

CONNECT

# Nomad /// Global Citizen

BY JULIA COSGROVE  
PHOTO BY CHRISTOPHER WISE

NAME: [Joshua Kaiser](#) AGE: [37](#) HOME: [Milwaukee, Wisconsin](#)  
MONTHS PER YEAR ON THE ROAD: [7](#) FAVORITE TEAS: [Oolong and Matcha green](#)



Joshua Kaiser has a job others might dream about. As **the founder of Rishi Tea**, a Wisconsin-based importer of loose-leaf teas, he travels around East Asia to source teas, participate in taste tests, and meet face-to-face with his partners, who include farmers, merchants, and artisans. Rishi, which imports such teas as Silver Needle, Mannong Manmai, and Ancient Snow Sprout, also sells handcrafted teapots, traditional ceramic teacups, and other brewing accoutrements. Since starting his company in 1997, Kaiser has logged more than 275,000 frequent-flier miles, imported more than 250 types of tea to the United States, and learned to combat the effects of jet lag. He spends most of his time bouncing around China, Taiwan, Thailand, Laos, Vietnam, and Japan.

**JULIA COSGROVE:** How did you get into the tea business?

**JOSHUA KAISER:** I studied international relations and political science in university. I was always interested in starting my own company, and from a young age, I really, really wanted to travel. Coming from Milwaukee, a place that doesn't have much diversity, I wanted to engage with other cultures and lifestyles. During my travels, I made a lot of friends who were organic farmers and artisans involved with tea. I fell in love with tea and decided to import it myself.

**JC:** You work directly with growers in very rural areas. Where do you stay?

**JK:** In some places I stay in the local villages. When I go to Yunnan, China—the birthplace of tea—I get a really good glimpse of ethnic minority life.

We started a tea partnership there in 2003 in an area populated by the Dai and Bulang people, who are descended from the first tea growers in the world. Some of them still practice very old traditions of eating tea and making pickles with tea. They have a unique rustic lifestyle. In 2005, an elder passed away, and they had a memorial service for him with a few hundred people, a band, dancing, homemade bombs, and fireworks. It was amazing. We got to dance with the local people and drink corn whiskey.

**JC:** What are some of your most memorable travel moments?

**JK:** In Laos, I walked 15 miles on remote mountain trails, only to be welcomed with interrogation over a cup of tea to find out whether I was a DEA agent. In Yunnan, two of my best friends and I climbed eight hours up and down a subtropical forest filled with snakes and bloodsuckers to see the world's oldest known

antique tea tree. In Kagoshima, Japan, I made soba noodles and spicy pork-bone soup with Japan's top artisan tea farmer and his family to celebrate our partnership.

**JC:** How much advance notice do you have before going on a business trip?

**JK:** Sometimes I will plan a trip about a month ahead, but many times I do quality control inspections, where I just show up unexpectedly to check out projects. My travel schedule is pretty hectic. On average, I buy my tickets about three or four days before I leave. My associates at Rishi are always wondering, "Where is he?" It's really difficult to plan when we're working with a crop that's at the whim of Mother Nature.

**JC:** How do you cope with long plane rides?

**JK:** I used to make the mistake of getting on the plane and drinking too much red wine. I've gotten past that now. I just drink water, and I stay away from plane food, even if I'm in first class or business class. And the moment I get off the plane, I typically go right to the gym and do a strenuous workout. That, in combination with melatonin, usually kicks jet lag. Coming back is always a doozy. I'm used to existing in some kind of surreal state for a day or two.

**JC:** How has your traveling style changed over the years?

**JK:** After some time you have to get really good at packing. My luggage is usually no more than 25 pounds. I try to go as minimal as possible. I used to worry about what I should bring. Now I buy what I need on the road.

Joshua Kaiser's suitcase always includes Japanese Matcha green tea powder, an altitude meter (for tracking the elevations of tea gardens), and a white porcelain tea-tasting set.