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JULY 2016

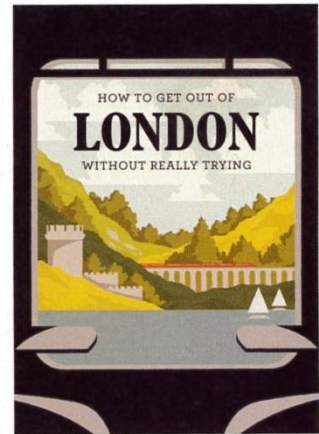
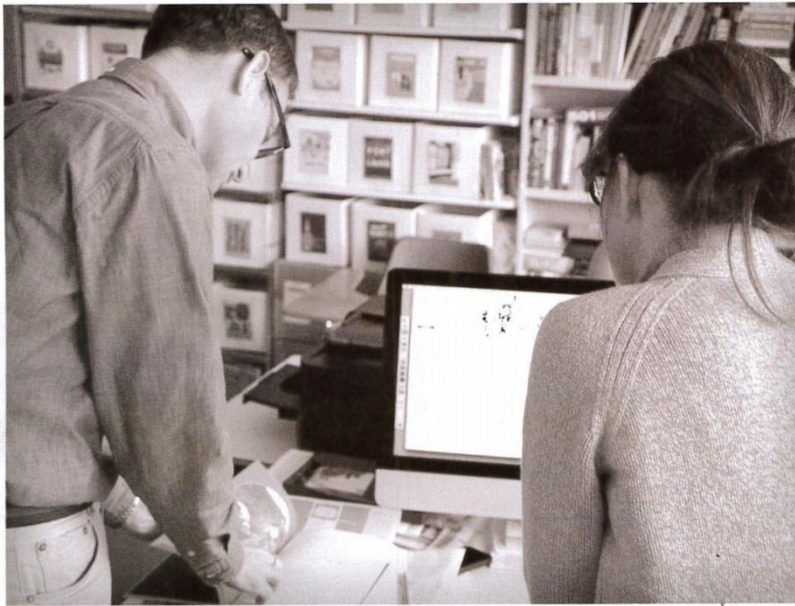


DRIVING THE CAUSEWAY COAST

Self-Starters

ENTREPRENEURS: TRAVEL

Meet entrepreneurs who have set up businesses to make travelling easier, from specialist travel guides and global city tours to luxury villas and tailor-made experiences in Tuscany



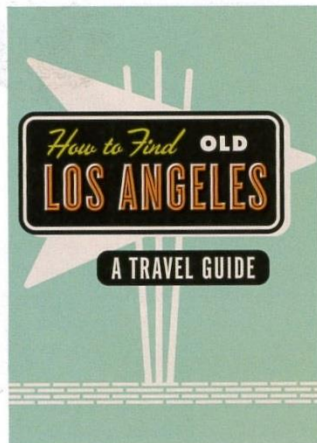
BEN OLINS & JANE SMILLIE

Founders, Herb Lester Associates
www.herblester.com

Herb Lester Associates is a London-based publishing company, specialising in well-researched travel guides that aim to show the reader what makes a place distinctive and how to enjoy it, without being overloaded with information

Herb Lester Associates is the brainchild of Ben Olins and Jane Smillie, who published their first compact travel guide in April 2010 after deciding to start a publishing company together. That first publication, a guide to places to meet and work (inspired by their own office-less existence), has been followed by dozens more in the years since, spanning four continents and more than 25 cities (plus 'Out There: A Guide to the Solar System').

Until recently, each guide was a fold-out sheet of A3 lithograph paper, with a numbered map on one side and succinctly-detailed descriptions of each point of interest on the reverse. Last month, though, Herb Lester released two larger-format travel books, a 64-page expansion of its popular 'How To Find Old Los Angeles' map and the brand-new *How To Get Out Of London Without Really Trying* which comprises 96 pages (plus an eight-page fold-out cover) suggesting rail-accessible daytrips from the capital city to serve as a reminder



that a break from the hustle and bustle is often easier than we think. "We've been wanting to do larger publications for a long time," explains Ben. "The new books both benefit from the additional space a book allows for more entries and photographs."

Having flexibility when designing new Herb Lester products is vital to the founders, and Ben says that books are just one of the formats available to them. "The freedom to approach projects in the way we feel best suits them is very important to us," he says. "There are still more folded guides in the works, as well as things like our guides to reading the menu in France, Italy and Spain, which came in a tri-fold wallet the same size as a credit card."

Along with coming up with their own ideas to research and produce, Ben and Jane have collaborated with other brands on a range of bespoke projects. Clients include Bathing Ape, Condé Nast Traveler and Instagram, who commissioned them to create guides to Paris, Berlin and London based on images of lesser-known sightseeing spots submitted by real users of the social media platform. Collaborative projects allow Ben and Jane to draw on their previous experience of working with clients (Ben was an editor, and then a freelance editorial consultant), and offer opportunities to try things they may not otherwise.

Building visibility of the brand is largely down to the quality of Herb Lester products, as well the range, says Ben. "Some products have certainly brought us to a new audience," he expands. "The best example of that is our set of fictional hotel notepads, which got a lot of interest online."

"But mainly we've just tried to produce good quality, interesting and attractive guides and products, and then worked hard to get them in front of people."

Before the year's out, there'll be a set of three new London guides from Herb Lester, along with a few new products that experiment with different formats – and anything else that may come up in the meantime.

How To Find Old Los Angeles and How To Get Out Of London Without Really Trying are available now for £10 each.



SIMON BALL

Co-founder, TuscanyNow&More
www.tuscanynowandmore.com

TuscanyNow&More turns 25 this year, and co-founder Simon Ball is celebrating the milestone by overhauling its offering to include tailor-made experiences in the area, as well as luxury villas

"We have houses owned by a famous bone surgeon, a prince, a senator, a renowned Italian architect, writers, painters, sculptors..."

25 years ago, Simon Ball founded TuscanyNow, marketing his parents' farmhouse and a few neighbouring properties to holidaymakers. The impetus for setting it up was the realisation that the agencies previously tasked with marketing the properties were selling them short, with short seasons and sky-high prices.

Simon's connection to Tuscany stems from his childhood, growing up in the hills near Florence from the age of 14. He studied at art school in Florence, then trained in architecture, and met his wife in the region. This summer, TuscanyNow has become TuscanyNow&More, offering more than just accommodation. "A change was needed as offering a house on a hill top with a private pool was not enough," explains Simon.

"There are many portals that offer this, so I decided we needed to invest in offering more services and experiences, such as wine tours, cooking lessons, cycling tours, and so on. At the same time, my father and mother had passed away and my siblings wanted to sell our home. You could say that the raison d'être of TuscanyNow was slowly melting away and we needed a rebirth. TuscanyNow&More has more front office staff dedicated to looking after our clients after they have chosen the house they want to stay in."

TuscanyNow&More is based in offices in London and Barcelona, with 14 internal staff, external specialists and around 400 people working to make sure the 180-plus

exclusive rental properties are "all up to scratch and that our clients get the best service possible." Since starting the company at the beginning of the 1990s, Simon says there's been a dramatic shift in the holiday property rental market. "Every house, even if it's an apartment on the 10th floor, is now called a villa, and the word luxury is overused to the point that it now means very little," he says. "So many companies, especially the larger ones, state that they know each house's location, which, sadly, is not the case."

"There are very few companies that really know each house, each manager and that only have staff at the end of the email or phone that are from that same territory. All our front desk staff, in sales, accounts or concierge, are from Italy and visit the houses in spring and in autumn. A bit of magic has been lost in renting a villa, it's more like buying a commodity off a supermarket self."

Simon attributes that change in part to the rise of companies such as Airbnb, which have "enabled the market to be flooded by properties, but there's a total lack of quality control."

Quality is paramount for TuscanyNow&More, which has been pushing villa owners to make improvements such as adding air conditioning, heating the pool, installing hot tubs and creating better shaded areas over the last three years. It's also constantly looking to expand the property portfolio, with recent acquisitions including a small castle near Florence. The best bit of the job, Simon says, is working with the owners. "We have houses owned by a famous bone surgeon, a prince, a senator, a renowned Italian architect, writers, painters, sculptors... People that come from many walks of life, and I have to speak a lot of time with them in Italy and try to get under their skin to ensure a strong working relationship."