

Fantastic Journeys And Who Can Find Them

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by

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KRYSTAL TAN

CO-FOUNDER OF BLUE SKY ESCAPES

In 2014, Krystal Tan held a day job as a lawyer when she started her first travel company, Andean Condor Voyager (ACV), to cater to adventure-seekers wanting to go trekking in Peru.

"It was meant to be a side gig," says Ms Tan, 30, who co-founded ACV with her fiancé Chervin Chow and Peruvian trekking guide Heimer Guillen Celestino. But even without much marketing, ACV's reputation spread by word of mouth.

In 2015, while still working as a corporate lawyer at Allen & Gledhill, she and Mr Chow decided to expand beyond Peru into Bhutan. Blue Sky Escapes was born, and they sent their first client there in November that year. In 2016, they added Mongolia to their portfolio.

Between 2015 and 2017, Blue Sky's bookings grew 40 per cent to 50 per cent year on year. It broke even within the first 20 months, which prompted her to quit her lawyer job.

"Running the travel business and holding down a full-time job got to be too much, and I had to pick between the two," recalls Ms Tan.

In the last 12 months, business has grown threefold. Sixty per cent of Blue Sky's bookings are for Bhutan, followed by Mongolia and Peru at 20 per cent each.

"I want to expand the depth of our offerings beyond the central and west of Mongolia," says Ms Tan, herself a keen traveller. Myanmar and Yunnan are also on the radar. The focus is on remote destinations for now, but Ms Tan doesn't rule out more developed countries in the future, as "experiences will drive the expansion of the business".

Her target clientele includes millennials already in the workforce - the tired and time-strapped with spending power not too unlike herself, she says. Currently, 40 to 50 per cent of her clientele are Singaporeans, the rest comprising expats in Singapore and around the region, and clients from the United States and Europe.

Blue Sky is also moving into customising retreats. It recently arranged a spiritual and fitness retreat in May in Bhutan. "This was our testbed," says Ms Tan, who adds that they are developing more retreats for other interests, such as humanitarian or craftsmanship.

One dream itinerary that she has put together is the Mongolian migration experience, where guests get to join the active migration of nomadic families between their summer and winter camps.

"They could help with packing and vaccinating the cattle and horses, which could easily number 300 to 400," says Ms Tan. "Then they can ride on horseback across the breathtakingly beautiful Mongolian steppes and the Altai mountains."

What also sets Blue Sky apart from other bespoke travel agencies is that "we don't put ourselves out as luxury", says Ms Tan. She does get requests for "no-expense spared" bookings - she is currently putting together such a trip to Bhutan for 100 family members and friends to celebrate a family matriarch's birthday. But Blue Sky will also work with clients with a budget of US\$250 to US\$300 a day.

Communications specialist Jeanne Lim spent US\$4,000 on her seven-day trip to Bhutan last November, staying in a mix of accommodation from a home stay to the five-star Como Paro. "Staying with a local family really helped me connect to the local culture," says the 40-year-old.