



FAMILY AFFAIR

WASHING UP FOR THOUSANDS, STACKING POTS AND PANS, CLEANING CUTLERY WAS THE BACKGROUND THAT LED A BROTHER AND SISTER TO HEAD MILES FROM HOME.

Thomas and Kristin Holdo Hansen weren't running away from drudgery in tears when leaving Sandefjord – population 43,000 – in Norway.

They were swept up by the inevitable... travel, tourism and hospitality was in the family wanderlust tradition.

Thomas, 34, smiles: "I suppose you could say it's all in our genes.

"Our dad, Hans-Ivar, 61, went to sea as a commis chef when he was 16 and later went on to become chief steward and cruise manager on full-rigged sailing boats and cruise ships. His father before him also sailed the seven seas. Dad always brought home interesting stories and memorabilia from all over the world.

"He's a teacher in food and hospitality subjects but has his own catering company. So we've seen at first hand the hard work required to this life.

"From small children, with our mum Berit, 60, we became part of the back-of-house hospitality operations when needed.

"Catering for more than 4,000 people or managing the logistics involved in arranging VIP events at a protected lighthouse in the Oslofjord certainly provided useful experiences for us later."

They are now based in Cambodia and its culture and magnetism seem to stick to them like glue. Kristin was hooked on the place after staying three days on a backpacking world tour in 1999.

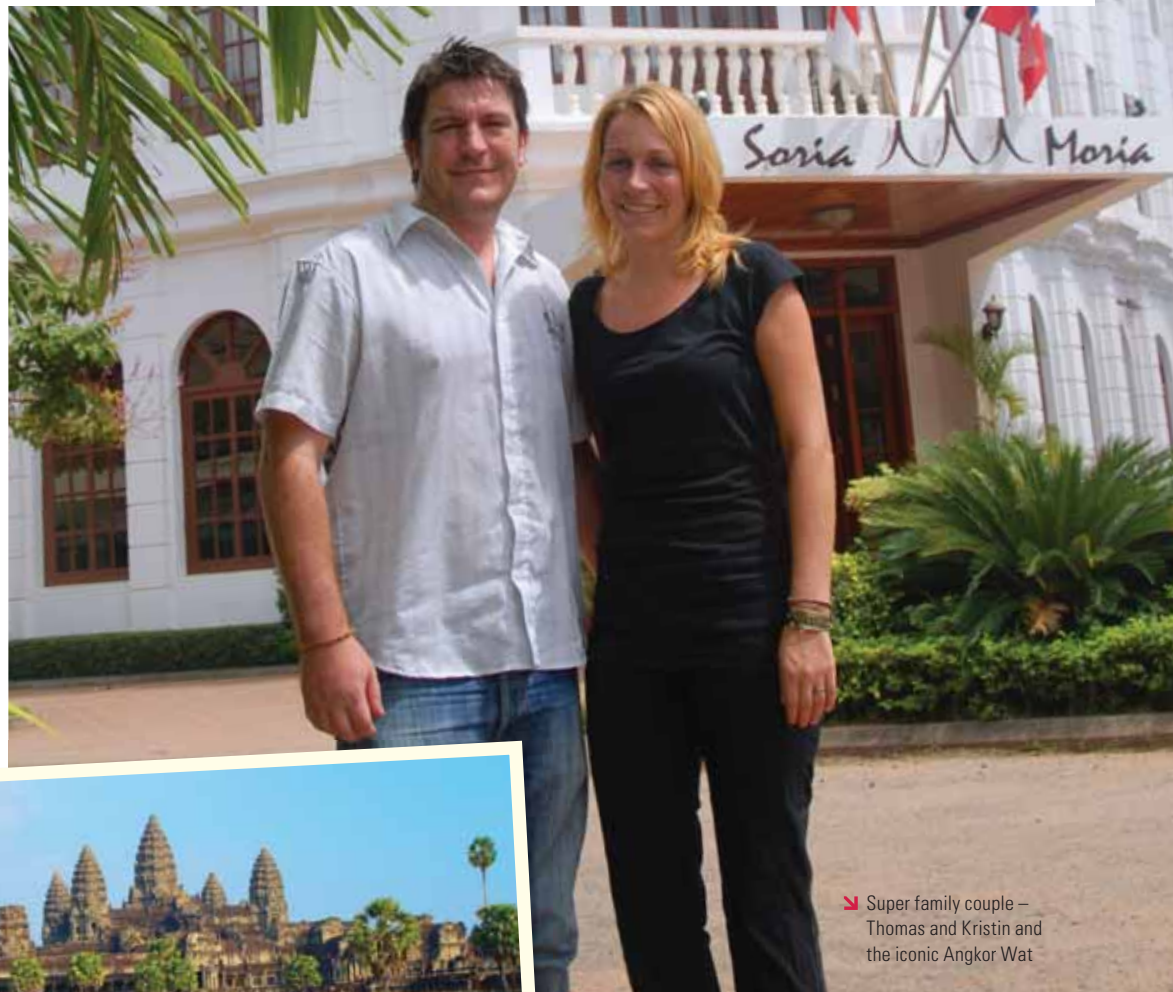
"In many ways, there are similarities between our upbringing and many family-run businesses in Cambodia. If required, all members of the family help out," adds Thomas, who studied for his tourism degree in Brighton, UK.

"Perhaps it is uncommon with siblings but we are not only business partners but also very close friends always inspiring each other!"

Kristin, 29, who gained Bachelor and Master degrees in tourism and business while in Sydney, Australia, says: "Our involvement together started in 2001 in Siem Reap when we opened a 20-room guesthouse with fellow like-minded students."

Thomas recalls: "Having read and heard about sustainable and responsible tourism in university lectures, our aim was not only to create a high-quality budget 'place to stay' but one which gave something back to the local community.

"We found that many of our guests at Earthwalkers were



Super family couple – Thomas and Kristin and the iconic Angkor Wat



interested in what we were doing and often stayed longer than average or initially planned. They got to see and do more than just the Angkor temples and greatly enhanced the travel experience."

Their work was quickly noticed.

- In 2004 they were finalists in Mekong Private Sector Development Facility's Corporate Citizenship Awards.
- In 2005, they were 'head hunted' to become Destination Managers for Worldhotel-link – a business model to assist small and medium-scale local accommodation providers.
- In 2007 they were asked to host an international workshop that was widely acclaimed. Thomas says: "A major conference goal was to demonstrate that 'action speaks louder than words.' Everything had RT elements. Thomas says: "The guesthouse is still operating, but the new major shareholders have a different management approach and, unfortunately, the focus on RT has gradually disappeared. "However, the practices that Earthwalkers were famous for are being continued at Soria Moria, opened in 2007." Already, it has been nominated for a range of awards. Kristin and her partner Ken Oishi – they had their first child recently – call Soria Moria "a people-oriented hotel geared

to create a win-win-win situation for guests, the local environment and the business."

Kristin manages the property. Ken is also founder and director of NEDO, the Norwegian Educational Development Organisation,

Kristin says: "Ultimately, we would like to help make Siem Reap and Cambodia a better place for people to live and visit. Our vision is to become the first choice of accommodation for independent travellers and small groups, offering a unique experience combining the best of local history with international standards of service and facilities.

"We aim to create awareness of responsible tourism practices and encourage visitors' participation."

Thomas says: "For us both there is a continuous learning process."

Kristin says: "Thomas and I have many stories, but right now we are especially proud of one of the first staff we employed. Seven years ago Sokha Khim worked as a cleaner and kitchen hand. She has just completed her bachelor degree in Tourism Management and next year starts her Masters.

"Sokha, 26, married with a two-year-old son, comes from a poor background and was extremely shy with little English. Today she speaks it excellently, has basis skills in other languages, and for the past year has been Soria Moria's Front Office Manager.

"She runs a 'sponsor a university student' programme that I recently initiated in Soria Moria. Some of the applications received – five enrolled in September – are very touching." Cambodia has been touched by Thomas and Kristin.