



Inspired: Helen Tomei in the yard at her Burnaby Mountain home. Tomei recently won an Inspiration 2004 Entrepreneur of the Year award for her efforts in setting up Sacred Earth Journeys.

Sacred Journeys for the Soul

Travel with a deeper meaning inspires first-time business owner to achieve success.

Julie MacLellan | Staff Reporter

For Helen Tomei, it all began at the age of 12, when her father took her on a trip to Peru.

“That’s what started my passion for travel to soul-stirring, exotic places,” she says with a smile.

So running her own travel company devoted to sacred journeys, wellness trips and adventure travel was probably not all that unexpected for Tomei.

The Burnaby resident recently won an Inspiration 2004 Entrepreneur of the Year Award for her work in setting up Sacred Earth Journeys.

Running her own company wasn’t Tomei’s first decision, however.

After graduating from Burnaby North secondary school, she worked at Expo 86 and then for various tour companies for 15 years.

When things started slowing down at her last job, she started taking stock of what might be out there for her.

She heard about BEST – BCIT’s Entrepreneurial Skills Training Program – and felt drawn to the idea “I thought, if I’m ever going to start my own business, now would be the time,” she explains.

In the program, she found the time to focus on her business plan and marketing research, with

expert instructors to help shape dreams into realities.

Tomei's focus from the outset was on the kind of travel that she's passionate about – learning about ancient spiritual traditions, connecting at a deeper level with other cultures.

"I just felt that people were looking for a deeper meaning to their travel experience", she says.

After completing the BCIT course, Tomei launched her company in October 2003.

She's set up in an office near Broadway and Main in Vancouver, and also does extensive work through her website, <http://www.sacredearthjourneys.ca>. Her offerings include sacred journeys – focusing on the spirituality of various cultures – wellness travel, yoga retreats and adventure travel.

Her tour leaders are all experts in their various fields – an Egyptologist, for instance, to lead the Egyptian journeys; experts in yoga for those retreats; a Peruvian shaman for a spiritual journey in Peru.

"They're all very specialized, and you're very well taken care of on these trips", she says.

Outside expertise is one of the things that makes her company work. Tomei is still running a one-woman operation, with jobs such as web design and accounting contracted out so she can focus on spreading the word about her company.

"I have really good partners", she says. "I work with a couple of like-minded companies that really support me".

Making those connections, she says, is one of the secrets to making a new business work.

"When you follow your heart, people and connections just start to happen that lead you down the path of success", she says.

So far, Tomei is finding that the trips she offers have very broad appeal.

She sees women, men and couples of all ages taking part.

But she notes that the majority of her clients are women in their 30s, 40s and 50s – generally well-educated and well-travelled, looking for something different in their travel experience.

Her surf and yoga retreats tend to attract a younger crowd, while other trips bring in seniors - a

75-year-old was among those heading on a recent women's retreat.

Each tour averages 10 to 20 participants, though some of the trips can go larger.

"We try to keep the groups small and intimate", Tomei explains.

Among all ages, she finds that the tours are tapping in to a desire to find a more spiritual experience.

"Yoga is really hot, people are very interested in that," she notes.

"It's kind of a niche...It's becoming more mainstream. I think the timing is good".

Tomei, of course, is hoping to see her business grow with increased sales and bookings.

She's already eyeing the possibility of expanding her offerings, including more trips to the Indian Himalayas and trips with a Buddhist focus.

She's also interested in pursuing the idea of family-oriented trips for those with children.

With two young children now- ages four and almost seven – Tomei is looking forward to introducing her own family to the joys of travel.

"I can't wait for them to experience it," she says. "It's good for kids to know that not everyone lives like we do in Canada and that we're really, really fortunate."

But she's willing to take growth slowly, as what she calls a "natural evolution."

"If you grow too fast, then sometimes it's your downfall," she cautions.

From here, Tomei is looking ahead to a bright future, and she feels that Sacred Earth Journeys will tap into what people are looking for.

"The point is that travel is just as much an inner journey as it is an outer one", she says. "People are ready for that."

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