

Super-luxury travel firm gives the star treatment

Sean Gallagher meets small and medium sized business owners and shares the lessons they've learnt in building their companies



Sean Gallagher with Siobhan Byrne Learat and Kasao Learat. Photo: Steve Humphreys

Sean Gallagher  

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Siobhan Byrne Learat and her husband, Kasao, run Adams & Butler, a privately-owned travel company that organises high-end customised travel for the super rich and those looking for unique cultural experiences worldwide. Set up in 2003, the company employs 12 full-time staff and this year turnover will reach €5m.

"We have now become the go-to contact for those looking for a unique and luxury experience in Ireland, the UK and Africa," explains Siobhan. "Almost all of our clients are from outside Ireland, primarily from the US, Mexico, Brazil, Australia, Canada, Brazil, Latin America, Russia and the Middle East. We do have a handful of Irish clients but these are mostly based abroad," she adds.

Clients have included Michael Jackson, Taylor Swift, Kim Kardashian and Kanye West, Nicholas Cage, Harrison Ford as well as Richard Haas, Senator Paul Ryan, several governors, ex-Presidents and numerous chief executives from blue chip companies. "We do everything from booking the finest boutique and five-star hotels to the more un-Googleable castles and private stately mansions, villas and safari camps," says Siobhan.

Earlier this year, they broke their own record for the most expensive itinerary booked by their clients when a family from Palm Beach, Florida, spent €270,000 for a 10-day itinerary.

"Can you give a flavour of some of the more unusual trips you have organised?" I ask

"We organised a trip to a castle in Ireland for an Arab prince who wanted to propose to his then girlfriend. We arranged for them to spend the day doing falconry. Just at the end, when the falcon returned to the arm of the woman, it had with it a small package in which was contained a diamond engagement ring and a note asking her to marry him," says Siobhan. "On another occasion, we flew a couple over the Cliffs of Moher in a



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helicopter and after they landed on a nearby beach, we had dinner set up for them in a cave complete with a violinist who serenaded them throughout. We also organised a trip to Ireland for the then Treasury Secretary of the US, who had always wanted to stay in an Irish castle. What he talked most about after his trip was not the time spent in the castle but about getting a lift on a tractor with a local oyster farmer who took him on a tour of his farm.

"We also arranged the ultimate private safari for a Russian oligarch who had set his sights on staying in a particular ranch in Kenya. The challenge at the time was that the place was owned by a Jewish financier family living in New York. It took us six months to track them down but we persevered and eventually it all worked out brilliantly," she explains.

She recalls too when she was asked by a famous Irish actor, based in LA, to arrange to rent a house on Vico Road in Dalkey. Because none were available at the time, Siobhan spent days going from door to door to ask if anyone knew of a house to rent. One woman, who owned an apartment in London, agreed to move there for two weeks to free up her home for the actor. "She didn't even charge him in the end as she was so delighted that he had stayed in her home."

Siobhan has enjoyed a varied career. Having grown up in Dublin's Mount Merrion, where both her parents and her sister were accountants, she remembers helping out in her sister's accountancy business during her teenage years - something that has benefited her ever since.

After finishing her Leaving Cert at 16, she got her first full-time job only to become pregnant unexpectedly. She later returned to full-time education, completing a degree in Spanish and Arabic as well as postgraduate degrees in business and Arabic and Middle Eastern History in UCD.

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For the next 11 years, she worked in sales, marketing, HR and finance with the Killiney Court Hotel before joining a property company. In 2003, having completed a part-time MBA in the Smurfit Business School, she left to set up Adams & Butler, a concept based on her MBA business plan.

"The first four years were tough financially. We were busy but not profitable," admits Siobhan. "Finding the right staff too was challenging. It can be a stressful business because our clients can be very demanding and can literally change their itineraries on a daily basis. However, we have built a team who are extremely committed to making our clients happy no matter how strange their requests," she adds.

Every business has a turning point and 2006 was the year things took off for Siobhan. That year she won the contract to look after pop singer Michael Jackson and his family on his extended visit to Ireland. She arranged for him to stay in Luggala Estate in Wicklow and later Grouse Lodge in Westmeath.

"That really put us on the map. From then on we became the go-to company for anyone bringing celebrities to Ireland," explains Siobhan.

Two years later, Siobhan met her husband, Kasao Learat, while on a visit to the camp in Kenya where Kasao was the assistant manager. An Elder in the Samburu tribe (cousins to the famous Maasai), Kasao had trained as a park ranger in South Africa and had been made an honorary life warden of the Kenyan Wildlife Service for his work in stamping out illegal poaching.

"He wanted to make sure that I knew what I was signing up for, so he made me camp in the bush, climb mountains and stay in his family's manyatta, or hutted enclosure, in Resim where Kasao's family still live as semi-nomadic."

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The couple have set up a charity, the Nalepo Educational Fund, supporting over 100 children in school in Kenya. Because the area suffers from severe drought, many school-going children must walk miles to collect water every day and so they are also planning on launching a crowd funding campaign to finance a water-hole.

Last week, Siobhan and her team were busy organising the visit of the Chief of the Choctaw Nation tribe in the US to Midleton in Cork, where he was officiating at the dedication of a sculpture, known as the nine eagle feathers, to commemorate monies sent by the Choctaw Nation to Ireland during the famine in 1847.

What about plans for the future? "I think we have been successful in building a super inbound business into Ireland and the UK and we recently had enquires from parties interested in buying this side of the business, but we haven't found the right fit yet," says Siobhan. "I want now to focus on growing the outbound side of the business where I see a growing market for wealthy middle-class Irish travellers looking to travel abroad, a segment which is currently being catered for by UK operators," she adds.

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