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INTERVIEW Immersion Not Optional

Urbane Nomads Brings Culture and Fantasy to Life

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What is an "urbane nomad?"

Ask Hajar Ali. As founder of the Singapore-based luxury travel firm, she specializes in crafting the breathtaking and exotic into incredible getaways for her clients. Price tag aside, Urbane Nomads is the premier architect to transform any dream journey into a reality.

Of course, the company does cater to those with a more unique getaway in mind. Ever wanted to explore sunken portions of the Great Wall of China by SCUBA? How about heli-skiing down Everest or taking an elephant-back safari in Nepal? Wherever your global passion lies, it is entirely possible that Urbane Nomads can help you can find it.

Yet why is Urbane Nomads refreshing as a travel bureau? Carefully designed itineraries are ostensibly focused on allowing guests to experience the pure beauty and culture of a host country. Rather than sightseeing only around the hotel pool and spa, Urbane Nomads encourages guests to get a taste of the local culture. Private city and museum tours, tastings at the finest and most exotic restaurants, and time spent perusing village streets and busy city markets convey the spirit of each culture in an unadulterated form. Ali and her co-workers allow guests to experience a country not as an observer, but as a participant.

The Tech: What inspired you to found Urbane Nomads?

Hajar Ali: I started in the real estate agency industry, developing a niche in well-designed, architecturally distinguished properties. Working in such a niche market in real estate, however, meant that I was frequently dictated by the supply of such properties. For quite some time, I'd wanted a more creative role and felt that I'd found the answer during a trip to Argentinean Patagonia where the existence of luxury lodges in such remote places inspired the idea of a travel company that constantly tests the limits of accessibility, bringing guests to remote places in as much luxury as possible.

TT: Did you travel extensively as a child, and are you multilingual?

HA: I Had started travelling extensively only in my 20s but being in motion has always "settled" me — even if it was just taking a bus ride by myself. Chatwin referred to this in his "Nomadic Alternative," expanding on Pascal's theory about how all of man's unhappiness stemmed from a single cause, his inability to remain quietly in a room. I am only bilingual, unfortunately (Malay and English). I had spent a few years learning French but as my French is neither colloquial nor anywhere close to perfect, I dare not speak it.

TT: It is often said that travel is an enlightening and transformative experience. How have your travels changed your perspectives and perception of life?

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HA: I am not sure if I'd had a transformative experience during travel. Rather, it's a combination of serendipitous moments and the people I'd met that had steered me into a different course in life. They're also the moments like sleeping to the sounds of hooves thundering past your tent and emerging from your tent in the morning to be greeted by camels grazing on trees by the outdoor bath, sleeping in a "star bed" with nothing between me and the skies but a desultory mosquito net and simply the splendid beauty of the natural surroundings in certain places that will remain with me till my memory's taken away from me.

TT: You have said that your dream trip would be canoeing through the Iraqi marshlands? What made you choose this particular setting?

HA: The marshlands have been referred to as an Eden and Eden (and its various manifestations — Shambhala, Shangri-La, Paradesha...) has always dominated much of travel lore. The promise of natural beauty combined with the area's tortured recent history makes it a very interesting place for me, personally. Urbane Nomads is looking at working with an NGO to offer this itinerary next year so it looks like I might be going to the Iraqi marshlands over the next few months! Of course there are the issues of developing sustainable patterns of tourism, in ways that benefit the local community and which is not detrimental to efforts of re-building an ecological diversity that was lost when Saddam drained the area over a five-year period.

TT: What has been your most challenging vacation to plan? Your most exotic?

HA: Most challenging and exotic — a trip through Mongolia where we'd had to figure out landing rights and logistics (moving tents during winter, toilets, food, generators) and still trying to do it all in as much style as possible. We're still planning it as we speak.

TT: Are you an advocate of ecotourism?

HA: I am immediately skeptical of terms that are bandied around in any industry to the extent that it becomes commodified. Most of the forms of ecotourism that I'd seen revolve around a carbon offset system — rather akin to the sale of "indulgences." That said, I'd seen really good work in the most unlikely places — filtering of water in remote villages in Myanmar that makes the tap water potable that benefits not just the hotel but the entire village.

Which brings me to the concept of geotourism, which works towards a more responsible model of tourism — where the tourism dollar goes towards preserving the culture, environment and way of living of the destination traveled to. To me this means a form of tourism that preserves rather than bastardizes the local culture. One of the unfortunate consequences of mass (and unsustainable) tourism is the bastardization of local culture. Staged cultural performances for the benefit of tourists, devoid of its original meaning, or the relegation of an important art form into cheap tourist trinkets because the original art form, having lost its traditional patrons, would have been too costly to be sustained by mass tourism, are just some of the unfortunate side effects when a country opens up too fast to tourism. However, any nation learns from its mistakes and countries that are just opening up to tourism are quick to emphasize sustainability, not attracting more tourist numbers than would be sustainable either through the imposition of artificial barriers like daily tariffs or by setting up an infrastructure that is ideal for geotourism. Examples would be Bhutan, Oman, and Abu Dhabi — where the tourism infrastructure places an emphasis on the preservation of the environment and culture. Abu Dhabi's tourism efforts are obviously predicated on its cultural heritage, with headliner conservation efforts like the Sir Bani Yas Island. Oman has similarly opted for low-rise, luxury hotels instead of skyscrapers dominating its skyline and is promoting its eco and marine tourism opportunities. Bhutan is, of course, synonymous with sustainable tourism, with the Kingdom placing strict codes of conduct on cultural performances for tourists — there are no cultural performances allowed to be staged purely for the benefit of tourists, and visitors to Bhutan enjoy cultural performances in their original setting and intent.

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