

AMERICA TRAVEL, INC.

America Travel, Inc. is located in East Providence, a city of 60,000 inhabitants just outside of its bigger namesake, Providence. America Travel celebrated its 30th year in business in 2003 and continues to flourish. Two Portuguese immigrants, Joe Serodio and John Botelho, started the company in 1973 with a \$30,000 investment. Two-thirds of that was invested by Serodio, who had wanted to have a travel business since he was a child.

Joe Serodio came to America in 1961 with his parents from the Azores, a group of Portuguese Islands in the Eastern Atlantic. From an early age it had been Serodio's dream to start his own business in the states. The child of a poor farming family, America was the land of opportunity and the place where Serodio believed his dreams could be realized. Serodio got his first taste for business when he opened a successful driving school, the East Providence Driving Academy, which he ran for 20 years. But his goals didn't stop there. He had always loved travel, and set his sights on opening a travel agency, one that would serve the inhabitants of East

Joe, Inês, and Eugenio Serodio in East Providence, 1965.



Joe Serodio, president of America Travel, Inc.

Providence, especially its sizable Portuguese community. At a church function he was introduced to John Botelho, a travel agent and—like Serodio—a Portuguese immigrant from the Azores, who had also hoped to one day own a piece of the travel business.

In 1973 the two men founded America Travel, Inc. in rented office space on Warren Avenue, one of the main streets of East Providence. Since Serodio was just learning the ins and outs of the travel trade, it was decided that he would concentrate on marketing and sales while Botelho, with his considerable experience as a travel agent, would see to the actual bookings and arrangements of vacation packages. The pair also saw that there was a need for group and wholesale travel services, and they quickly filled the void. In the same year that the company was founded, the men put together two major charters. In July of 1973, for their first group excursion, they chartered TWA for a trip to the Azores. In October of the same year, they put together a Pan Am charter to Málaga and Costa del Sol in Spain for the Amway Corporation.

America Travel continued to grow throughout the 1970s. It became the agency of choice for the Portuguese community in the Providence, East Providence, and southern Massachusetts areas. Serodio believes that their success is a direct result of their advertising and marketing campaigns, which have been a mainstay of the company's strategy since its founding. When they first started the company Serodio went on foot to various social and church events, handing out brochures and leaflets, and as the business grew he expanded into newspaper, radio, and television advertising.

The tremendous success the company had with its group travel business brought about the establishment of Festive Tours in 1980. Where America Travel handles both individual clients as well as groups, Festive Tours was dedicated exclusively to group travel.

As the company continued to grow, Serodio and Botelho decided to purchase a permanent home for the agency. They found a property on Warren Avenue that was up for sale, located on a prominent corner lot just two blocks from



America Travel's office in East Providence.

where their business first began. Serodio purchased the property on sight, demolished the existing structure, and built a new one-story brick building in its place. The lot also holds several parking spaces, making a trip to their office convenient and more accommodating for their clientele. The 3,000-square-foot office space is tastefully decorated and was designed with customers in mind.

By 1985 the company expanded once again, founding Azores Express, which put together travel itineraries for groups from Providence and Boston, who were traveling to the Azores. The company was owned in partnership with the regional government of the Azores, which was also the major stockholder. In 1988 America Travel sold its shares to its partner, and the company still exists today.

The travel business has changed dramatically since Serodio and Botelho first started in 1973. The company has weathered many local and world events

that have had a tremendous impact on travel including the Rhode Island credit union crisis, the Gulf War, and most recently the tragedies of September 11, 2001. In addition, the explosion of the Internet has also drastically changed how people travel. Today many people book their travel online from their home or office and no longer use travel agents. Because of these changes, many travel agencies have closed their doors permanently, but America Travel and Festive Tours have survived. Serodio believes there are a number of reasons for their good fortune. The fact that they have been in business for 30 years and have invested wisely over those years, has enabled them to weather the storms. Their retail service has also always been much more personalized to the point where they are now seeing third generations of families coming to them to book their vacations, honeymoons, and group packages.

America Travel has also fine-tuned some of their offerings to specific ethnic communities such as the Portuguese, immigrant Africans, Cabe Verdeans,

and Liberians. Many of the group tours that Festive puts together are religious pilgrimages to places such as Fatima, Portugal, Lourdes, France, Santiago de Compostela, Spain, the Holy Land, Athens, Cairo, and Rome.

The company has also gone to great lengths to create travel and cultural experiences for members of the Portuguese American community to help them learn more about their Portuguese ancestors who settled in Brazil during the 1940s and 1950s. To that end, Serodio has taken exploratory trips to Brazil to plan customized journeys for his Portuguese American clients. One such area in Brazil is the state capitol of Florianopolis in Santa Catarina, an island just off the coast of Brazil.

Travelers also visit areas in and around Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo which was settled by the Portuguese and make stops at churches and shrines, like the Shrine of Our Lady of Aparecida, the Patron Saint of Brazil. Visiting these Portuguese settlements in Brazil gives America Travel clients the opportunity to not only experience their culture in a new environment, but also to do genealogical research on family members who settled in Brazil. Serodio takes great pleasure in helping his clients discover their family heritage, which they may never have known if not for his efforts.

Serodio, who is now 58, still loves to travel and immensely enjoys the fact that he can share his passion with his clients. The journey has now come full circle for him. He came to this country with the dream of owning a travel business. Today this successful enterprise brings him back to the Azores frequently where he shares its beauty with new generations of Portuguese Americans, helping them to see the land of their forefathers for the first time.