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Work life with the founder of AMO Traveling. How one Bogotá woman turned her hobby into a business

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What a difference a year makes. Less than eighteen months ago, Ana María Orjuela was living in Colombia surrounded by her friends and family, happily working as a commercial manager for a large bank, climbing the corporate ladder. But then she gave it all up for love.

She made the life-changing decision to move to the small Italian city of Treviso to be with her husband. And she learned that when you follow your heart, great and

unexpected things can happen. Arriving in Italy a year ago, barely able to speak the language, Ana María couldn't have imagined that she would be ending 2013 as the owner of a thriving business.

I caught up with her to learn more about her journey from Colombian finance to successful travel consultant. And like so many entrepreneurial stories, it all started when she decided to follow her passion.

As she explained to me, "I was happy in my banking job. I like working with people, so I really enjoyed building relationships with clients and co-workers. And I'd spend all the money I saved on traveling."

Ana María has visited more than thirty countries, across all five continents. But she's not someone who likes to take package tours that treat countries and sights as boxes to be "ticked off". For her, the quality of your experience is more important than the number of stamps in your passport. And this thirst for unusual experiences has seen Ana María ride camels in Africa, climb the Dolomites, pick tea in China, dive in the Great Barrier reef, and listen to the sound of glaciers move in Alaska – to name just a few.

When she moved to Treviso, Ana María faced many challenges. She had to learn a new language, adapt to living in a much smaller city, make friends and, of course, find a job. Finding a finance job in Treviso would have been tough at the best of times. But given the current economic crisis, it seemed like an impossible task. However, she decided to stay positive and view the situation as an opportunity.

Sitting down and thinking about her skills and experience, and what she enjoyed doing most, she suddenly realized that she'd already been working as a travel consultant for many years without even realizing it. "My family travel a lot together, and in the past ten years my parents started delegating the organization of family trips to me. Also, because I traveled so much, people were always asking me for recommendations. I had already spent years creating unique travel experiences for the people I love, so I thought why not do it professionally?"

And that was how, in March 2013, **AMO Traveling** was born. The first thing Ana María is quick to point out is that **AMO Traveling** is not a travel agency. It is an important distinction. She doesn't sell standard packages or represent hotels or other operators. There's no incentive for her to send all her clients to the same hotel. Instead, she plans trips that are tailored to each client.

"The first thing I do is to get to know the client. One person's measurement of what good looks like is very different from someone else's. Different people enjoy different things."

“Some people, usually honeymooners, ask me for recommendations of where to go. In that case, I find out what kinds of things they like, what kind of climate they are looking for etc and then propose destinations. But even when clients already know where they want to go, I still take into account their specific preferences and needs so that the trip I organize is unique to them.”

So if she's not a travel agent, how does she describe what she does? “I don't sell anything. I help in the buying process. There's so much information out there, it can be difficult for clients to wade through it all and figure out what to trust, especially if they've never been to the destination before. It can also be difficult for them to find the best rates, or to know which hotels are in good locations. I do the research for them to make sure they get the best value for money.”

I was interested to know what it was like going from the corporate world to life as an entrepreneur. “I enjoyed working at the bank,” she tells me, “but there's something quite special about creating your own business, especially in an area that you are passionate about. I work very hard, but I don't mind it because I really love what I do and I feel that I'm building something of my own. One of the best parts is getting feedback from clients and knowing they had an amazing time.”

“Also, a lot of my clients are Colombians traveling abroad, and I've also planned trips for Europeans going to Colombia. I love that I can still maintain a strong connection with my country through my work, even though I now live so far away.”

Since launching **AMO Traveling** in March of this year, Ana María has arranged 45 trips (some as long as 25 days) to destinations across Europe, the US, Mexico and Asia. And many of those clients are now returning to her to organize their 2014 vacations. With most start-ups struggling in the first year, I asked her what she thinks have been the keys to her success.

“Even though I have a website, most of my clients first learn about **AMO Traveling** through word of mouth. I try to provide a very high-quality, personalized service. And I think people appreciate that and tell their friends.”

“Personalized” is certainly the word to describe **AMO Traveling's** services. Clients don't just receive transport and hotel reservations. Because Ana María takes the time to get to know the clients, she is able to provide a bespoke itinerary for each client with daily suggestions and tips that you often won't find in even the best guidebooks.

So where does she get all these insider tips? As an avid traveler, Ana María has already been to many of these places herself. In addition, she has a wide and trusted network of friends across the globe from her time as a student at Instituto de Empresa (“I.E.”) in Madrid. “There were people from about 70 countries on my MBA course, so I'm usually able to phone a local and get inside tips on the best things to do,

regardless of the destination.”

“Another important factor, that I think clients appreciate, is that my services only stop when the clients have returned home. So for example, if I see that it is raining on a particular day I’ll contact them to suggest indoor activities that I think they would like.”

Even though Ana María has reinvented herself as an entrepreneur, she hasn’t forgotten the things she learned in corporate life, “at the bank I learned a great deal about customer service and relationship building, which is key to any business. Also what I learned at I.E. has really helped me. Even though I.E. is quite renowned for entrepreneurship, at the time I wasn’t thinking about starting my own business. But looking back on it now, I realize that I learned so much about strategy, marketing and networking at I.E. that I now use in my day-to-day life as an entrepreneur. And, of course, there’s that international network of “locals” across the globe that I now count as close friends and who give me great the insider tips that I pass on to my clients.”

Ana María’s story is an inspiring one. Arriving in a new country, one that is suffering from an economic crisis, and building a successful business from scratch is an impressive feat. It just goes to show that with passion, energy and drive, anything is possible. And 2013 was just the beginning for **AMO Traveling**. We can’t wait to see what 2014 has to hold for this Colombian entrepreneur.

Carolina Doherty de Novoa, december 2013