

Small business of the month

Aquaholics Dive Centre, Portstewart

By Amy Leonard



Always thought scuba diving was confined to exotic, sun-drenched locations with translucent blue waters? Think again.

Aquaholics Dive Centre in Portstewart provides the opportunity for you to explore Northern Ireland's remarkable north coast from an angle you've never seen; on, and under, the sea.

The Dive Centre has a five star accreditation from PADI (The Professional Association of Diving Instructors) and offers a full range of scuba diving courses, from 'Discover Scuba Diving' for beginners wanting to test the waters, to the PADI Master Scuba Diver to get people on their way to a new career.

The Sea Safaris provide the chance to see it all from the comfort of the deck, with boat trips that cover the entire north coast, from the Giant's Causeway to Malin Head to Rathlin Island.

Back on dry land there is also the Aquaholics Dive Shop which supplies all major brands of everything dive-related.

In addition to all that, Aquaholics also provides marine services for film crews from the likes of Disney, *Game of Thrones* and BBC during shoots at sea.

They have most bases covered already but a recent acquisition is going to push their span even further.

The business has invested in a new commercial vessel, a catamaran, in the hopes of attracting a wider range of international tourists to the area.

The new boat is a step up in the luxury stakes and Richard Lafferty, owner of Aquaholics, says it's what the business needs in order to compete with global destinations such as the Maldives and the Red Sea.

"The catamaran will provide a far higher level of comfort for the visiting tourists, with a lot more space on board, larger dive deck, larger viewing platform for non divers, heated cabins, berths and a galley on board, and a high sea level so we can spot wildlife easier for our customers."

Richard began diving at the age of 12 after seeing other people do it on the north coast and thinking he may as well have a go. It started as a hobby but when other jobs left him wanting, things developed. "I had a normal job for a while, but I got fed up sitting in front of a computer screen. Now I teach diving and get to show people our amazing coastline."

With Aquaholics now operating for over twenty years, and taking up to twenty-four people out on the boats every day, he's come a long way.

"Not a lot of people realise how attractive the North Coast is to divers and we see a real opportunity to bring more international visitors to the area. This new, state-of-the-art vessel enables us to provide the high quality service our customers now expect."

This is a new chapter for the business and Richard knows he has a key partner to thank.

"Ulster bank provided great support. This boat has been in the plan for about two years and Ulster Bank let us adjust our requirements in what we needed financially right until the completion date of the boat."

Rhonda McClelland, business manager at Ulster Bank, says Richard's innovative business approach and the beneficial effects to the local area are impressive.

"Richard has diversified the business extremely well, including his line of work in servicing media companies and film crews. He has also invested well in his core diving operation and we are very pleased to support this latest purchase intended to bring more international visitors to the North Coast."

With ever improving and increasing standards for themselves, it looks like business should be smooth sailing for Aquaholics in the future. ■

A word from

The Wise

The column with an ear for experience...

Name:
Nick Whelan

Position:
Group Chief Executive,
Dale Farm



How did you start out in business?

I joined Kerry Group on a graduate scheme after gaining a B.Comm at University College Cork (UCC). I was lucky to join at a time of significant transformation and change, and opportunities were abundant within the Kerry business. In that time, I built a strong foundation in many aspects of business and after 12 years in different parts of the Kerry Group, I moved to Glanbia in 2007 taking on the role of Commercial Director. Now, a little further north, I've been in my new position as Group CEO of Dale Farm for four months. It's been fantastic getting to know the people behind this impressive business and working with them to build ambitious plans for the company's future.

into your vision for you to get the best out of them and to do this I've always operated an open door policy which cultivates an environment where everyone feels they have a valuable contribution to make. I try to be generous with my time and make a point of never underestimating anyone. Effective communication is key to delivering on this approach.

What would you change if you could go back and do it all again?

I would honestly say nothing. I have been blessed to work in remarkable companies and join them at an opportune time when they are in periods of growth.

Have you done it all on your own?

I have arrived where I am today thanks to a number of important people in my life. It's essential to always surround yourself with people that you can learn different styles and strategies from – not only in business, but in wider life. Joining a graduate programme is a great opportunity for a young person to get exposure within a business and receive mentorship. However nothing I've achieved would be possible without the help of my family – my wife Sandra, in particular. We've recently relocated from Kilkenny to Belfast to allow me to fulfil my ambition to lead Dale Farm, and to have that support is priceless.

What did you find the most challenging during your years in business?

The dairy industry is a tough environment because so many factors are outside of your control. In recent years, the market has become globalised and as a result become more volatile. The key to success is the ability for companies to be agile and adjust to the speed at which the industry moves. There is also a huge responsibility in this business to employ a strategy that will ultimately deliver value right back to the farmer, and create a company which our owners are proud of.

How would you describe your management style?

I've always believed that inclusive leaders get the best out of their people which ultimately ensures an organisation succeeds in today's complex and diverse landscape. It is as important to invest in your employees as it is to invest the company's infrastructure. Everyone in the business needs to buy

How would you like your business career to be remembered?

For building and developing successful businesses while also developing successful careers – that's very important to me. I feel a huge sense of pride when people grow under my mentorship and go on to achieve their goals. ■