

Colin Hunter – entrepreneur, dedicated family man and jazz singer

After immigrating to Canada with almost nothing, Colin Hunter would become the Founder of Sunwing Vacations, Sunwing Airlines and other divisions including a string of all inclusive resorts in the Caribbean, Mexico, and Central America.

By Peter Kerr

Colin Hunter arrived in Canada with nothing, and eventually fulfilled his dream of owning an airline, an idea he developed as a young man while working for British Airways in London, England. As an immigrant who chose Canada, Colin is the embodiment of the Canadian Dream; an inspiring story of a business success. That success has benefitted thousands of Canadians with good jobs throughout the country. Coincidentally, many more thousands of jobs were eventually created in the Caribbean, Mexico and Central America when the company expanded into the resort ownership business.

Under his leadership and with the steadfast support and business acumen of his son Stephen, Sunwing would become the most important vertically integrated travel company in Canada and one of the largest in North America. Colin is also quick to point out that without his supportive wife and a happy homelife – none of what he accomplished would have been possible.

This is the story of an immensely talented entrepreneur who – against all odds – started an airline to support his fledgling holiday tour company and thereby consolidating the resort and air travel components under one roof.

Colin Hunter immigrated to Canada in the early 70's after his family had relocated to England in the 60s. He began his travel industry experience while working at British Airways, and continued his educational studies at night. To supplement his income and make ends meet, he also worked as a bartender for a premier London Dance Hall.

Growing up in Bombay (now Mumbai) Colin demonstrated his competitive nature at an early age. He was

Captain of the boxing team at Cathedral Boys' School. He continued with the sport and was Captain of the university team of St. Xavier's College; and won the championship for his weight division for three consecutive years, beginning in 1956. In a preview of his singing career later in life, Colin frequently sang on All India Radio, the country's national broadcaster since 1936.

After arriving in Toronto in the early 70s, Colin started working as a reservation clerk at the newly formed Sunflight Holidays in October of 1970. The tour operator offered all-inclusive sun destination holidays. Colin's pay was just \$90 per week. The company recognized his abilities and by 1984 Colin was a Vice-President. He then worked on contract for Carousel Tours for a year before heading up Dallas-owned Adventure Tours, which operated the all-inclusive Jack Tar Villages in The Bahamas. They expanded to other destinations and continued with the all-inclusive format.

In late 1988, Colin entered into an agreement with UK-based Air 2000 to start Canada 3000 with a group of partners and operating in the all-inclusive holiday market. The other partners wanted to transform Canada 3000 into a scheduled carrier, and Colin disagreed with that strategy. The partners bought his shares; leaving him unemployed but with a strong financial footing gained from selling his shares. It proved to be a wise decision because Canada 3000 closed after 9/11 proving Colin's belief that becoming a scheduled carrier was not a smart strategic move.

Former trusted employees and executives at Adventure Tours and Canada 3000 convinced Colin that there was an opportunity in the marketplace for a new tour operator in the aftermath of 9/11. The budding entrepreneur decided to use the proceeds from his shares to



Colin Hunter founded Sunwing tours and airline, creating 3,000 new Canadian jobs

launch Sunwing Vacations. Using knowledge gained in the holiday travel business, Colin's first step involved setting up the tour operator, and then he followed by launching the airline.

In the beginning, Sunwing used Jetsgo for their weekend flights to sun destinations. Jetsgo would eventually fail, and Sunwing was obliged to buy seats on other airlines. This was to be a pivotal time for Colin. He decided to bring the flight portion of the company in-house; the die was cast to act on his dream of owning an airline.

Against the advice of others, Colin decided to apply for a licence to operate aircraft. The process took a year, and required all of his financial resources... and more. To bridge the financial gap, he mortgaged some personal assets to acquire the additional funds needed to complete the project in 2005.

Sunwing positioned itself as the airline that put style and grace back to air travel. A glass of sparkling wine before take-off and hot meals. While operating costs would eventually make those hot meals prohibitive – it proved to be a brilliant marketing move that captured the imagination (and loyalty) of the travelling public.

Come Fly With Me!

In addition to his business acumen – Colin is a talented crooner singer, adept at performing songs from The American Songbook by artists such as Frank Sinatra, Dean Martin and Tony Bennett. In another brilliant marketing move, Sunwing passengers are treated to the owner of the airline singing his rendition of Frank Sinatra's hit song, *Come Fly With Me* shortly before takeoff.

After a good start in Ontario, Colin enlisted the talents of Sam Char in Montreal to launch Sunwing in the Quebec market. With a smaller company infrastructure, smaller and cost-efficient Boeing 737 aircraft; the company was nimbler than their main competitors.



Encouraged to record *Come Fly With Me* to play before take-off, Colin launched a new career as a jazz crooner of the American Songbook



Colin's performances include the Montreal International Jazz Festival

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