

Forbes Global Life

Touring Pro

By Pranay Gupte 06.04.07

Not long ago a gaggle of chief executives from the World Presidents' Organization--including fashion mogul Mohan Murjani--trekked through the high Himalayas on a tour organized by Pallavi Shah, chief executive and cofounder of New York's Our Personal Guest. For these executives, no strangers to tight scheduling, the timing had to be just right. This meant rising before dawn on a set day and performing a yoga exercise that celebrates sunrise--while getting to



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Pallavi Shah

watch the first rays of daylight fall in the distance on Annapurna, one of the world's highest peaks.

"It's not just the trip that these folks want, it's the unique experience," says Shah, a youthful 64, in New Delhi (she spends much of her time shuttling between New York and Asia). "These

are people who can afford to go anywhere in the world, and at any time they wish. They are not necessarily looking for thrills. They are looking to participate in the customs and traditions of local cultures."

One such custom, dating back 3,000 years, is the lighting of tiny votive lamps on the banks of the Ganges in the Hindu holy city of Varanasi. One CEO--John Veronis, president and co-chief executive of Manhattan investment bank Veronis Suhler Stevenson--wanted to take a boat ride down the river and witness the ceremony. He found a half-dozen friends who wanted to come along for the trip and contacted Shah.

Shah thought that her new clients should be taken for more than just a ride down the river. "I said to myself, 'Wouldn't it be great if I could get a thousand oil lamps in vessels made out of dry

banana leaves and twigs floating past my visitors as they went on the Ganges?'" Shah says. And so it was done.

On another occasion she arranged for a *pooja* (a holy ceremony) for Thomas Preston -- then president and chief executive of Viacom -- in a temple dedicated to the Hindu Lord Shiva in Jaipur, a fabled city in the western Indian state of Rajasthan. On yet another occasion Shah took Charles Schwab and some of his friends first on a private plane and then onto a helicopter to view tigers in the sanctuary of Ranthambore, also in Rajasthan.

Shah has been creating such travel experiences for nearly three decades, well before India became a trillion-dollar economy and a hot destination for well-heeled travelers.

The daughter of well-known physician Sarala Patel, Shah distinguished herself at Mumbai's prestigious Elphinstone College. After graduation Shah, curious about world cultures, opted to become a flight attendant with Air India in 1963, which was then trying to increase its flights to the U.S. Air India's executives soon recognized that in Shah's outgoing personality they had found someone to be a brand ambassador for the airline--and for India. In 1965 they posted her to New York as a communications specialist.

Shah recognized that she would have to take steps to strengthen India's image in the U.S. if the airline was to increase tourism and business travel to her native country. "In those days India, if known to Americans at all, was still a country of snake charmers and swamis, somewhere east of Suez," Shah says. "People would ask me, 'How do you speak English so well?' My saris must have seemed like costumes from outer space."

After she was posted to the U.S., Shah went on small-town TV stations explaining India's myriad religions, 18 major languages and 875 dialects. Soon Shah--who by now had married a Nepalese prince, Sanu Shah, and produced a daughter, Kunjali--was organizing events at museums. She got a big break when the Smithsonian Institution

in Washington agreed to exhibit Indian costumes (as did the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York later). The exhibitions led to educational programs about India that Shah created for the host institutions.

In 1989, after 25 years at Air India, Shah decided to use her experience to start her own business, Our Personal Guest. Her cofounder was Anita Trehan, who had experience in the hospitality industry and was married at the time to an investment banker (Trehan is no longer Shah's partner). "We knew perfectly well what was going on in the travel business concerning India--it was group-tour driven. But I had accumulated a vast network of stylish and wealthy people who weren't interested in standard group packages," Shah says. "Here was a market that wasn't being served."

She started serving that market by organizing private tours that included sessions with Indian royalty, high Indian officials and top corporate executives. That way Shah's clients could meet high-class, educated Indians on their home turf. When she started, much of Asia, which lacked luxury hotels, was still considered "adventure travel." The distances, visa problems and poor on-ground facilities meant that a lot of Asian countries lent themselves to being a backpacker's heaven but were daunting for more demanding, luxury-oriented travelers.

With the rapid growth of Asian economies and the active promotion of tourism by countries such as Thailand and Indonesia, more luxury lodgings, such as Amanresorts, started sprouting up in the region. That enticed sophisticated travelers who were willing to spend big bucks to go long distances--as a result, luxury travel companies began to flourish.

These companies now book travel for Americans that's worth more than \$5.5 billion, according to Luxury Travel Advisor, a research service. Another \$2 billion is reportedly spent by well-heeled travelers from other countries, most of them from Europe, the Middle East and Asia.

Shah's main competitors are American Express, Virtuoso Travel, Valerie Wilson Travel, Fischer Travel and Lisa Lindblad Travel Design, all American companies. Fischer Travel's owner, William Fischer, charges a \$50,000 initiation fee and a \$10,000 annual charge. For this, clients

can secure last-minute rooms at luxury resorts everywhere.

Lisa Lindblad, who started her company in 1997, does about 60 "events" each year, charging an initial consultation fee of \$2,000, plus a "design fee" to create a program for a client whose costs would vary depending on the nature of the trip. "My clients know they will have a unique experience that is individual and tailored to their interest," says Lindblad.

Shah services about 150 exclusive clients each year. In some years she hosts a large conference, held for as many as 500 people. One such conference in New Delhi was for the international board of directors of Alliance Capital; in 2004 she arranged two seminars for the Capital Group--a huge conglomerate that manages mutual funds--in Mumbai and Bangalore.

For a 250-person group Shah charges \$750 a person daily; on occasion there have been groups in which each person paid \$20,000 for the entire trip. Shah's excursions range between 14 and 21 days, depending on the destination.

Not long after she opened for business, word quickly spread in the American corporate community that Shah enjoyed high-level access in India and that her tours were so meticulously organized that nothing was left to chance in a country where work habits--and public hygiene--left much to be desired. "Unfortunately, in India we tolerate a high degree of degradation of our public facilities, and we have come to accept dirt and filth in our streets," Shah laments. "That is why I personally ensure that every place that my clients visit meets the highest standards of hygiene and efficiency."

Shah admits that sometimes there are debacles. For example, one group of clients from the Young Presidents' Organization was determined to stay overnight at a mountain hotel, Everest View--not far from Mount Everest--that had a limited number of rooms. Shah had arranged for them to come to the hotel site just to get a glimpse of Everest and then take high tea under the shadow of the massive peak. But instead of boarding the helicopter for their return to Kathmandu, as scheduled, some of the executives dashed back into the hotel and deliberately stranded themselves, forcing the

hotel to accommodate them--at four to six people per room.

Shah has expanded her menu to include places like Cambodia, China, Vietnam, Nepal, Thailand, Egypt, Italy and South America. She visits every country before her clients do, so she can organize every aspect of the itinerary.

And what does she think of the current euphoria about India's economic prospects as a global giant? "We've just gotten too arrogant for very little," Shah says. "I don't think everybody's euphoria is justified. What we are finally doing is only spectacular by comparison to zero. Despite all this talk about how much optimism there is, the numbers are pathetic compared with any other country. You only have to look next door at Thailand or China to see what they've accomplished--in tourism and everything else."

Now Shah has a new role to play, literally. Last year her longtime friend, the film director Mira Nair, offered her a part in *The Namesake*, and Shah accepted. The film, shot in India and New York, is based on Jhumpa Lahiri's novel of the same name and has been a critical and commercial success globally after its opening in March 2007. "My clients say, 'You're in the movies now?'" Shah says.

What next, Bollywood tours in which you star in your own adventure movie? Not so far from reality. John Veronis wants a Bollywood tour. But, says Shah, Mumbai studios can be difficult with visitors. Never one to miss a connection, she's arranging tours of film studios in India's up-and-coming movie-producing city, Hyderabad.

What do her powerful clients really want to see at Indian film studios? "Song and dance numbers," Shah says. "Some clients actually want to gyrate to the music. They want to be extras in a dance number."