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Headline: From frying tarantulas to farming rice, Singaporean opens Asia's backstreets to travellers

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Former SMU student Jamon Mok helms a social enterprise offering offbeat travel experiences to tourists while empowering craftsmen across Asia to lift themselves out of poverty.



Jamon Mok (second from right) sharing a jar of Lao rice wine with Khmu farmers in Luang Prabang. (Photo: Backstreet Academy)

 CAPTION 

SINGAPORE: It began in a mask carver's workshop in Kathmandu, Nepal.

Jamon Mok, a fresh business graduate from Singapore Management University (SMU), was running a micro-social venture capital fund called Gazaab Social Ventures that awarded grants to rural entrepreneurs in Nepal through business competitions to carry out their ideas.

In his first year of college in 2009, Mr Mok founded Gazaab with two other SMU students, Nepalese brothers Anil and Akash Gurung. For four years, they led teams of students in expeditions to organise such competitions, supporting small business owners in bringing their communities out of poverty.

But as they looked to expand the project into a full-fledged social enterprise, they found their seed funding – a few hundred thousand dollars – fell short of the estimated S\$5 million they needed for the model to be sustainable as a business.

Searching for new ideas, the founders revisited some of their beneficiaries to figure out how they could still invest the resources to make an impact. That was when one of the craftsmen, a wood carver with more than 10 years of experience, spontaneously offered Mr Mok and Mr Anil Gurung a lesson on the spot.

"We sat down in the back alley with him, covered in wood shavings to just learn at the feet of a master for five to six hours," Mr Mok recounted.

"Our hands were sore, our feet were sore, but it was a magical experience to be able to know someone there, sat in that alley. It was authentic, a real experience with tradition, with culture, with craft. At the end, we felt like we made a friend."

Mr Mok, 28, is now the chief executive officer of Backstreet Academy, a "peer-to-peer impact travel online platform for unique experiences in developing countries".

The encounter with Nepalese woodcarver Kedar Dhanuki made a deep impression on the founders and was the spark that inspired Mr Mok and the Gurung brothers to refocus their business on tourism entrepreneurs in March 2014, he told Channel NewsAsia.

Backstreet Academy sells one simple but compelling idea – learning from locals in their own countries.

Instead of visiting museums or heritage sites, visitors might opt to spend a day forging a traditional Lao knife, fishing with a net on the Mekong river or cooking dishes popular among Nepal's famed Gurkha warriors.

Mr Mok said the social enterprise was a way the founders felt that they could contribute to the world and work towards helping those in poverty.

"We feel like it has to be a model of empowerment rather than, say, handouts," he said on the vision for the platform.

"If we can motivate them and give them a platform to develop their own kind of businesses, their own kind of projects, initiatives where they can take ownership and grow it, they will really be empowered and inspired to take it forward themselves and also motivate and inspire the rest of the community to the same."

From just one experience in Kathmandu, the platform now lists more than 1,200 activities in 40 cities across 10 countries in Asia.

It features experiences hosted by more than 1,000 locals across the region – the majority of whom have increased their incomes by two or three times and moved out of poverty since signing up – as well as local managers and a pool of freelance translators in each country, Mr Mok said.

According to the entrepreneur, Backstreet Academy operates under a "fair revenue share" policy. For each booking, hosts receive 50 to 60 per cent of the revenue, translators take 10 to 15 per cent and the transport operator earns 10 to 15 per cent. The remainder - which can range from 5 to 15 per cent - is the platform's share.

The appeal of "authentic", off-the-beaten-track travel - a natural counterpoint to mass tourism and all of its trappings - has been around for many years.

With rising affluence in many countries and the advent of budget airlines, an entire middle class has been raised with more access to travel than ever – and their craving for novel experiences is being met by a growing number of online-based businesses.

Airbnb was arguably the most globally influential in popularising the use of peer-to-peer platforms for travel with the launch of its hugely successful home renting service in 2008.

Many other travel-related services have sprung up in the past three to four years. Some examples include Plate Culture and Traveling Spoon, which offer home-cooked meals by local hosts, and I Like Local and Withlocals, which also promote a range of local experiences from farm stays to volunteering opportunities.

Mr Mok says Backstreet Academy is different. For one, it focuses on people in poverty in developing countries who often don't speak English or have access to advanced technology.

"When we go to such places, when we want to learn from someone who is really a master – a master woodcarver, a master fisherman, someone who does really interesting art – chances are most of these people can't speak English. They can't use technology in many of the cases, and they're just not accessible to most people," he said.

Unlike other platforms, Backstreet Academy has found ways to overcome these barriers, Mr Mok said.

They have a local translation network in each city – when a booking request comes in, the host gets a translated call or SMS in their local language with the relevant details and can confirm the booking immediately, even on their feature phones.

The booking then goes out to a vetted pool of translators – including students or part-time guides – who will bid for the job of bridging the gap between the hosts and guests.

The model seems to be paying off. For a startup less than three years old, it boasts an impressive resume: 25,000 to 30,000 tourists hosted, TripAdvisor certificates of excellence in several cities including Siem Reap, Phnom Penh, Hanoi and Luang Prabang and features in global publications like National Geographic and Conde Nast Traveler.

Backstreet Academy also became profitable in the past few months, Mr Mok told Channel NewsAsia. They are steadily expanding and looking to venture into Myanmar and Africa next, he added.

In November last year, Airbnb started offering a similar service under their new feature, Trips, touting "hidden gems" led by local experts such as violin-making in Paris or marathon-running in Kenya.

But Mr Mok said he did not feel threatened by the market leader's entrance into the field.

"It's fine," he said laughing, "because they don't have Southeast Asia like we do. We have Southeast Asia. They can eat up the rest of the competition."

MAKING AN IMPACT

Speaking to Channel NewsAsia at SMU, where he first stepped into the world of social entrepreneurship, Mr Mok said he knew blazing his own path was the best way for him even before university.

"Ever since I was 19 or 20, I decided that being my own boss was the only way I could choose what I want to do and how I want to do it, and bring a measurable impact on the world."

While he said running his own business was definitely not as glamorous as people might think – he spends most of the year working abroad and only returns to Singapore a few days every one or two months – Mr Mok said his belief in what he was doing tided him through the difficult times.

His advice for budding social entrepreneurs: "Understand the kind of audience that you want to create a product for, the communities that you want to help and see what their real needs are. It is only with that, that you get the kind of motivation that will bring you through the tough days and get you to create a product or service that helps people and makes a difference."