

THE BIG SHIFT

What do former investment bankers, a marketing executive, and a model have in common? They are all impressive individuals who have transformed their lives with career-altering change, taking on the big risk of financial loss for big payouts in personal

satisfaction. Philippe Brown, Mathias Echene, Amna Tirmizi Naqvi, Daniel Green and Robert Fernstrom all have heeded their inner voices and fashioned new lives for themselves and their families based on passion and personal fulfillment. With the help of supportive spouses and families, these intrepid souls prove that a Big Shift in work, lifestyle, and, perhaps most importantly, perspective can be a yearly bonus in and of itself. *Privé Asia* thinks their stories are more relevant than ever. After all, in today's financial climate, who hasn't given their career some thought? Daily headlines of economic doom and gloom are enough to penetrate even the most bull-market mindset. Read on for words of wisdom from the other side of the great unknown. And then ask yourself, what would you do if you decided to clean out your desk tomorrow...

By Ajay Shamdasani & Jayne Kim Schrantz

Philippe Brown

For Philippe Brown, a former marketing executive in Paris, Slow Food travel trumped fast food marketing. After years in marketing and two years dedicated to promoting global domination of the Happy Meal, Philippe struck out on his own by transforming himself into a purveyor of customised travel packages in London. Since then, his company, Brown & Hudson, has led private clients on bespoke itineraries around the world. Just listening to descriptions of his trips makes us want to grab our passports and strike out immediately for Chek Lap Kok. And to think that it all started with a snail...



What was it like being a marketing professional, especially in the fast food industry?

I began my professional life as a marketing man, first in advertising in London and later in Paris. Together with a team of 24 employees, I worked exclusively on McDonald's French business. In the land of slow, decadent gastronomy, my team and I helped French children and adolescents embrace the *le hamburger*. Every Wednesday – the day French children have the afternoon off – my team and I loitered in McDonald's restaurants all over France to watch happy kids eat their Happy Meals and play with the boxes or collectible toys. These days such behavior would have me locked up!

What sparked you to do something different?

After two years devotion to my client's business, I found myself in a weekly "analyse the Happy Meal in every possible direction" meeting. My mind wandered. As I zoned out quietly at yet another mention of special sauce, I pondered the positives that my commitment to my client's business generated. The list was sadly too succinct. I visualised myself years in the future, at story-time with my grandchild on my knee and nothing other than Happy Meals and ketchup to talk about.

Pinpoint for us when you realised a career of burgers, fries and toys were not for you. How did the call of global travel grab you?

I was enjoying a magnificent four-hour lunch in a small, family-run trattoria in the Tuscan village of Montisi, Italy. It had been awarded a "Slow Food Snail" window sticker in recognition of its excellence and wholesome values. That was the sign, the snail, Slow Food and all that the movement stood for. In one romantic moment, global became passé and local became chic. At that specific moment, everything changed for me. I was reminded of some important values that I had neglected in my hectic Parisian existence. Slowing down the marketing merry-go-round wasn't the point. I wanted to get off altogether.

With a diverse European heritage, fluency in four languages and being of a rather multi-cultural disposition, I decided to travel. Along the way I was fortunate enough to discover the luxury travel business and was soon leading small groups of friends, families or corporate clients on active or cultural expeditions to different corners of the globe.

My travels turned into [the company of] Brown &

Hudson, and our values have remained the same. We create active or cultural bespoke travel experiences that combine our intimate knowledge of different places with our client's specific needs, wishes and desires.

What have been your worst moments on your new path?

The worst moments are few and far between. Let's face it - whether in the office or in the field, we lead a rather charmed existence.

If I had to dig deep to find worst moments they would be when clients come on holiday with problems that couldn't be possibly resolved on vacation. Otherwise, perhaps it's when people don't really let go of the troubles, stresses and strains that bother them back home.

For more prosaic worst moments, I suppose we could dredge up memories of the odd Patagonian flight being cancelled and having to drive five hours to get somewhere, but to a creative guide, even the worst moments are either challenges or opportunities. In that particular situation, the group drove and stopped at a historic estancia along the way, chatted with the owners and ended up staying for magnificent dinner. Again, this kind of thing can happen because of who our guides are and because the relationships we develop with our clients allow these worst case situations to become opportunities.

Over the years, one of the greatest learning points has been learning to let go of anything that doesn't support the overall goal of quality of life.

What have been the high points of making travel experiences your career?

Generally, our high points are inextricably linked to our clients' experiences and satisfaction. The specific examples of high-point events are numerous: From drinking champagne on the Perito Moreno glacier in Patagonia at the millennium, to rebuilding a devastated community in the foothills of the Himalayas, to first-contact with cannibals in Korowal or Kombai of Papua New Guinea for some business executives, to an underwater wedding in Belize. Nearer to home, perhaps biking to an incredible family lunch in a Puglian olive-grove, three days spent shadowing one of Spain's leading matadors in Andalucía, dancing in the sub-Sahara, and playing golf above the Arctic-Circle were all incredible moments. But "incredible" is such a moveable concept. These days we've found that clients seem to want to take more time doing nothing more than just sitting and contemplating a

scene. To squat in a café on bustling Ha Noi Street just to marvel at the show-like flow of the traffic and people – those are all high points.

Does your travel work take a toll on your personal relationships? After all, you're all over the place!

A hectic travel schedule changed the way I maintained relationships. Letters, fax, phone, e-mail, VoIP [Voice over Internet Protocol] all played evolving roles. Rather than cocktails or dinner on a Friday night, perhaps we would catch up for longer during long weekends in the countryside, when I was still in London or Provence.

You've obviously had to make certain sacrifices in your Big Shift, but what are the most important things you've gained?

Friendships and valuable lifelong relationships! Because of the bespoke nature of our business, the fine line between clients and friends is blurred. In the work we do, a bond of trust emerges. So we have met some great clients and developed terrifically enduring friendships with them. Year after year, our clients return to continue the relationship where it left off in, just in a different corner of the globe.

When did you know you had succeeded?

In traditional terms, I know we have succeeded every time a client goes to the trouble of writing a heartfelt letter thanking us for a trip we created, for the discoveries they made and for the memories or life changes it brought about. When, upon returning home, the first thing someone does is to write to all their friends and rave childlike about their travel experiences, you know you are doing something right.

Personally, I know that I've succeeded every day. The question is simple. If tomorrow I fell under the wheels of a fast-moving tuk-tuk, would I be happy with today as my last living day? Every day I ask myself that question the answer comes back a resounding "Yes!" and we continue happily onwards to the next trek.

