



FOUNDER OF JACADA TRAVEL

ALEX MALCOLM

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IF YOU'RE EVER IN Rio de Janeiro and decide to join the rest of the sun-bronzed locals on the beach, be careful where you sit, says Alex Malcolm, founder of Jacada, a UK-based luxury travel operator. Unless you're a local, you wouldn't know that the three-kilometre stretch of beach has invisible lines, dividing the crowds according to their social status depending on age, income level and sexual orientation, laughs Mr Malcolm. He knows because as a young graduate from London, he took off to Brazil for a couple of years, assimilating into local society so well that he would take visiting friends and family on cool insider tours they wouldn't be able to get from a commercial tour guide.

Mr Malcolm was working for a small travel company at the time, and it soon became clear to him that there was a ready market of discerning travellers who wanted the same kind of unique, local experience – it has since been the guiding principle behind his company, which now organises bespoke tours for the well-heeled who want to go beyond just luxury flights and accommodation to real, experiential travel.

From its beginnings in 2008, Jacada has expanded from London to Cape Town, Hong Kong and Santiago. In fact, the fastest-growing market is Asia, with Hong Kong in the lead. Singapore isn't far behind, with business growing by 20 per cent this year and expected to grow by 40 per cent in 2018. Hence Mr Malcolm's recent visit to meet potential clients. Does owning his own travel company mean he has visited every single place on earth? Not quite. His next big trip is going to be an adventure – he's off to Antarctica, where some polar bears are waiting to give him an insider's tour of their natural habitat.

What was your very first travel experience as a child and what got you hooked on it?

I was around seven years old and I clearly remember travelling through Italy. My parents had a restaurant and were foodies themselves – my Dad always had his guidebook looking for the best little local restaurants to try.

One day we took a long drive from our hotel to a restaurant in this little village. I think we'd made a mistake – the restaurant either wasn't there or wasn't open. The villagers saw how disappointed (and hungry) we were, and took us to the back of the local bar and offered us what they had. It was lasagne that

they'd cooked earlier and I still remember saying how it was the best lasagne I'd ever tasted and how close we all felt as a family having that moment.

What sparked your obsession with South America?

The music. Through university I was really into Brazilian music – samba and bossa nova. There was something quite alluring about these sounds, even though it was from the 1960s. After my exams I rustled some money together with a classmate and we went to Brazil for two weeks. That was when I realised I wanted to stay. The people were so warm, friendly and confident and as a relatively shy guy from close to London, I felt I had a lot to learn from them.

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How do you rationalise travellers' fascination with exotic lands and the fact that it's this very influx of foreigners that leads to the damage of natural landscapes?

I'm not sure I agree that tourism should be equated with damage. It's perfectly possible for tourism to be an entirely positive experience, it just needs to be managed well. Look at Bhutan, which realised it might be overrun and took the unusual step of charging a minimum price for travelling there. That's worked very well for them and they've been able to improve the lives of the local people while not compromising on culture. Travel is a way of bringing an income to the poorest people in the world and providing a value to otherwise endangered cultures and habitats.

What are some of the challenges involved in trying to stay a step ahead of the competition, to ensure that your tours are really very bespoke?

It's about being able to keep your ear to the ground

and invest the time being “out there”. You can spend your time visiting trade shows and waiting for things to come to you, you really have to be there and experience it to find something completely new that no-one else has. That's why we've set up offices across four continents, as that gives us a real connection with the places that our guests want to travel to, from Latin America, to Africa, to Europe and Asia.

You talk about sustainable travel. What role does that play in your business?

It's always been important to us, but we didn't realise just how important until recently. We really love the places we send people to so it's only natural that we want to protect them. We see ourselves in the travel industry as having a unique responsibility. We need not only to protect but also to show people that there's a way to make a difference, and that can even start with a very comfortable trip. We've made a commitment to carbon offset all the travel our clients make (even the international flights regardless of whether we booked them). It's all done through community projects so that you know that you're not just helping the environment, you're helping people and I think that marriage between the two is crucial.

So you're going to see polar bears. Are there any other places on your bucket list?

I prefer to see places multiple times (or for a long time) to really get to know them rather than just checking off boxes. I haven't been to Mongolia or Ethiopia yet, and have never really explored the Middle East. I'm fascinated by the “Far East” of Russia and would love to explore it.

What are the things you never travel without?

More recently it's my travel yoga mat. It's a daily practice that really helps me stay grounded. A pair of comfy sweatpants for the flight. And plenty of sunscreen, as I burn very easily.

So what's next for you?

I'm very happy doing what I do with Jacada. I hope we can open an office in Singapore soon. As for my personal life, I think I need to settle down and start a family (my mother will be very happy to hear me say that)!