

How She Did It: From corporate burnout to spa and wellness superstar



Stella Photi, the founder of Wellbeing Escapes

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After spending a placement year as part of her degree in a travel marketing company, Stella Photi fell in love with the industry and pursued a career in sales for travel companies and for major airlines.

But, as for so many people, the events of 9/11 were a turning point in her life - making her reassess her priorities and think about what was truly important. She decided to leave her demanding management role at a major US airline and start her own business.

Stella, now 48 and living in North London, co-founded a consulting company - but the dream was to create a brand that combined her passion for leading a healthy lifestyle (yoga, hiking, meditation) with her travel industry experience. So, all the while, she worked on a plan to create [Wellbeing Escapes](#).

Here, Stella tells us how she did it.

What inspired you to start it?

It's a bit of a cliché - but burnout in my corporate job. I was struggling to keep it all together, as I had a young child at the time (he's now 21) and a punishing travel schedule. I would spend a lot of money on holidays looking for a way to rejuvenate and come back feeling energised... but most of the time I came back with nothing more than a great tan, heading straight back to burnout.

It inspired me to come up with the idea to create a range of results-driven wellness programmes and offer down-to-earth, objective advice. The type of holidays where people come back feeling fabulous but have also learnt how to apply small changes in their lives, which will make them achieve a greater sense of wellbeing. We carefully research and personally test all of our destinations and it's so rewarding when clients tell us that they've had a life-changing experience, or successfully managed to make significant changes in their life following one of our holidays.



Wellness holidays - not just a hotel with a spa attached

What were the first few steps you took?

The first thing I had to do was build a business plan in order to get a bank loan, a grant to launch and to build our website. I still look at that business plan now sometimes and realise how much I have learned over the years - and how optimistic I was then about my initial forecasts.

I then went about researching the products, creating the concept and negotiating with suppliers. It was a brand new idea at the time and I used a lot of energy convincing others that it had potential. Luckily, lots of people were excited and wanted to be part of it.

How did you raise awareness?

Given that we had little funding, I had to be creative. I tackled this through a mix of PR, Google advertising and partnerships with other brands who had similar target client bases. Social media was yet to take off in a big way 10 years ago, so that wasn't in our cost-effective bag of awareness tricks. One thing I have learned over the years is that there is no one 'magic bullet' - you have to plug away at all the different channels.

What has been your biggest challenge?

Being ahead of the curve. The wellness industry has exploded in recent years but not everyone totally got it when we started out. The idea of what a holiday constitutes has changed with an ever-growing interest in rejuvenation programmes, healthy eating and exercise. But explaining the concept of how a wellbeing holiday differed from going to a hotel with a spa on the side was sometimes a challenge.

How do you tackle challenges?

I am very determined and a natural optimist. I'm a great believer that there is always a way and that a challenge is only a lesson to be learned. I also don't let my ego get in the way and frequently seek advice from others or use them as a sounding board. An objective point of view can be extremely helpful and it's amazing how someone else can point out the obvious solution or help you to crystallise your thoughts.



Stella practices meditation and mindfulness every day

What helps you stay motivated through tough times?

Knowing that I am lucky to be following my passion. I was recently visiting a new retreat, located in a beautiful part of Sri Lanka, and thought how fortunate I am to be in a job that I love - one which also helps people to improve their lives.

What's the best thing about running your own business?

The freedom to shape my own destiny and not having to deal with corporate politics. I thrive on having total responsibility and accountability, even though it can be stressful at times. I try to foster an organisational culture where we are all putting our energy into being creative and providing outstanding customer service, rather than shifting the blame around.

Plus, of course, discovering new wellness destinations (come on – there have to be some perks to the job!) They are all unique and I love finding out what they are particularly passionate about and meeting their team.

Do you have a business philosophy?

Nurture your clients so they come back to you because they value your advice and honesty. We spend a lot of time helping people to choose the most appropriate wellness programme and spa destination for their individual goals.

What advice would you give budding entrepreneurs?

Be authentic and be in it for the long-term. Be true to who you are and your vision for the company. Follow your instinct and heart - and only do business with people who share your passion and ethics.

How I Did It...

My greatest fear is...

Not making most out of life. So much to do in such a short time!

The bravest thing I've done is...

Conquer my fear of heights through hypnosis and then ride a horse to a top of a mountain in South America.

I would tell my teenage self...

Always listen to your inner voice. We are bombarded by a constant stream of opinions and advice and it's easy to get confused and unsure, but deep down you know more than anyone what is right for you.

I believe...

That if you ask the universe to help you then it will. I quite often chew over a problem and lo and behold a little while later, the solution comes across my path.

The biggest lesson I've learned is...

To let go. You can't do everything and burning out helps no-one.

My top business tool or resource is...

Mindfulness – I practise meditation and mindfulness every day as I find it keeps me grounded and gives my clarity and calmness.

My favourite quote...

'Everyone deserves a little wellbeing' – I truly believe that proactively investing in your health and wellbeing is one of the most powerful things that you can do for mental and physical contentment.