

IT company Softcat wanted to make a trip to Fiji meaningful as well as memorable. Belinda Cole reports



Team work: Softcat staff helped build a house

How Softcat gave it back

Is it possible to reward staff while giving something back to the world?

IT company Softcat wanted to find out. Voicing the idea at a dinner party, chief executive officer, Peter Kelly, was advised to get in touch with Hands Up Holidays, which specialises in holidays with a volunteering element.

It was the first incentive group the company had handled and they suggested a nine-day trip to Fiji, combining a luxury cruise with a meaningful volunteering experience.

"We'd done a few charity events before and decided, with CSR such an important aspect, that we should take things a bit further," says Kelly.

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The client: Softcat
Agency: Hands Up Holidays
The event: Incentive trip for 34-strong sales team with volunteering element
Destination: Fiji

something back."

However, not all of the hard-working sales force was keen on the idea of giving up their annual reward in return for hard labour.

"We're a democratic company so we put it to the vote and it was a very close call," admits Kelly. "We just got it voted in, but afterwards everybody said they were glad they did it."

The 34-strong team would be split

into two groups; one of which would spend three days helping build a playground for an orphanage, while the other helped build a house for a deprived family with nine children.

The trip started with a rather gruelling flight with Air New Zealand via the States.

"It took 27 hours and we all flew economy. We had some guys over six feet tall and 20 stone and offered to upgrade them but they wouldn't hear of it," says Kelly.

"The most irritating thing was that it took five hours just to clear customs in the States and then we had to rush across the airport to get the next flight."

And the teething problems didn't end there.

"The guys working at the orphanage found it highly rewarding, however those of us building the house for the nine kids didn't have

such a good experience," he reveals.

"We hadn't realised the extent of the family's problems, and neither had Hands Up. The father was mentally ill and had just got out of prison.

"We were being filmed live by the equivalent of the BBC and the Fijian Minister for the Interior was there too. As we handed the house over the father went mad and threatened to attack the children. It was horrific."

In all, Softcat spent £120,000 on the trip, £30,000 of which had been donated to build the house. However, it seemed there were others keen to take credit for their generous gift.

Kelly says: "We couldn't understand why everyone was saying 'aren't the Rotary Club really kind for giving the money'. We thought people might be getting backhanders. But despite everything, we were able to see by doing it we'd given nine lovely kids a house which was a lot better than before."

He adds: "I'd say Hands Up probably learnt a lot through us, but



Can you dig it?: Softcat plans to volunteer again

it is certainly something that will never be forgotten!"

And things were to get better. The group checked out of their 'grotty local hotel' in Fiji's capital, Suva, and boarded a luxury cruise liner for a four day cruise of the Yasawa Islands, with one night on the exotic Denarau Island.

"We moored this cruise liner to a palm tree, jumped off at this beautiful sandy beach and spent the day swimming and snorkelling. We had a barbecue and a party in the evening with dancing and a show. It was amazing," recalls Kelly.

And, perhaps surprisingly, they haven't been put off.

"We would absolutely do it again," says Kelly. "The average age of our sales team is 26; they're young graduates and they got tonnes from doing this.

"Another volunteering trip has been strongly requested. We're doing a trip to Peru in October and we're considering doing some volunteering if we have time." ■