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In her preferred Presidential Suite. “We book our reservations by the room number.” – Mandarin Oriental, Tokyo

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Front Runner

Seia Lee (39), CEO, Jetsetter

Introducing VIPs to the Japan Unexplored

The 36th floor of Mandarin Oriental Tokyo in Chuo Ward, Tokyo. The suite, priced at 1.1 million yen for a single night stay, overlooks a panorama of high-rise buildings.

“It’s the Manhattan of Tokyo.”

As General Manager Christian Hassing personally tours her through the room, she replies in fluent English, “The ambiance of the dim room is really sexy.”

Four years ago, Lee founded a member-based travel agency that targets wealthy travelers. Travel agencies that exclusively target VIPs are quite common in Western cultures, but they are still something of a rarity in Japan.

Everything about a hotel she books, from the room’s scenic offerings and its furniture to the doorman’s service, Lee checks with her own eyes, whether the hotel is in Japan or abroad. Receiving invitations and newsletters from the finest hotels around the world, Lee travels overseas at least once every month. But she says, “I can only recommend a hotel to a customer when I’m confident that I know it better than anyone else.”

It is certainly not easy to satisfy the sophisticated travel tastes of the world’s VIPs. Yet, to all the seemingly impossible requests—put to her almost as if to test her—this travel expert delivers with pride and pure will.

Once an African member of royalty wanted to buy a Japanese fire engine as a souvenir. Another time, a renowned American architect asked for, “Ten of those cranes on top of that building over there.” Lee had occasions when she would be negotiating over the course of a year.

“With every customer, I feel like I’m starring in the movie *Mission Impossible*. But the feeling that I get from accomplishing the tasks is incomparable.”

Lee is a third generation Korean-Japanese, born to an architect father and a vocalist mother. Her parent’s work often took the family abroad, and the young Lee quickly became familiar with a number of countries.

Deciding that if she was going to see anything of the world, she would see the best of it, in her high school years Lee began touring the world’s major cities with her sister, who is her elder by five years. She would save the earnings from her part-time jobs and would then travel abroad, staying in five-star hotels.

But this experience gradually gave her the sense that many hotels merely looked good or featured novel attractions, and did not truly offer first-class service. While her travels started out as a hobby, Lee naturally developed an eye for true quality, and so she began posting her travel reports in a web magazine.

Life changed six years ago when a friend introduced Lee to Mary Gostelow, an English travel journalist. Meeting owners of prestigious hotels around the world whom she befriended through Gostelow, who travels almost 300 days a year, Lee noticed that there were no travel agencies in Japan catering to wealthy individuals. Although she had never worked in the industry, she believed that her experiences could be put to use. Courageously, she obtained a travel industry license and entered the business.

The job looks glamorous, but the work is endless. Simple customer service manuals do not work for VIPs. And there are still many luxury restaurants in Japan that hate to offer anyone preferential service. “You visit them frequently and ask them to do you a favor. It’s all about communicating your passion and sincerity.”

The company has six employees. All of the staff who attend the VIPs are women, and Lee is confident that the “hospitality of Asian women can compete globally.” The one million yen registration fee and 600,000 yen annual membership fee are not cheap, but through word-of-mouth and referrals, membership is approaching the company’s limit of 100 people.

The “last frontiers” of the world—Morocco, Bhutan, Thailand and India—that VIPs around the globe have long adored have been experiencing rapid development in recent years and are starting to lose their cultural characteristics.

“Japan, exotic and with its ancient culture still alive, is an ‘unexplored frontier’ for the world’s VIPs. I’m hoping to create more fans of Japan with our spirit of hospitality.”

Text: Etsushi Tsuru

Photos: Toyokazu Kosugi

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“I believe stress is proportional to the population.”

Seia Lee, CEO, Jetsetter

--What does the company name “Jetsetter” mean?

It’s a term that was coined to represent wealthy people who fly around the world on their private jets for work and pleasure. I choose the name to reflect my desire to become someone with a jet engine in her heart, able to cross borders and racial barriers in search of something to see or have whenever she wants, without anything to stop her.

--What gave you this idea?

Back when I started traveling, Koreans needed a visa to go to Italy, the United States, or any other country, and it was always tedious. Opening the door wasn’t difficult, but we’d be freer if the door wasn’t there to begin with. But then it was that door that made me, as a child, think about the notion of country and led me to understand that seeing things through tinted glasses wouldn’t benefit society. I think that has become one of my strengths today.

--You started a travel agency without any experience in the travel industry.

When I married, my entrepreneur husband was immersed in opening up the world of Internet content, which in many respects was still very nascent here in Japan. Seeing him chase his dream of creating something that did not then exist and turning it into something that society would not want to be without, I felt as if I wanted to do something similar.

I began by launching a web magazine that specialized in luxury travel, hoping that my ideas and experiences would be of some use. As readers of my travel reports responded with comments like, “I want to stay there too,” or “Can you recommend any travel plans?”, my reputation grew.

Starting with a customer record

--So once they pay the registration and annual fees, what services can members expect to receive? I start by interviewing the customer for an hour or two in what I call a Session. Then I ask them some questions: “What is one place that you truly must visit?” or “What was one trip that you found really disappointing?” From this, I create a member’s record. We then analyze the record and suggest some travel ideas. Our frequent travelers mostly leave everything up to us, with instructions

like, “Summer, seven days, sea.”

Whether you’re rich or not, the busier you are, the more you need to break away from your daily life at least once a year to take time out to reflect. I believe stress is proportional to population. National parks in the African savanna limit the number of people who can enter based on how many animals are there. You have to create your own opportunities to commune with nature, otherwise you’ll eventually go astray. Whenever I suggest a travel idea to a customer, I always make sure to add, “I hope that something in this trip will move you.”

--Is there an experience that you particularly remember?

The first international order we received—from a Russian billionaire who was planning his children’s trip to Japan—was a great experience. Accompanying his 18-year-old son and 16-year-old daughter were two bodyguards, a cameraman, and a tutor. We put them up in a suite with a room each, and the total travel cost for 11 days was 55 million yen. I asked them to choose a restaurant from three that we had reserved, mentioning that the other two would charge cancellation fees. The son told me, “Money is not a problem.” They created some wonderful memories for me. What’s most difficult every time is not the overseas VIPs that we welcome, but the inflexibility of the Japanese. While I think that cultural matters, such as no shoes on a tatami, should be respected and observed by any VIP, habits such as observing breakfast times or not serving soba together with rice should not become rules.

Debuting as a singer

--You are also a soprano vocalist.

Music was always very intimate to me because of my mother. However, a career in music requires perseverance, and I quit in junior high. I then worked as a model and traveled. I had also thought about marrying and setting aside my goals so that I could be with someone. But that really wasn’t being true to myself. Then I saw a friend who had stayed with music perform a wonderful song, and it rekindled my desire to test my abilities, so I entered music college at age 29 to start my studies again.

--What are your goals?

I believe that we all command our own destinies. Now that the company is off the ground, I would like to enter a new field and seek new possibilities. Right now, I’m thinking of making my debut as a vocalist overseas. I have a concert with my mother scheduled in November. I would really like to start my career as a vocalist. This year should be a turning point for me, and may well decide the next ten years.

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In front of a grand piano that she bought ten years ago. She honed her vocal skills under her mother’s tutelage. – Roppongi, Tokyo

Notes

“Once she’s determined to do something, she won’t stop until she does it.”

“I know she’s my daughter, but she does work hard,” laughs Matsuko (73), Seia’s mother, who has quietly watched her daughter’s rise.

In raising her two daughters, Matsuko never stood in their way. Since infancy, her only advice to them has been, “Make your decision based on what makes you happy.” This approach seems to have helped Seia develop her strengths in making a decision and acting on it, while encouraging her limitless curiosity.

When Seia decided to go to a music college at age 28, she took lessons every day to prepare for the entrance test, and never complained at her mother’s strict coaching. “Once she’s determined to

do something, she won't stop until she does it," says Miki Fukuchi, one of her employees. Matsuko "is always fair, independent, and kind to those in need," and is a role model for Seia. Matsuko collects clothing donated through charity and sends it to developing countries. Following in her footsteps, each year Seia conducts Jetsetter's charity auction, sponsored by a leading hotel.

Seia's father, meanwhile, is an architect and a big fan of the Hanshin Tigers baseball team. The only time the entire family has ever sung together was when they performed *Rokko Oroshi* in 1985, when the Hanshin Tigers won the pennant.

Profile

*Born in Tokyo. Graduated from the Toho Gakuen College Music Department. Trained under mother and vocalist Matsuko Lee since childhood. Her standard repertoire encompasses Italian opera by composers such as Puccini and Verdi. She is also an associate professor in *sado* (tea ceremony) for the Urasenke school.

*Married her current husband, whom she met at Toho, at age 29 when she entered music college. No children.

*From the age of 17, worked for a period as a part-time model (photo). At one time, was appearing in commercials and on television.

*Founded Jetsetter (<http://jetsetter.ne.jp>) in 2001 as a limited partnership company. Ran a web magazine specializing in luxury travel. Later incorporated.

*Became a member of the committee for Planning and Development Luxury Travel Market, run by METI, in 2009.