We built a carbon-neutral hotel booking app for good people

Mike English aims to disrupt a $700 billion market with a travel platform that uses an army of AI agents to help save the planet

INTERVIEW
LINDA DALY

ILLUSTRATION BY JAMES COWEN

When Mike English was 22, he thought he had hit the big time when he sold a piece of software to a US company for $600,000. The application in question made it possible to zoom in on charts, an innovation in the 1990s.

English, a Cahir native, never quite reached the financial heights of Jeff Bezos or Bill Gates but his new tech venture could prove to be a nice earner.

"I went on to sell a number of pieces of code over the years ... but scaling a business is tough," he says.

IMPT, which English co-founded with Denis Creighton in 2022, is looking to disrupt the online travel agent industry, a sector that itself was regarded as the disruptor when it emerged in the late 1990s.

"Three companies sold the world's hotels: Booking, Expedia, Agoda. Now, there's a fourth – built for good people," IMPT's website claims.

English spent six years building IMPT's hotel booking technology, which he says does a few things that other online travel agents do not.

"We're taking on companies that are 20 to 30 years ahead of us. We bloody well had to find a different way to do it," he says.

First, users can book by typing in a plain English sentence, which is then handled by "a swarm" of AI agents. The IMPT app – which the founders wanted to be a play on the word "impact" – offers access to eight million hotels in 195 countries, but the AI agents will throw up a more refined list of hotels based on what they think will suit the customer's needs.

Second, every time a customer uses the IMPT tool to book a hotel, the company will put 5 per cent of its margin towards carbon offsetting.

The company has completed deals with about 100 United Nations-verified farmers' organisations around the world.

"The travel industry is one of the heaviest on the environment. If you stay in a hotel, you have air-conditioning, you have towel washing ... If the transaction happens with us, it's carbon neutral."

English says that rather than encourage people to turn off lights to save the planet, he wanted saving the planet to become a seamless part of their day-to-day lives.

"The idea is very simple. We wanted to come up with a way to allow people to impact climate without having to do anything extra," he says. On its app, users can see the projects that their carbon credits go towards. It could be the planting of 40 trees or the operation of a solar farm.

A third differentiator for IMPT is that it does not just sell hotel stays. Users can shop via the app, which has 25,000 retail partners as well as its own shops.

The company tailors shopping experiences for customers based on their preferences. If a person is interested in surfing, for example, they can click on a section that offers everything from surfboards to hotels in good surfing locations. Or if yoga is their thing, they will can access yoga mats and yoga retreats at the click of a button.

IMPT works off a commission-based model. The company charges about 18 per cent on hotel stays, which English claims is "cheaper than Booking.com on about 90 per cent of its hotels".

He is not harbouring any grandiose ideas that IMPT can swoop in and start eating Amazon's or Booking.com's lunch, but he would like IMPT to become the go-to app for online shoppers. He also fancies making a dent in the $700 billion online travel agency market.

"We certainly won't compete with [Booking.com] on last-minute hotels in London," English says. "They spend €7 billion a year on marketing. We have had €25 million to scale the business. They would spend that in an hour."

English says, since it was set up in 2022, the company has raised about €25 million from backers including venture capitalists and family: "There's probably about 15 to 20 investors in the business."

The company has spent a big chunk of its initial fundraising on getting the tech right. It has also grown its staff headcount to about 25 – compared with 10,000-plus at Booking.com. However, English says recent advances in artificial intelligence have helped level the playing field for small businesses.

"AI allows the small guy to take on the big guy a little bit more. Our 25 [human] guys now have 100 [AI] agents working for them," says English, who acts as IMPT's chief technology officer while Creighton is its chief executive. Creighton, a serial entrepreneur and adviser, is a former chief executive of Conduit, the once stock market-listed contact centre operator.

Coding is English's first love. One of seven children, he was raised on a tillage farm in Cahir but when his mother bought the house a home computer in 1992, he was hooked.

For most of his career he has been self-employed. He started building websites for people and worked with various tech companies over the years, including the software giant Oracle. Between 2006 and 2013 he was a consultant for Tesco, helping the retailer to implement its grocery delivery website internationally. He went on to spend a year providing IT consultancy services for the Heffernan family-owned Dunnes Stores.

"I have worked with the powerhouses but this time we are the little boy coming around the back and trying to find ways to [make our mark]. I love that," he says.

English has not always been faithful to tech; he has made property investments. In the recession, he entered the hospitality trade when he bought the 12-room Ocean hotel in Dunmore East in Co Waterford, which had been placed into receivership by Bank of Scotland (Ireland).

English says he ran the hotel for about six months and gained an insight into some of the needs of hoteliers. After realising his heart was in tech, he let the hotel to other operators. In 2021 the property was destroyed by fire. English finally sold it this year after settling a claim with his insurance company.

> I have worked with powerhouses but this time we are the little boy coming around the back

Another business venture was My Frozen Yogurt, a retail chain selling frozen yoghurt. At one stage the company had seven shops but a dispute with one of its shareholders in 2016 brought English's time with the business to an end. "We made a settlement," he says.

A decade on and English is fully focused on IMPT as it enters what he sees is a growth phase. So far the app has been downloaded more than 100,000 times. English says it has an active shopper base of about 20,000 people.

The business is about a year behind where it was supposed to be. English and Creighton put a pause on the company's growth last year after an unthinkable family tragedy.

In April 2025, English's 18-year-old daughter, Bronagh, was killed in a single-car collision while travelling home from a maths grind lesson she was taking before her leaving certificate exams.

For the past year he and his family have been navigating their grief, while also trying to find answers from Tipperary county council about the lack of road signage on the road where Bronagh was killed. English says he wants to improve road safety in Ireland.

He turned to tech to help with his grief, setting up an AI tool that allows family members to create an AI approximation of their loved ones using photos, voice notes and other memories. He hopes to launch it this year. In the meantime, he will try to change the world in other ways.

The carbon credit market has been open to abuse, including accusations of inflated and false climate benefits. Similarly credits have been reused long after they have had made any impact. English says by IMPT using blockchain technology, it injects some transparency into the process.

"Our carbon credits are [akin to being] from farm to plate. We track everything from the carbon credit provider. You can see where the credit comes from and there's a public record every time you retire a carbon credit," he says.

The next stage for IMPT is to allow users to pay their home utility bills through the app. The company is in discussions with a UK supplier.

English wants users to be able to pay their gas, electricity and broadband bills through the app, and will continue to introduce new products on the app.

The company has customers in 92 countries, from Ireland to China, and English wants to add countries where it is accessible. It will look to do a series B fundraising shortly, to fund future growth – but English does not imagine it will ever reach the €7 billion annual marketing budget of Booking.com.

He sees himself as David to the Goliath of the established online travel agencies. "Our biggest challenge is that we're up against the world's biggest companies," English says. "We're up to the challenge."

THE LIFE OF MIKE ENGLISH

Age: 50
Lives: Clonmel, Co Tipperary
Family: married to Danielle with children Mia, Mikey and David, and the late Bronagh
Education: Rockwell College in Tipperary as a day boarder. A diploma in applied project management from the UCD Michael Smurfit Graduate Business School
Favourite film: *The Shawshank Redemption*
Favourite book: *Beyond Weird* by Philip Ball

WORKING DAY
I'm a very early starter. I start at 5am every day. I code aggressively. I work with my teams and do catch-ups in the morning and afternoon every day. I travel up to Dublin about once a week and we have a small satellite office in Berlin, which I'll often visit.

DOWNTIME
I spend my evenings doing a bit of farming. I have eight acres with some hens, an old donkey and ponies. My father used to describe me as a "big gardener" rather than a farmer.

'I went from F1 champion to the venture capital rat race'

William Turvill

It's ten years since Nico Rosberg reached the summit of his sport, beating Lewis Hamilton – his childhood friend, Mercedes team-mate and fierce rival – to the 2016 Formula 1 championship. It is also, ten years since Rosberg, aged 31, flummoxed the racing world by retiring five days after this win.

"It was so incredibly tense – it was not sustainable," says the German-Finnish Rosberg, 40. "Some others have much thicker skin, and I'm much more of a sensitive person, so it gets to me more."

Today, while the 41-year-old Hamilton is still racing and attracting paparazzi attention by dating Kim Kardashian, Rosberg is quietly making waves in the world of venture capital – where his "fund of funds", invests in the portfolios of other VC firms – and a new start-up investment vehicle.

He started raising money for Rosberg Ventures in 2022, struggling to get started because "I'm a race car driver and I have nothing to show"; now, he says, his fund has $200 million of assets under management, mainly from wealthy European family offices. "There was a 10 per cent chance it was going to work," he says. "It should have failed, actually."

I meet Rosberg in the breakfast room of an upmarket London hotel, where he is nursing an £18 bowl of matcha and chia seed parfait. When I order a flat white, he gives me a puzzled look and asks: "What's that?"

After hanging up his helmet in 2016, Rosberg was "scared" as he faced the prospect of starting a career. Initially, he experimented with the David Beckham model: lots of social media, advertising campaigns and attention-seeking media work aimed at telling your "story".

"You can see Lewis Hamilton doing that as well," he says. "Part of it is the fashion side. So he walks into the palais every time with a different outfit. It generates reach every time because it's amusing for people to look at. He's telling a story there: 'I'm a creative fashionista walking into the palais with crazy outfits.' "

Rosberg didn't enjoy this foray. Instead, he found a more lucrative use for his fame – breaking into venture capital. He says in the VC world, everyone knows the best funds to invest in – those controlled by, for example, Silicon Valley's Andreessen Horowitz and Sequoia Capital. The challenge is gaining access to them.

Rosberg's pitch to would-be investors was: let me use my renown to open doors for you to invest in the most exciting young companies in the world. And, after a time, "people believed my hustle".

Nico Rosberg with his wife Vivian Sibold after securing the F1 World Drivers Championship in Abu Dhabi in 2016

After persuading family offices to commit their tens of millions to his fund, Rosberg used his fame to introduce himself to venture capitalists in Silicon Valley.

The way he tells it, he has built a virtuous circle of investors and funds, with him as the fixer in the middle. After building a reputation over the past few years, Rosberg says it's becoming easier to win new investment and buy into funds.

As well as operating his "fund of funds", Rosberg and his small team, which includes six full-time staff, are investing directly in start-ups. "Again, it's not rocket science," he says.

"You can see the top 20 clearly. Out of London, for example, it's ElevenLabs [the AI speech generation tool]. It's pretty obvious that's a company that's likely to do well. The problem is, again, nobody can get in. It's oversubscribed and so many people get rejected. It's hard to get in ... We can get in."

Another UK company in which Rosberg has invested is Fuse Energy, a tech start-up founded by former executives at challenger bank Revolut.

To break into start-up investment rounds, Rosberg is utilising his background once more. Shortly before our meeting, while visiting London from his home in Monaco, he had been for a go-karting session at Tottenham Hotspur's stadium with a group of founders. In Germany, he hosts dinners to introduce start-ups to chief technology and information officers at large companies such as Mercedes, BMW and Deutsche Telekom.

Rosberg also writes letters and emails asking to meet founders and influential figures. He has befriended OpenAI boss Sam Altman, an F1 fan, but not everybody responds to his missives. "I wrote to Joe Biden – he didn't answer," says Rosberg.

He is enjoying his new work life. But, I wonder, how does the buzz of landing a new investment compare with racing?

"It's not comparable," he admits, with a short, wistful sigh. "The thrill ... in racing – you're coming to the last corner and [then] it's done and... I'll never have that again."

He recalls a recent occasion when his team had just landed a place in a fundraising round that they'd been chasing. It was, "one of our biggest successes", and the team celebrated it with a WhatsApp message and three clap emojis. "I was like: 'Let's get the champagne out! Let's celebrate! Not just one WhatsApp.'

"It's still good, though," he adds. And when I ask if, a decade on, he has any regrets about his career choices, Rosberg responds emphatically: "Not at all."