

Ask any seasoned traveller, people are largely the same wherever you go. Some things need time for adjustment and understanding like local laws and odd delicacies, equally attempts at humour are best left to the brave and the bold – at least until you’re well settled in. My motto is ‘be polite, speak slow, and smile.’

Wherever you are, the people around you are usually working, living, loving and generally wanting for the same things as folks back home.

My journeys to Malaysia are an example of great people-focused service. It all kicks off with a chat, coffee and haircut by Cathy in Donaghadee-based Kelly Cowans, Northern Ireland’s L’Oreal award-winning salon, before my wife Joanne takes me to the airport. Some twenty four hours later I walk into my accommodation in downtown Kuala Lumpur (KL) to be greeted by the concierge saying “Welcome back Mr Philip”. Whether Donaghadee or KL it’s the little touches that count.

Customer services are driving the mobile market too as consumers across the globe demand the latest technology and data services quickly and at the lowest prices. The pace of the sector is creating new opportunities for hi-tech Northern Ireland firms as global operators scramble to satisfy consumers from Strabane to Singapore or Seattle.

Local staff at SLA Mobile’s Centre of Excellence, based in the Malaysian capital of KL, are quick to remind us that until only recently Asian consumers had to look on enviously as their European cousins worked and grappled with the latest technology trends. Boy has that changed. iPhones and smartphones are now just as common on the streets of KL as they are in the leafy suburbs of Belfast.

Helped by recent price declines, smartphones are within reach of the growing middle-classes in Southeast Asia’s top six economies; Singapore, Malaysia, Thailand, Philippines, Indonesia and Vietnam. That’s a market of nearly 500 million people.

Manufacturers are rising to the challenge and shipments of smartphones this year are forecast to rise to 9.7 million units in Southeast Asia, more than three times the forecast level of growth for mobile phones in the region.

The boon in availability is good news for consumers, operators and manufacturers, but it is also providing a wealth of opportunities for mobile data and service providers in a position to reach the growing markets.

In Indonesia, for example, we recently unveiled a new mobile advertising service for mobile operators. Designed by our team in KL, it is now in use in Indonesia enabling our customer to offer its 25 million mobile customers cheaper internet access in return for receiving targeted adverts.

With almost all countries in Southeast Asia boasting 3G, services and delivery here are largely similar to that in Europe and is often backed by familiar global brands such as Vodafone. Indigenous providers, although not widely known in Northern Ireland, also command a lion’s share of the market with firms like Indonesia-based Indo XL and SingTel, representing two of Southeast Asia’s largest telecoms operators.

Mirroring established consumer markets in Europe and USA, each anticipated launch, handset unveiling or new service offering is watched and gossiped on intensely by trade and consumers alike. For example, excitement is already building here for the forthcoming Communicasia expo in June and the 2010 Mobile Asia Congress (MAC) which takes place in November.

For firms like SLA Mobile, it represents an opportunity to get to understand more about our markets, establish new contacts and reconnect with old ones. Importantly it gives us a chance to review the technology and opportunities that are coming down the line.

Drawing a lot of early excitement is the Mac's first-ever App Planet event which features app developer conferences with top mobile providers, app exhibitions and networking. But whether you're a fan or not, there's no denying that the Apple iPhone and its 'apps store' reigns supreme here just as it does at home.

With stylish good looks and game-changing functionality, the iPhone is the most talked about and most wanted handset in Malaysia. Mind you there are lots of cheap knock-off imitations flooding the market too. Most of the fakes lack basic functionality, in fact some cannot even make calls, but the eerie aesthetic similarities make them notoriously difficult to tell apart from the original and fool thousands of bargain-hunters.

With consumers constantly wanting to increase their street credibility, access to the latest technology and save some cash there will probably always be a demand for cheap imitations and not just in KL. In Northern Ireland you've probably seen one or two suspicious vendors at the open air markets or designer goods with prices that really are too good to be true.

It just underlines what we already know; people and demands for bargains really are the same wherever you go.