



The Venus beach café Tolcarne, Newquay

# Venus rising

**The Venus Company trusts Mentor to help it maintain its caring employment philosophy as the company grows.**

When you're running a business, you're focused on your customers and, if you don't have a human resources pro in your own ranks," says Michael Smith, "then, I can tell you that being able to phone someone up for help – knowing you've already paid for it – is extremely comforting.

"And the advice is always good – it's like having a full-time HR department of your own!"

Smith is not easily satisfied. His family-owned firm, The Venus Company, was set up a decade ago "to bring the professionalism of the High Street to stunning beach settings and to acknowledge corporate responsibility for achieving positive environmental impacts and community benefits".

These principles remain sovereign. Venus runs cafés and beach shops on four beaches in the West Country: three in Devon (Blackpool Sands, East Portlemouth and Bigbury-on-Sea) and one in Cornwall (Tolcarne Beach, Newquay). Its motto of "loving the beach" is, for once, a whole lot more than merely an off-the shelf mission statement.

The company has been honoured with a Queen's Award for providing the best *al fresco* Mediterranean-style dining experience in a UK beach setting and for integrating environmental and social care into every business decision. It's a five-times Gold Award winner in the Green Tourism Business Scheme.

"We started as four or five people who'd been in the corporate world

and wanted out of it," explains Smith, a former Whitbread executive. The business grew to employ up to 15 full-timers and twice as many seasonal staff: "In the last two or three years, we've had a number of graduates, and the majority of our full-timers are in their 20s.

"These younger guys clearly wanted a career with us, so we decided about five years ago to open year-round – it's part of our business philosophy to provide a service to the local community and to our employees all year," Smith says proudly. "But that means we need a lot of flexibility."

It was one of his fellow-founders, Lee Porter, who pressed the case for Mentor Services: "I have to be honest, I was a bit sceptical about what they could do," chuckles Smith. "But I have to say, it's been really excellent."

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Michael Smith, Venus Company



Mentor provides both a comprehensive, integrated HR package and on-going consultancy. But, for Smith, the real value comes in Mentor's readiness to shape its service to the specifics – some might say, idiosyncrasies – of Venus's business ethic.

Mentor's on-going HR consultancy is based on a monthly fee for each Venus site and this includes an Employment Law customer helpline. "This works really well," says Smith, recalling a recent, highly specialised employee issue, where a call brought bespoke advice and e-mailed letter drafts specific to the circumstances.

He explains that the initial package, following extensive consultation, was "a fully interactive process. It wasn't just: 'Here's something off-the-shelf – take it or leave it'. The package was totally tailored to our own particular needs."

The outcome included completely re-writing every employment contract, plus new processes and policies covering every aspect of staff relations, from recruitment to equal opportunities. Smith calls it "a comprehensive employment guidance system."

But the focus on principles carried its own risks as Venus grew. "I think we became aware of the danger, not only of the philosophy of the company being diluted, but also of falling foul of discrimination laws, regulations on harassment etc., and we needed backup for that," admits Smith.

"That was the driving motivation for the relationship with Mentor. We obviously wanted to remain on the right side of the legislation – and legislation seems to change almost by the day! And we were also determined to ensure that our company's caring philosophy in relation to our employees, our community and our environment was firmly enshrined in our HR policies, as well."

A few of Venus's seasonal workers this year come from the EC – the firm has links with the Sustainable Development Department of a college in Slovakia and provides its students with work experience, training, accommodation and other support.

Smith reports that immigration complexities have not loomed especially large among the issues on which he has sought Mentor's advice: "The big issues have been the usual things like entitlement to holiday pay, sick pay and so forth," he says. "The vast majority of our seasonal employees are local college or university students wanting to work the summer to pay off their student loans."

