

Inspiring and Educating Sellers of Affluent Travel

FEBRUARY 2013

LUXURY

www.luxurytraveladvisor.com

TRAVEL ADVISOR

IN THE KNOW

Lia Batkin and Seth Kaplan provide unique trips for their generation

DESTINATIONS

Indulging in Istanbul
South Africa for Families

HOTELS

The Nam Hai in Vietnam
"I Do" Down on the Ranch

SPAS

California Dreaming

CRUISE

Culture at Sea



In the Know Experiences

Husband and wife's travel agency earns \$20 million just six years since inception.

We thought we were lost when we reached In the Know Experiences' corner office suite on the third floor of a downtown Fifth Avenue building in Manhattan.

As we approached the front door, we could already hear what sounded like at least 20 young, caffeinated female advisors speaking a mile a minute with eager jet-setters on the other end of the phone, while other employees frantically punched away notes on their keyboards. It all sounded more like a Wall Street war room rather than a travel agency that has been in business for less than a decade.

After a knock, the door swung open and we were greeted by the matriarch of this vibrant ensemble, co-owner Lia Batkin, who quickly introduced us to what turned out to be just three women who were making all that noise.

But they couldn't be blamed for the chatter since actually speaking to clients is usually required when these advisors are organizing their signature experiential trips for their VIPs. All five full-time employees at the company, as well as In the Know Experiences' 20 independent contractors scattered throughout the world, master the art of experiential travel.

Batkin's and husband, Seth Kaplan's rapid route to success stemmed from understanding their clients, which they learned through

many of their own firsthand travel experiences as well as firsthand travel nightmares that occurred on a poorly planned trip to Argentina.

"From our own travels and experiences, we learned that clients really wanted that experiential stuff," says Batkin.

"When we were booking people who wanted to go to the Super Bowl, we knew it wasn't enough to just send them to the game, especially if they have been before," Kaplan tells *Luxury Travel Advisor*. "So, we decided to take it one step further. Let's get them into the locker room, let's bring these clients onto the football field, let's have them meet the players."

It's because of that "above-and-beyond" attitude that the company has been growing between 200 percent and 300 percent annually for the last three years. The agency is doing so well that Batkin tells us she plans on hiring

about three more people by the end of the year.

In the Know caters primarily to affluent travelers from 30 to 50 years old. So, where are these clients going?

Both Batkin and Kaplan point to Latin America as one of the hottest regions lately. "Prices in North America and South America are going to be less than the Caribbean," declares Kaplan, "and these destinations are really beginning to grow. They are building hotels and they are increasing clients, so now is the time to go."

"We really try to push people to see places now that we know are starting to change," says Batkin. "For example, go to Nicaragua now, go to Cartagena [Colombia] now because these destinations, in three or four years, are not going to have those empty white sand beaches. They are going to be full of people."

With a robust business and such know-how, it's hard to believe that it was only six years ago that Batkin and Kaplan were looking to become independent contractors for any travel agency that would take them. They were turned away by every one.

"We were calling every agency to be an independent of theirs and we couldn't even get anyone to give us more than five minutes of their time," recalls Batkin. "So, we basically started off as an independent of an independent."

And now? At just six years old, the agency is one of the youngest agencies ever to join Virtuoso, the luxury travel agency network.

"It's a humbling experience," notes Batkin.

IN THE KNOW EXPERIENCES

Founders/Owners: Seth Kaplan and Lia Batkin

Headquarters: New York City

Staff: Five full-time agents and roughly 20 independents worldwide

Sales Volume: \$20 million gross revenue in 2012

Affiliations: One of the youngest agencies to be a member of Virtuoso

Website: www.intheknowexperiences.com

BY JOE PIKE

SETH KAPLAN AND LIA BATKIN. A nightmare experience that put a damper on their dreams of escaping to a foreign land gave them the confidence to launch a travel company.

“It’s amazing to look up and see how well it’s been going and at the same time, it’s been so natural and organic because it’s just so fun.”

Prior to In the Know Experiences, Batkin worked in the publishing industry for upscale magazines such as *Gotham*, *Hamptons*, *The Atlantic* and *Robb Report*, where she began honing some vital travel advisor skills without even knowing it.

She helped put together a variety of unique events for readers and advertisers, which is when Batkin first became aware of customers’ craving for one-of-a-kind experiences.

“When I was at *Robb Report*, it was at the height, height, height of luxury,” she stresses. “Everyone was spending, so it was unique to see that even though people could afford a \$20,000 or \$50,000 watch, the ability to go to the actual watch makers, to the factory and meet with the head watch maker and learn how that particular watch was made was worth so much more than simply buying the watch. Just because these people had the money to spend didn’t mean they weren’t looking for something that was worth it. It didn’t mean they weren’t looking for value.”

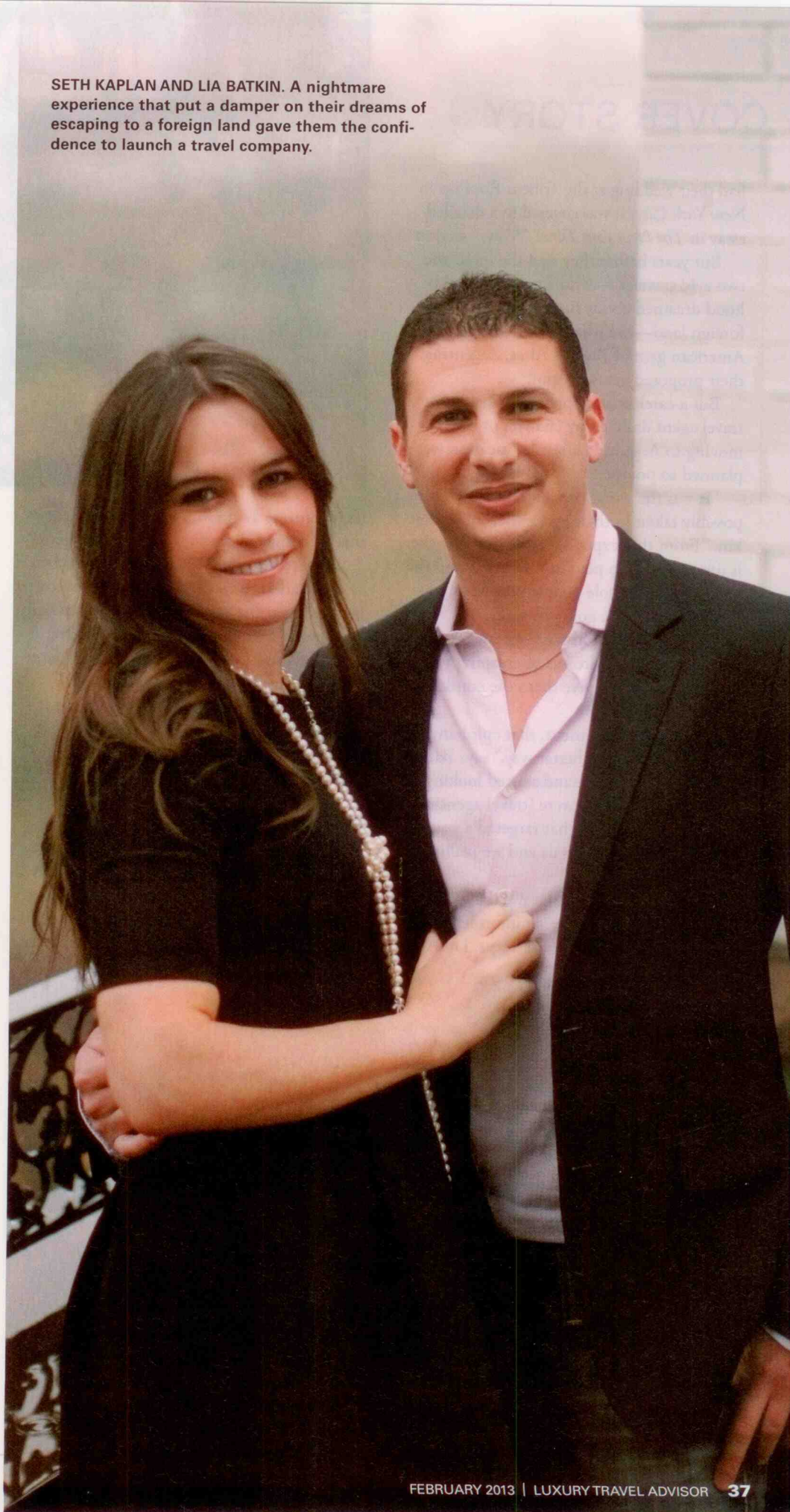
Building a Foundation

Seth Kaplan’s previous profession was working in the fashion industry briefly on the sales side, but it was working for a construction company in New York that gave him behind-the-scenes knowledge about building projects for high-end residential properties as well as nightclubs and restaurants.

And that was the information that would prove vital in the years to come. Not to mention, being in New York alone provided preliminary planning experience Kaplan could build on.

“Living in New York, I’ve always been involved, always put together events, parties and happenings,” Kaplan says. “So, from that, it became my love.”

Both Lia and Seth attended the University of Wisconsin, but had never met until a mutual college friend introduced them a few years later in 2005 after they had both graduated. Fast forward five years later, the two eventually fell in love and in January 2010,



COVER STORY

had their wedding at the Tribeca Rooftop in New York City; it was covered in a detailed essay in *The New York Times*' "Vows" section.

But years before they tied the knot, the two avid travelers—who since their childhood dreamed about running away to a foreign land—eventually chose the Latin American gem of Buenos Aires, Argentina, as their proposed getaway spot.

But a careless and apparently lackluster travel agent dashed any chances of the two moving to Argentina after the vacation was planned so poorly.

"It was the worst trip anyone could have possibly taken in their entire life," notes Batkin. "From that experience, we saw that there is just so much to plan in a vacation and that you can't pigeonhole people into what you think that they are going to want."

Although the nightmare experience put a damper on their dreams of escaping to a foreign land, it did give them the confidence to start a new career.

"We had that moment, that epiphany that there has got to be a better way," says Batkin. "We went back home and started looking around to see if there were [travel agencies] out there that existed that targeted a younger demographic similar to us and we really didn't find that much."

So, the two decided to travel the world together for a year, gathering information on such hot spots as Miami, Las Vegas, Los Ange-



les, Montreal, London, Paris and other places that a younger clientele would want to go to.

Early travel memories also inspired them.

For Batkin, it was sitting in The Dorchester in London at the age of three, having tea with her mom. "I remember sitting there in my pink dress and it was the most amazing, fabulous thing in the entire world," she recalls.

For Kaplan, it was any of the many boat trips to the Caribbean that he took with his parents at an early age whether it was to St. Maarten, St. Barth's or The Bahamas.

Finding Fast Success

Not long after their worldwide research trip, the couple founded In the Know Experiences. But it was not an instant success since the two were still holding onto their day jobs while trying to make their dream job come to fruition.

"For the first six months, I'd be sneaking outside of my other job having conference calls in the bathroom," Batkin says with a smile. And Kaplan's colleagues were wondering why he was suddenly taking so many lunch breaks.

Besides finding time in between their other jobs, finding an agency to align themselves with was even harder, considering their ages and lack of a reputation in the travel industry.

The first year involved what Kaplan describes as "easy bookings" to places the pair was familiar with, such as Mexico, the Caribbean and Las Vegas. The nature of the trips was usually bachelor parties, honeymoons and other trips that those around the same age as Batkin and Kaplan were taking.

The results? In the first year, the company brought in a humbling \$40,000. Year two, they made roughly \$1 million in hotel bookings alone. In 2012, In the Know Experiences made a gross total of \$20 million.

Today, there is never a request the two cannot meet, whether it's Kaplan providing 50,000 roses as part of a three-month, \$2.5 million trip he booked for the Saudi royal family or Batkin having a road closed in Bandol, France, for a client's 50th birthday.

"It's such a great industry to be a part of and we had so much fun doing this and you know we take every trip so personally and get so involved," emphasizes Batkin. "It's like planning our own personal trips." ■

BARCELONA'S BOQUERIA (above) is admittedly one of Seth Kaplan's favorite places in the world.

LIA BATKIN (left) stands with elephants on a trip to Jaipur, India.

