

Why Krystal Tan left law to set up luxe travel boutique Blue Sky Escapes

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By most accounts, Krystal Tan could have had a long, brilliant legal career. Graduating from King's College London with a First, she cut her teeth at prestigious law firm Allen & Gledhill LLP in Singapore for over seven years and left as a senior associate. To decompress after long work hours and work stress, she would travel. Only thing was, she called her breaks "escapes", because they were always journeys to places "relatively inaccessible and remote, where the Wi-Fi was weak".

In 2014, during a rejuvenating and inspiring trek in Peru, she and then boyfriend Chervin Chow bonded with their Peruvian guide, Heimer, and decided to set up a Peru trekking company, Andean Condor Voyager, with the aim of bringing other adventurous travellers like themselves to Peru for tailored travel experiences. This arrangement of partnering local guides was also set up in destinations like Bhutan and Mongolia – under their umbrella brand, Blue Sky Escapes.

In July 2017, Tan finally took the leap to leave legal practice and dive fully into growing her boutique travel company. As true believers in experiences, when Chow proposed to Tan recently, he got her to dive for and mine her own diamond ring in Cape Town, South Africa.

You've made travelling your work. How do you take a break?

The kind of travel we offer is very experiential, to relatively remote destinations. So, when it comes to going to well-developed places, that is leisure time to me. Usually, I travel to a more developed place like London, Penang or Bali if I'm looking for a base to work out from.

What do you think makes people happy?

Many people spend their time accumulating wealth, because they believe it would bring them happiness. But I think that couldn't be further from the truth. From what I've observed, the people who are most content tend to spend time building quality relationships with friends and family. And they create purpose for themselves. Just having a purpose that drives them and having firm, strong, loving relationships... these simple things in life make them happy.

Can you give an example?

When I was in Bhutan, I went to this monastery that could be accessed only by climbing a rope. It's in a remote valley called Haa. We met the caretaker there. He used to be the bodyguard for the royal family and would take them hunting. As animals would get killed during the hunts, he felt the need to atone for his sins. Which is why, after retiring, he chose to be of service to the monastery where he's been for the last 15 years. His wife makes regular visits as well to spend time with him – we met her. He said: "I just sit here, read the scriptures, chant, clean the monastery and light the butter lamps." Before he sleeps, he thanks himself for getting through the day, because he feels each day could be his last.

When you observe their way of life and how they just want to be of service, you realise that happiness isn't in wealth or fame. When you've got a purpose and you've fulfilled that purpose, you're happy.

Was it tough, making the transition from a legal career to starting Blue Sky Escapes?

When I left, I was going to give myself two weeks to completely decompress, unwind, get back in shape and recover all that sleep debt. Within the first one or two days, I felt anxious already! Because I'd just come from this high plane of overwork to absolutely nothing at all. It's funny, it was almost like I had to relearn how to relax again. It was a very reflective period for me.

Has food been one of the ways you bond with people of different cultures?

We always ensure, for all our journeys we craft, that the travellers experience food at a farmhouse, or local place. I think most people let their guard down while eating – it's also more enlightening to eat with the locals and understand more about the food they eat and observe their customs. Food is pretty much a language that transcends race and cultural divides... and it can even make or break the relationship! For example, in Mongolia, every time a nomad offers you food, you should take it from him with your right hand as a mark of respect and always try it.

What are some of the weirdest foods you've tried?

In Peru, I tried roasted guinea pig. It tasted like pork. But of course you have to get over the initial cringe factor when you see it presented to you – it's like the whole body, roasted, suckling pig-style but rat-sized, and you can still see the teeth sticking out. It was quite yummy actually. I've also tried whale meat and reindeer meat, and that was in Greenland.

These experiences must've helped in your business today.

Definitely. I'm more prepared. We're in experiential travel, and experiences drive the expansion of our business. Recently, I spent one month in Bhutan, even though it was my third time back. That time, we were exploring lesser-known experiences, and we went deeper into more remote places and studied how we could make those places more accessible. We explored how horse riding could make some places more accessible, how to make certain longer journeys shorter for the time-strapped, that kind of thing. We also looked into wellness retreats; that's something we're developing.

What are some unexplored destinations you'd love to see and showcase?

One of them is Socotra island – off the coast of Yemen. It's known to be the most alien-looking place on earth and is home to some of the most endangered flora. If you google it, you'll find weird-looking trees; it's like a different planet. There's one tree called the dragon's blood tree, because the sap that it secretes is red; it looks weird and only grows there. You can do amazing hikes there. But, of course, I would wait until the civil war in Yemen dies down.