa Cliff Estate in Bali. (Seriously, [check it out](#), it's a digital vacation!)

We chatted with Jon Stonham, CEO, to learn more about Elite Havens and how they are responding to the COVID-19 restrictions on travel.



What makes Elite Havens unique in the space?

Our uniqueness lies in the fact that we have the finest collection of exclusive villas in Asia, the majority of which we manage ourselves to ensure that the maintenance and service standards are world-class. We have teams in each country that we operate in, to make sure that the guest experience is second to none. And we have a team of highly-trained chefs, butlers, housekeepers, and Villa Managers whose passion is providing guests with a truly personal and memorable experience.



What's the best feedback you've heard from your guests?

Making memories. The world is (or was before COVID-19) fast-paced, life is all-consuming, and people forget to connect and enjoy each other's company. Although we offer people stunning properties, our guests don't only wax eloquent about the villa in their reviews, instead choosing to focus on the staff and the very personal service they provide, which allows everyone to truly relax and switch off. Guests comment on the warmth and friendly nature of Elite Havens' staff, the chef's restaurant-quality food, and how proud the staff members are to share their communities and cultures with visitors. Invariably guests mention the staff, often each by name, in any feedback and how their group has had a memorable stay as a result of their hospitality. It's not infrequent for guests to ask if they can take the staff back home with them! It is this personal connection that makes them book our villas, again and again, compelling them to return to the same villa often.



How many guests do you typically see every year?

We host over 80,000 guests a year, predominantly families and groups looking for luxury, privacy, and personal service. Guests come from all over the world, from Asia Pacific, the Middle East, Europe (both east and west), and the Americas to enjoy an exclusive and tailored experience. We cater to everyone - nationals from Australia, India, China, Scandinavia, Japan, the USA, the Middle East, and even Eastern Europe. We try to tailor our services to different cultures, be they food preferences, or the additional services that we offer.

Why did you choose to get into the travel industry?

My first foray into travel was to set up Asia's first online hotel booking platform in the 1990s - asiahotels.com. It was the first site to introduce feedback from guests (years before TripAdvisor). It was born out of frustration as there was a distinct lack of accurate information on hotels in the Asia region. We sold the business in 2005 as the market consolidated into the brands we know today with a strong focus on technology. My passion has always been to give people the holiday they want, tailored to their needs - and thus, my business partner and I moved into the villa space. We aimed to create a villa brand people could trust, offering consistency and quality. After more than two decades of dedication to this vision, the feedback we get today is highly rewarding. Each Sunday, I take time out to sit and read feedback and comments left by our guests who checked out the previous week. The pleasure is immense to see how much joy our staff creates. The very personal notes I get, I never once saw in the hotel industry. I am extremely proud of the team we have.



Are you working on any new initiatives to attract and retain customers?

Elite Havens is always looking to see how we can improve the guest experience. Our villas are spotlessly clean, and much effort has gone into training the staff on COVID-19 hygiene and safe distancing best practices in recent months, to ensure that our guests not only get a fabulous stay but a safe one too.

Booking enquiries suggest that our regular guests see villas as a great option for self-isolation and safe distancing, something that mass travel at hotels or resorts doesn't allow. Guests feel that villa vacations may be the perfect entry back into the world of travel and hospitality.

Space and privacy are seen as the ultimate luxury today, which, when coupled with outstanding service, results in an opportunity to escape the mundane routine, unwind, and relax while maintaining safety and hygiene. Guests also see the value proposition of cost per bedroom to be significantly better than at an equivalent hotel.

Recently, we have expanded our operations to India and now also offer stunning properties at Goa, Alibaug and Lonavala. Some of these properties are where the whos-who of India spend their downtime, ranging from cricket legends and business tycoons to film actors and superstars.

We will be adding more destinations to our portfolio over the next 12 months.

What has been your communication with guests that have booked for the next few months?

The reassurance of flexibility. We have waived our usual cancellation terms completely and are offering our guests a 12-month window to come and visit us. We are talking to customers on a rolling 3-months out basis, answering all their doubts and queries. Many guests have already selected new dates, while others are choosing to wait until they get some clarity, both with world events and in their personal lives.

We look forward to welcoming them in due course and putting the issues of coronavirus behind us. I think everyone realises the difficulties that the travel industry is facing currently, and our guests have been most appreciative of how flexible we are being.



Are there any silver linings to this situation or projects you are working on that you haven't had time for in the past?

There are not many silver-linings for the travel industry currently. I suspect we will be the hardest and longest hit. Having said that, I have managed to clear those little niggling things which have been in the non-urgent pile for a while. That has been satisfying. More importantly, the current situation has given the team time to reflect on the big picture – where will Elite Havens be in 5 years, what will our guests want, how do we reach them conveniently and cost-effectively? I have been in the travel industry for 25 years now, and I think times like this

are rare but beneficial, taking a step back to reflect. Travel has gone through huge changes in the last few decades, especially in the realms of marketing and sales. One must remain agile and current. Our Chinese guests now book our villas through WeChat and want instant responses; our younger generation guests only use their mobile, and there is so much noise and clutter in the electronic media. To stand out as a market leader, as we have been for 22 years, takes real stamina and a willingness to change.



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Jon Stonham, CEO, Elite Havens



In light of the pandemic, do you plan to invest in any new tools or resources to help recession-proof your business?

Difficult to have contingency plans for something as dramatic as the coronavirus, as its impact is global and unprecedented. However, we have been diversifying geographically, including beyond Asia, to be able to mitigate localised events and potential catastrophes. As a company, we have always been very technology-focused, and increasingly we are looking at tools that make us efficient, improve revenues, and reduce risks. We are automating many of our systems to free up our team and allow them more face time with guests.

We have moved to real-time and cloud-based reporting to help our owners understand what is happening with their properties, as it happens. Furthermore, training and quality control have been stepped up to help protect our brand offering. The coronavirus has made us relook at how we work, how we communicate with teams spread over many countries, and what guests are looking for.

Once restrictions ease, villas will see a strong return as we already know guests see them as a safe place to stay with their families, avoiding 'mass' contact seen in other accommodation options. Our experience shows that once people have tried a villa vacation, they find it difficult to go back to being just another anonymous guest in a hotel. The luxury of privacy and personal service is very compelling and makes for a truly memorable experience.



What ways are you keeping the staff connected during this time?

As a company spread across geographies, we are used to working remotely with teams in other countries on a regular basis. That said, we now have almost all the workforce working from home (except those in the villas) which does bring a different set of issues. Many miss the team bonding element of working in an office, and the informal way information is often shared in person over a cup of coffee. Others find it difficult to separate work from home, often working longer hours. Communication is key, with regular team meetings and one-on-one calls. Skype, WhatsApp, Microsoft Teams have been useful platforms, but we miss that face-to-face connection. It's something we enjoy, which is why we are in the hospitality business.

Have you noticed an upside to your staff working remotely?

Many of our support staff members are in places such as Manila in the Philippines, where travel time to and from

work can be brutal. Employees working remotely are saving many hours a week, which gives them more time with their families and to pursue their interests. We will certainly look at how we can harness the best balance of office and remote working, going forward. We have also found that we have longer coverage as staff can now be flexible with their hours, which leads to a faster response to our guests, which is certainly a good thing.

Of course, our travel and entertainment bills have reduced to almost nothing. Good for all concerned and the environment. Sandra, my wife, is certainly pleased to see me more as I used to travel constantly between our six offices.

Once the world returns to normal, what are you most looking forward to?

Seeing people. Life is all about relationships, not possessions. There is nothing more pleasurable than sharing time with people you like and whose company you enjoy, whether it's close friends, our villa owners, our staff, or our guests. One plus about the lockdowns across the world is the time I have now to reconnect with friends further afield, many who have moved out of Asia, with whom I almost lost touch. Life is about friendships, and remaining connected is so very important. I prefer to connect in person; remote chats don't quite do it for me.



We feel the same way; we can't wait to be face-to-face once again! If you'd like to learn more about Elite Havens, or take a virtual tour through one of their stunning villas, please explore <https://www.elitehavens.com/>

Remember: every day is one day closer to your next adventure!

Link: <https://www.flywire.com/resources/client-spotlight-elite-havens>