**“Conversations On Turning 20”: Jacinta Lim on AI, niche communities and the quandary of travel**

When you get to the ripe young age of 20, you’re bound to collect lots of stories – not only about the past but lessons for the future.

As WiT marks its 20th year in 2025, we turn the spotlight on our community, our tribe pioneers and leaders, to tell their stories and share their views on the evolution of online travel and technology.

We ask them to look back on the past and their early days, reflect on the present and why this moment is pivotal for online travel and get them to imagine the future, the next 20.

This special WiT Studio series, “Conversations On Turning 20”, is the collective story of WiT.

As a Chinese saying goes, 以古为鉴，可以知兴替

“By using history as a mirror, one can understand the rise and fall of things.”

**Episode 6: Jacinta Lim, CEO & Co-founder, Seek Sophie**

As a relative newbie to the industry, entering travel only in 2018, Jacinta Lim brings a different perspective to the story of online travel in Asia. She and her co-founder, **Lina Gedvilaite, both millennials, are creating something for their generation with Seek Sophie.**

**They want to build a marketplace that promises to “uncover the unexpected” by offering unusual, local experiences, sought after by their generation and they bring a conviction and purpose to their business that is both idealistic and admirable.**

**They want to build Seek Sophie into the “Patagonia of travel” by embracing and living the values of the outdoor apparel company whose** founder Yvon Chouinard has declared that “Earth is our only shareholder”.

Said Lim in an earlier interview with WiT, “Ultimately our vision is to become the Patagonia of travel – to build a successful business with positive impact. We’ve been doubling year-on-year on average and are currently at eight figures of sales. Our goal is to get to (and exceed) 100m in sales by 2028.”

She knows it will be a tough balance to strike between growth and holding true to the mission of positive impact.

This is her perspective.

**COVID DIDN’T REALLY CHANGE ANYTHING**

05:55.09

Jacinta

So I started SeekSophie in 2018, so a newbie to the travel industry really. And that's my first librarian in the travel industry and And obviously we had 2020, the pandemic, just when we were starting to find our feet. So I think there's, I've seen a lot of changes in travel, but actually when, at the start of 2020, when I was asked to predict what was going to happen to the world of travel after the pandemic.

06:27.25

Jacinta

all my predictions turned out not to be true, right? Because I expected COVID to fundamentally change how people were traveling. um And actually that didn't. um And you see that after COVID, people actually returned to traveling in a fairly similar way, I think, to how they were traveling before COVID. So people are slightly more open. Well, people, um at least in Singapore and parts of Asia, are a lot more open to, I guess, nature activities, being outdoors, because we did a lot of more of that in COVID. But that's not like a fundamental shift in behavior in terms of how they are choosing travel destinations.

**AI & ChatGPT: THE BIGGER IMPACT**

07:04.03

Jacinta

That's quite that's quite an interesting one. um But I think since I started, I guess the biggest change to how people travel um came with chat GBT. That's the one that I see like completely up in consumer behavior in a very short period of time.

07:19.77

Jacinta

And a lot of people are using that as kind of their first touch point for travel. There's obviously the inspiration of social media, but that's always kind of in the background and nobody really knows like how much to attribute um you know consumer booking behavior based on that because I think what social media does is it just makes people go to more of the same places.

07:40.94

Jacinta

It just amplifies more of the same behavior, and um but it's still the same behavior. Whereas GPT, I think, opens up a lot more possibility as to a little bit more bespoke ways of travel because people can actually say, this is my preference. it's not obviously very accurate at the moment in terms of planning out trips. It still it still points people towards a lot of the mass market destinations. It doesn't feel the blanks and logistics as well as people want it to, but I think it's a matter of a year or two, right? Before we can see like very bespoken um very bespoke travel recommendations that this can provide. So I think that is quite an interesting trend at the moment that I'm seeing. Um

**THE RISE OF NICHE COMMUNITIES**

08:26.91

Jacinta

The other fairly interesting trend, I guess, which, which came out of social media got a little bit amplified by COVID, which I think will be amplified even more in the coming years is niche communities. So I think what social media does obviously is that it amplifies niche communities. So you have, you know, like chili hates, right? Like people who love like chili, like coming together, maybe like traveling together to, um, you know, the next like chili conference or something.

08:52.27

Jacinta

um But I think you see a lot more of those these communities popping up and a lot in Asia as well. And you start seeing a lot more travel being congregated around these communities. So it's not it's not a full on trend yet. But I think that will be quite interesting space to watch because you see them.

09:11.19

Jacinta

um marathon and starting to like travel together like for marathon vacations you know people who bake bread that would come together in like Facebook groups and my Instagram communities and they start to travel together for as well to you know like see just Baker in Taiwan somewhere for example so I think you will probably see a lot more of that especially when the Gen Z start traveling a lot more because they're a lot more used to these kind of communities and they have grown up in these communities right so these are their friends and basically like niches down as well. So I think in the next, you know, five years, 10 years, they'll be quite interesting.

**THINGS WE OUGHT TO TALK ABOUT**

12:48.04

Jacinta

I mean, ah ultimately I think Ultimately, I think travel is good for the individual. Right. But I think a lot of people are now starting to talk about, you know, what what is travel actually doing for um for the communities and like cities. But then

13:10.08

Jacinta

There's a lot of very destructive things about travel that people don't talk about. and I mean, that's obviously an untold story. That's not that that's not sexy, right? And I'm not i'm not sure I'll ever be told like you know how staying in a villa in Bali basically causes like so much water shortage that the locals don't actually have water there anymore. And the more we continue this this down this line,

13:38.70

Jacinta

it's not It's not even like pricing people out homes. It's that there's no more water for locals. There's no more. you know does The wildlife has all been, a lot of wildlife is abused in the name of tourism and all that sort of stuff. it's not It's not a secret, but I don't think people talk about it or want to talk about it. So I do think there's a lot of,

14:06.01

Jacinta

oh a lot of destruction that this this kind of um this kind of path is taking us down. yeah It's not a secret.

**THE NEXT 20**

09:11.19

Jacinta

um marathon and starting to like travel together like for marathon vacations you know people who bake bread that would come together in like Facebook groups and my Instagram communities and they start to travel together for as well to you know like see just Baker in Taiwan somewhere for example so I think you will probably see a lot more of that especially when the Gen Z start traveling a lot more because they're a lot more used to these kind of communities and they have grown up in these communities right so these are their friends and basically like niches down as well. So I think in the next, you know, five years, 10 years, they'll be quite interesting. One of the big challenges that I can see in the next 20 years, which I think I'm, I'm, I'm curious about, um, I don't know what a solution is, is what's tourism going to look like in the face of overpopulation, right?

10:03.63

Jacinta

um We're at 8 billion. We're going to go to towards 11 billion people. ah ready it's In the last 30 years, we've lost 70% of our wildlife. um A lot of tourism is to see these natural places, is to see like the wildlife. You already see the strain in a lot of places. um Cities are seeing the strain. That's where you get a lot of the media from. But you know we work in places that are very off-grid and in natural places.

10:32.37

Jacinta

international parks and things like that. And we see that strain quite a lot and we're only at 8 billion. People are getting only getting wealthier. They're traveling more. We're going to get to 11 billion quite soon. And I don't know what um I don't know what our national parks are going to look like, right? There's no there's no land, there's no there's no space like underwater for all these people who want to go see it. um There's not a huge amount of wildlife to be seen, um and there's going to be less in the next 20 years.

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Jacinta

So what's what's that gonna look like? And I don't know, right? You're gonna see, you know, you're obviously gonna see like quarters, you're gonna see things getting more expensive, like that that's gonna be government reactions to to overpopulation and over tourism. But are you gonna see changes in travel behavior? Are people going to actively want to spread out a little bit more? um and say, look you know this this National Park is ready overcrowded, let's go see like these other places that might need the money. um I don't know whether that's actually going to influence consumer behavior. And I guess then you then you get to a point where you get pushed to push to the point where actually there are too many places are there too many people in these places that you want to go to. That

11:53.02

Jacinta

Are there like extreme ways to travel? right you know People already talk about like space travel, but then there's things like you know like neural experiential travel, where people plug things in your brainwaves, and then you actually get to experience your travel without actually going there. But that's like very far off, right? But when you start thinking about a world with you know overpopulation and what tourism will look like in that face of that world, I don't think those things will feel that far off when we get there.

12:21.48

Jacinta

But I think that's going to be one of the biggest challenges in the next 20 years.