



# Angel Tours Celebrates 20 Years

by Keith Loria  
Photos courtesy of Angel Tours

Founded in 1998 to serve a casino, Angel Tours has grown to be one of Canada's most prominent charter companies. The company celebrated its 20th anniversary in 2018. Note that this Prevost H3-45 in the Angel Tours fleet carries the name "Trillium."

In 2018, Angel Tours and Entertainment Inc. is in the midst of celebrating its 20th anniversary as one of Canada's most prominent charter companies. It continues to live up to the company's name – being an "angel" of great service to the thousands of passengers it carries each year.

The birth of the company in 1998 stemmed from an opportunity with Casino Rama, a large casino, hotel and entertainment complex located in the town of Rama, Ontario, which offers more than 2,500 slot machines, 110 gaming tables, eight unique restaurants, a world-class 5,000-seat entertainment center and a 300-room all-suite, full-service hotel.

"Commercial casinos had just opened in Ontario for the first time ever and Casino Rama was a mere 1½-hour commute from the Greater Toronto Area, yet very few people knew how to get there," says Angie Ricci, owner of Angel Tours. "I worked for Casino Rama's player development department in a satellite office opened to build relationships with guests. We would generate so much pre-formed group business from that location that in March 1998, we had 144 buses arrive on property over one weekend."

The resort even had a T-shirt distributed saying, "I survived March Madness" and it was so successful, that there were lineups across the casino floor trying to get into the buffet restaurant. The casino was at capacity and guests could not find a table or slot

machine to play. Ricci knew this was an opportunity to do something on her own.

"In 1998, I left the casino to start up my own company with a public vehicle license destined to Casino Rama only," she says. "I hired other bus companies to transport my guests and I showed up at each pick-up to build relations with my group leaders and offer promo items to build the Angel brand. I remember giving out key chains with angel-looking cherubs on them, which was a big hit."



Quickly, news travelled across the casino floor that some of the guests were winning because of the cherubs and more people wanted them. Ricci realized that this was a great way to bring attention to her brand, and she spent the next two decades highlighting the Angel and its meaning in the company.

## Growing the Business

In June 1999, Angel Tours purchased its first bus, a brand new 1999 H3-45 Prevost. Back in those days demo buses were spec'd with all the bells and whistles to wow the purchaser and passengers. It was deep purple – a royal color that would be embraced by the large travelling Asian market, which Ricci's marketing data told her would be important to the company's success.

"The decision to acquire our own vehicles was risky yet needed to happen to have more control over vehicle condition and driver selection," she says. "By the year 2000, we expanded our public vehicle license and got our charter license, one of the largest scoped licenses issued. I remember taking 133 support witnesses to our public vehicle license hearing with the Ontario Highway Transport Board, that would last all day. This hearing was the largest in participants and the OHTB has never witnessed anything like it."

Thankfully, Angel Tours was successful at obtaining the regions it applied for and began offering charter services. In the fall of 1999, the company purchased another 1999 H3-45 Prevost, then in 2000 it leased another three H3-45 year 2000 models. By 2001, the company had seven newer model coaches.

Then, the tragic events of September 11 happened and it would change the scope of the travel industry – and all Angel Tours had worked so hard to achieve – forever.

"In August of 2001, we opened a 2,000-square-foot office in Barrie to expand our charter market, but the next month the tragic Twin Towers event would instantly change our business plan," Ricci says. "Insurance dropped all coverage to the United States and all the trips there were cancelled at the snap of a finger. Our insurance premiums went up from \$30,000 to \$85,000 instantly. We were lucky to have enough casino business to cover our financial commitments, but we would have to work harder to retain it."

### Proudly Woman-Owned

Angel Tours & Entertainment Inc. is the only bus company founded, owned and operated in Canada by a female. Ricci tries to bring other females into the industry, which is why she is trying to increase the company's roster of female drivers, noting that women represent only three percent of people currently in the industry. This is something she hopes to change in the years ahead. She believes that women can be strong leaders and workers in the industry and also provide something that not all men can.

"All bus companies have their ways of doing business; ours includes the human touch," Ricci says. "I treat the company as a family member by transferring my 'mama bear skills' into the operation. We are also a bit more creative with some of our slogans."

For example, recent ones have included "Ride the Only Wings that Never Leave the Ground" and "Thanks for Being an Angel" – sayings that not only capitalize on the clever moniker but express the company's commitment to the customer.

"This fall, we are planning to promote a safety message to other drivers by advertising it on the sides of the bus – these are our 45-foot moving billboards," Ricci says. "Our



The Angel Tours fleet consists of 55- and 56-passenger new model Prevest luxury coaches. It is interesting that the buses in the fleet are not numbered but each carries a unique name. Company staff, including the drivers, participate in the coach naming process.

units are not numbered, but uniquely named i.e. Cupid, Pride, Legend, Loonie, Toonie, Autumn, etc. We even let drivers participate in the naming." The company's current fleet includes 55- and 56-passenger newer model Prevest luxury coaches.

### A Solid Team

Though it started with minimal drivers back at the beginning, Angel Tours currently employs 38 drivers, and plans to add another six or eight before the year ends. "A strong team comes from a strong management that leads by example," Ricci says. "We have taken the unprecedented steps to focus on shortening the hours of a driver's days

when and where we can. To do this you must understand the challenges the driver is facing like increased traffic, distracted drivers, construction, weather and the most important, driver fatigue itself or health and fatigue of an aging workforce."

One of Ricci's favorite things about looking back at 20 years in business is that both her kids – Sarah and Johnathan – have held roles in the company since their teens. And while many of its drivers have retired over time, there is an equal number who have stayed part of the family for years and years.

"Our most senior employee of 20 years, John Teixeira, started as a driver, then trained



Angel Tours currently has four locations and a fifth office. The company has their own mechanics and supporting apprentices. Shown here are Angie Ricci in the center with son Johnathan Ricci on the left and daughter Sarah Ricci on the right.



to become a driver trainer, then maintenance manager and now manages a fleet of 25 buses," Ricci says. "Our philosophy is respect in the workplace, respect the organizers and respect the needs of your travelling guests. Our motto is 'Thanks for Being an Angel.' It is not religious, it is just relatable, in everything, everyone and every day."

### Operations Matter

Angel Tours currently has four locations and a fifth office with a six-bay garage being built in Barrie, Ontario scheduled for completion by the end of the year. "We are specialists in the casino market, but are focused on the growth of charter business," Ricci says. "We do what makes sense for the company. We pick customers who value our service and let go of those who are bargain hunting. You get what you pay for."

While there is talk about autonomous buses in the industry, Ricci does not see that happening for vehicles that travel the speeds needed on unpredictable routes with the load counts her buses carry. "Our industry cannot be replaced by robotics. There are simply too many care and custom details that cannot be managed by robotics," she says. "Autonomous trucks carrying cargo is definitely doable, but our cargo is live and there is no room for error. Battery-operated buses yes, we do see this, but not autonomous."

With more than 20 years of doing business, Ricci has learned that the key to doing a strong business is both engagement and education. "The more you teach your client, the better the relationship," she says. "They become experienced in their role, which



The Angel Tour fleet started with a new 1999 Prevost H3-45. It was painted a deep royal purple that would catch the attention of the Asian traveling market. Today, the company operates a fleet of 25 modern Prevost coaches.

makes the booking process easier. Recognizing when an error is made on our side and making it up to the client is equally important. We also offer customer appreciation events and trips to thank them for entrusting us with their travel."

This year, the company will carry close to 300,000 guests, most of whom travel a daily VIP service to Casino Rama. This is slightly higher than its yearly average, and Ricci is excited about growing the company even more in the years ahead.

"Growth initiatives include having our own mechanics and supporting apprentices

for the bus industry," she says. "Our new location in Barrie will offer a much needed charter bus service to Simcoe County. We will offer wash service and light mechanic service to truckers in the area. Having newer buses has attracted a lot of new business that we simply cannot service. A good and bad problem to have so we will focus on those opportunities." □

This special logo on the side of the Prevost H3-45 named "Legend" calls attention to the fact that Angel Tours celebrates its 20th anniversary in 2018. Originally founded to provide service to a casino, the company has since expanded into a 25-coach fleet with several locations. The company looks forward to continued growth in the future.



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