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ARCHITECT
OLE
SCHEEREN
ON BREAKING OUT IN ASIA**

PASSION PLAY



GOING THE DISTANCE

Endurance and perseverance inspired by sports are guiding Song Saa Private Island luxury resort owner Rory Hunter in expanding his business beyond Cambodia and spreading the good news of changing lives and the environment for the better.

STORY VICKI WILLIAMS

Australian-native Rory Hunter has come a long way since spending three years as a self-described “ski bum”, or ski instructor, in his youth. He is now a successful entrepreneur as the co-founder, chairman and CEO of luxury resort Song Saa Private Island in Cambodia, and the co-founder of the Song Saa Foundation, an NGO. Yet sports have remained important to him, both on a personal level and as a facilitator for success in business.

His chosen sports are running, cycling, surf and snow skiing, sailing, diving and competitive endurance events. Earlier this year, he competed in the one-day, coast-to-coast World Multisport Championship race in New Zealand, considered one of the planet’s toughest endurance races with a 243-kilometre course involving cycling, running and kayaking.

“I enjoy endurance sports both on a mental and physical level, and find that it helps with business in regards to managing stress, and maintaining mental

ABOVE
Rory Hunter
ski-jumping
in Thredbo,
Australia.

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strength,” Hunter says. “There are similarities in what is required to train for endurance sports as there are in being a self-motivated entrepreneur. And fundamental to success as a start-up is perseverance, so there is a strong correlation between the two.”

STRENGTH AND CLARITY

Hunter, 40, says that sports also help him to recalibrate and that being physically fit and strong enables him to make clearer business decisions. “I believe that life is about a lot of great small decisions, bite-size chunks, and that the clarity that comes from being physically fit – and therefore mentally fit – makes it easier to make choices and maintain better patterns and decisions, leading to a better overall place,” he says.

Hunter’s next endurance race will be the Siem Reap Marathon in December, and to prepare for this, he does specific training four times a week, in addition to a regular regime of running and going to the gym 5-6 times a week. Also important to Hunter is adequate sleep – which means 8-9 hours each night. “I believe that resting and repairing both body and mind through adequate sleep is vital for success in all things,” he adds.

Hunter has no hesitation in acknowledging that he is a risk taker. “Without question,” says the former Saatchi & Saatchi account director based in Auckland, New Zealand. But his view on taking risks borders on the inspirational. “It is fear – the fear of failure – that is the great inhibitor to many people taking risks, but when you take the concept of failure off the table, and if it does not work out, it is not a failure – it is just a different outcome than you thought, and it may even lead to something better.”

CHANGING LIVES

According to Hunter, it is only through taking risks that one’s wildest dreams can be realised. If it was not



ABOVE
Rory Hunter

RIGHT
Competing in the World Multisport Championship in New Zealand

BELOW
Rory with his wife, Melita, and their son, Naryth, on Koh Rong Island



PASSION PLAY

for this attitude, the Song Saa Foundation – aimed at improving people’s lives and the environment in Cambodia’s Koh Rong archipelago – might never have come to fruition, in 2013.

The foundation started taking shape after Hunter and his wife, co-founder Melita – backed by investment partners – began to work on the award-winning Song Saa Private Island, which they wanted to do in a sustainable and responsible way. But the journey to Song Saa was itself a serendipitous one. “We moved to Cambodia in 2005, originally for a 12-month stint after which we had planned to move to New York. The following year, a Khmer friend told us about a beautiful archipelago with virgin rainforest and untouched beaches, just a few miles off the coast from the mainland, populated only by fishermen,” Hunter says.

A two-week visit to the area turned into a long-term commitment, especially when the Hunters decided to buy an island, Koh Ouen, from a local fishing family that was planning to move to the mainland, driven off their traditional livelihood by overfishing. “Our whole experience in the archipelago had been so eye opening and life changing that we didn’t really hesitate in buying the island. It was from there that the hard work really began,” says Hunter, who eventually moved his wife and their son, Naryth, to Hong Kong, where he set up the Song Saa head office with the aim of promoting the brand across the region. “We love the vibrancy and dynamism of this city,” Hunter says.

Back at Song Saa, the couple developed a waste management system, which they then extended to the nearby village. “We began to further understand the community, and how we could help the people and the surrounding environment,” Hunter says.

A BETTER PLACE

The foundation is run as an independent unit, although about 0.5 per cent of the resort’s gross operating profit goes to the foundation as a CSR initiative. A school has been built – the archipelago’s first – while the women are learning about the handicraft business. The foundation has introduced fishermen to sustainable practices and other sources of income, while families now have access to health care, which includes clinics and an annual visit by 40 doctors and US\$2 million in supplies.

Aside from donations from guests and business partners, as well as creative fund-raising initiatives such as short courses on marine conservation and experiential tour packages, the foundation has attracted high-profile support, including from Prince Albert II of Monaco, who has helped in the expansion of the Koh Rong Marine Reserve, Cambodia’s first, to



around 400 sq km. Other partners are the Flora and Fauna International, The Darwinian Initiative, the Smithsonian Institute, and Taronga Zoo in Sydney. As an indication of the foundation’s success, Hunter was invited to the Forum of Young Global Leaders by the World Economic Forum in early 2015.

New resorts in more remote locations across Asia are planned, which will likely be served by the foundation as well – first on the Cambodian mainland, followed by Indonesia, Myanmar, the Philippines, Sri Lanka and Bhutan. “I want to make the world a better place. I measure this by asking, if we have a presence in a certain location, will it make it better or worse? If the environment and the people will benefit from our being there, then we’ll do what we can to make this happen,” Hunter says. ☺

www.songsaafoundation.org

FROM TOP
Rory Hunter leads a clean-up at Prek Svay village on Koh Rong Island. The Hunter family with members of Song Saa Foundation during one of the Koh Rong medical missions.