



LAUNCHED INTO THE ETHNOSPHERE™

The hallways and meeting rooms of the UN building in Geneva were bustling as usual. The contemporary double-height entry was teeming with its usual colorful array of international delegates and guests and a cornucopia of different languages floated through the air. As an experienced designer sourcing products from suppliers in remote locations, I had been invited to attend a conference set up by an NGO to promote women entrepreneurs in emerging markets and educate them on micro-lending opportunities. As a passionate advocate of sustainable luxury and Gender Equality, I was to identify means of helping them market their items to the luxury community.

As I made my way through the cavernous lobby, I noticed a small group of brilliantly clad women standing behind tables brimming with merchandise. In a sea of professionally attired men and women, this little group looked completely incongruous. Dressed in native garb, they were beaming with excitement and anticipation. Their makeshift marketplace represented a myriad of cultures: from Russia, Ukraine, Mongolia, India, and Bangladesh to various parts of Africa.

When the women saw me approach they lit up, hope written all over their faces. I could feel how proud they were to be at the UN and knew it must have taken every last cent their villages could scrape together to send them to Geneva to display their skills. As I poured over their array of fine raw linens, intricate beadwork and exquisite gold embroidery, I found that these women were true artisans with amazing talent! They were masters of their craft, and had woven their culture and heritage lovingly into their work.

And yet... although the quality of their work was extraordinary, there was one major drawback... few of these items would actually sell. In the global marketplace, no amount of brilliant craftsmanship or exquisite patterns can make up for incongruous design. I knew from past

experience that even if, in an effort to support these women, people purchased their goods, these magnificent pieces would eventually end up hidden in a drawer or stored in a box of exotic treasures, soon to be forgotten.

As I pondered this irony, an idea began to take shape: Could we not create products which could rival pieces bought in designer shops in Milan, Tokyo, London...? What if we brought modern designers to these villages to design their merchandise for the global luxury market? After all, ensconced in their remote locations, many of these artisans had little access to the tastes and preferences of this particular hoped-for customer base. What if we were to offer designs that would preserve their cultural heritage while simultaneously adding a modern twist? A little global ingenuity incorporated into the superiority of the local artistry could result in the production of stunning pieces, worthy of the most exclusive showrooms. What if, via a luxury milieu, we could highlight this artistry, thereby helping the artisans and their communities flourish?

In that moment, the seeds for Ethnosphere™ had been planted.

I have always been passionate about travel, myths and legends from all cultures and creativity expressed through craft. My childhood was studded with memories of international physicists, artists and philosophers from all walks of life, debating passionately into the wee hours around our dining table. In the morning I would find fascinating sketches, phrases and diagrams from writers, sculptors and architects such as Walter Gropius, among the half-empty glasses of red wine and overflowing ashtrays. I cherished those scraps of paper. They kindled my passion for architecture, design and stories. Ethnosphere™ symbolizes for me the embodiment of this passion. Through Ethnosphere™, we are able to fuse modern design with native craft heritage, resulting in unique products for the sustainable luxury marketplace. Each object in the Ethnosphere™



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line contains within its artistry a beautiful story of empowerment. For years, through MCM Design Studio, I have sourced high-end custom-designed products from artisans in the most remote areas of the world for my own projects in luxury architecture and design. Through Ethnosphere™, we are able to bring this concept to a new level.

As I delved further into the role of Ethnosphere™, I was faced with a myriad of moral, anthropological and environmental questions. How do we, as a more “modern” society, bring the exquisite native artistry into a luxury world that is distant and remote without destroying the foundation of the culture from

which it emerged? Do we not risk destroying what is precious because it functions only on a small scale? In an effort to please the global market, how do we introduce the artisans and their communities to the modern world without interfering with their cultural identity? How do we introduce new technologies while preserving original craftsmanship?

The answer: Ethnosphere™. Not only did the artisans I had met want to raise their standard of living, but they also wanted their skills to be recognized by the international luxury marketplace. If we, as the more “advanced” society, deny them that right in the name of preserving their tribal system, we are, in essence, denying them the right to evolve.



Candles by Comaral.



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Through the Ethnosphere™ concept, we can lend support to this willing evolution while preserving both cultural identity and the natural environment. Rather than imposing contemporary designs on the artisans in an egocentric manner (as many designers do), our chosen designers will work to blend the modern with the ancient to achieve cultural synergy. Their inspiration for these new objects will be born out of the artisan's skills & cultural heritage, the myths and legends of his country, and the materials his people have been crafting for centuries.

Ethnosphere™ is not just another high-end import-export company. After a four-year battle with Spanish giant El Corte Inglés,

Ethnosphere™ obtained its own trademark label based on a charter of principles which mandate among others Fair Trade, natural and cultural heritage preservation, Gender Equality and self empowerment.

As a logical complement to Ethnosphere™, the Ethnosphere™ Foundation was established. A percentage of the profit of each sale of Ethnosphere products goes directly to the Foundation to provide support for philanthropic projects related directly to the craftsmanship involved in the creation of new products – training in new designs and technology, funding the development of prototypes and research into new sustainable methods of treating materials, and improving



Students in Bhutan.
Photos by Erny Kable

applications of greener energy systems within the communities. The sustainable luxury marketplace, and in this case Ethnosphere™, offer companies and individuals the opportunity to indulge in the best life has to offer, while simultaneously supporting the preservation of craftsmanship and contributing to the well-being of underdeveloped communities across the globe. In addition, donations made directly to the Ethnosphere™ Foundation enable us to continue this work on a larger scale.

Finding new avenues for sustainable luxury in emerging market countries can be a daunting task. Bringing new sustainable luxury products from the initial discovery of the artisan to the sale of finished items on the global luxury market is complex at best. Ethnosphere™ and the Ethnosphere™ Foundation have been developed to provide a win-win situation: to bridge the gap between the challenges inherent in developing sustainability, both natural and cultural, and the intricacies involved in providing tasteful products of impeccable quality to this exclusive marketplace. The goal of this “dynamic duo” is to instill a new respect not only for the environment, but also in the beauty to be found in native heritage and crafts.

Ethnosphere™ has already lined up social enterprises who actively embrace Ethnosphere's™ core principles. Take Animana for example: the story of a courageous Argentinian woman, Adriana Marina, who went back to her native village after an international education and global exposure. She witnessed the paradox of exquisite talent

blooming amid poverty. Adriana created a social enterprise producing the most elegant and luxurious blankets and throws out of baby alpaca, vicuna and merino wool. By sharing the profits, she helps train more artisans, has rebuilt communities with schools and clinics, and teaches the local workforce about quality control and prompt delivery. After discussing the concept of Ethnosphere™, Adriana and I saw the incredible potential for local artisans to produce objects for the luxury home and hotel markets in leather goods, silverware and textiles. Animana will produce a part of Ethnosphere's™ first limited edition collection of exclusive alpine furniture and accessories.

Bolza Amazonia, another incredible example of ingenuity and innovation, is the story of a university project which brought sustainable paper design and production to the indigenous population of the Brazilian Amazon. With the help of the World Bank, a Japanese paper master taught the local Indians the art of paper making. He introduced them to an entire world of objects that can be created from this vegetal paper, from beautiful lamps to elegant packaging and sophisticated stationery.

Ethnosphere™ is forging strong partnerships with these and other social enterprises such as Arzu in Afghanistan (rugs) for whom Zaha Hadid recently completed a design, Balzatex in Morocco (towels, bathrobes, accessories) and Hemp Gallery in Australia (linens, skin care, fabrics) to create limited edition luxury items for the high end residential and hospitality environments. We hope also to work with Western industrial design schools on one end



of the spectrum, and on the other end, schools such as the National Institute for Zorig Chusum in Bhutan, which teaches thirteen sacred arts and crafts. I look forward to seeing the unique synergies come to life between Ethnosphere™ and these entities, as we bring their products and amazing histories to the forefront of the sustainable luxury marketplace.

Ethnosphere™ will begin with two limited edition product lines available exclusively through elite resorts and hotels worldwide as well as Ethnosphere's™ invitation-only virtual boutique. The Alpine Collection will be displayed in locations such as Megève, Courchevel, Gstaad, St. Moritz, Zermatt and Aspen. The Safari Collection will be exhibited in hotspots such as St Barth's, Ibiza, St. Tropez, Santa Barbara and Monaco. Ethnosphere™ will have a presence in exclusive department stores in London, New York, Paris, Tokyo, Shanghai and other key cosmopolitan cities.



Plans are in the works to furnish upscale ski and waterfront resorts and spas through this unique line of furniture, textiles, accessories, organic cosmetics and soaps, lighting and tableware ...everything a hotel or resort would need to provide their customers with the ultimate in sustainable luxury.

What a pleasure to soar into the Ethnosphere™! Merging modern design with handcrafted beauty in an effort to contribute to the the prosperity of developing communities and preserve the environment is truly an enjoyable task. My journey continues to be peppered with adventures, new friendships and discovery. Since the battle for the trade mark was won in March of this year, things have fallen into place so smoothly and magically that I cannot help thinking of Paolo Coelho's quote in The Alchemist, “And, when you want something, all the universe conspires in helping you to achieve it.” ▲