



LAKANI'S SECRET INGREDIENT

When Heidi Lakani founded her eponymous private jet tour company in 2003, she was already a veteran of, and something of a legend in the travel industry.

She had done the corporate end of it and earned her stripes two decades earlier, and wanted to fulfil a personal dream: creating a "studio" that specialised in the art of travel for clients who want only the best and who have the means to pay for it.

She set about it in the most ingenious way, by hiring people like her – exceptionally well-travelled tour managers who had been to all corners of the world and turned their passion for globe-trotting into a vocation. Freelance travel professionals who, to this day, can pick and choose with whom they work - she built it and they came.

The fact that they CHOOSE to work with Lakani has everything to do with why her clients choose her, rather than any competitor out there.

Her recipe for success is the subject of much speculation within the travel industry and many would like to know what the secret ingredient is. Revealing it here wouldn't necessarily mean that it can be emulated easily - or at all, in fact. It is as intangible as it is counter-intuitive if you happen to be a company with an eye for the "bottom line", i.e. high profit margins.

Heidi Lakani is quite a character and a self-confessed "people addict". She collects people like others collect rare wines – she savours and appreciates them, and she certainly knows how to take care of them, profit margin be damned.

"People love to be cared for", she says, "and my team and I are caring people".

"The service we offer is both unconditional and uncompromising and this is something that comes naturally to me – so naturally, I attract people who are similar. We avoid consumerism and everything associated with it."

"Once clients have travelled with us, they would never go to anyone else and it is tempting to organise lots of tours, because they are all sold out all the time. However, in order to maintain the quality of our product, we keep groups intentionally small."

Lakani's market segment is tiny – she made a decision to cater to the most discerning at the outset, and being focused has paid great dividends. Firstly, because she has got to know her market like no one else does. Secondly, because she has honed her team's performance to virtual perfection. Thirdly, and most importantly, because she cares about the client rather than shareholders (Lakani is privately owned).

Her formula is to reduce the number of passengers (between 25 and 30 on the Around the World private jet program of approximately 3 weeks), so that they would enjoy maximum comfort and gourmet dining in the on-board sky lounge.

"If you pay \$250,000 per couple to go round the world, you expect not only the utmost private jet comfort but also hotel accommodations to match. We treat all clients equally and each of them gets a suite, which sometimes can be a challenge."

The Lakani Private Jet tours are accompanied – this means the team travels with the clients (a high percentage of whom are repeat clients) and consequently gets to know them so well, it can anticipate their wishes.

"There is no such thing as "not included" on our tours", says Lakani, "the client just needs to tell me what they want and it's done". Lakani's Private Jet client does not want to stand at airports, worry about their luggage or anything else, for that matter. She makes it easy for them. Luggage is seamlessly collected and delivered from one hotel suite to the next.

This a la carte, curated travel experience is what Lakani excels at, of course. Her team has been designing trips since the 1970s and what they don't know is not worth knowing. She refers to them as "the gift of God" - because they are the lifeblood of the operation. They ensure itineraries are fresh and creative and even when they have visited a landmark a hundred times, they retain their enthusiasm for it so they can share it with the client.



Keeping things ever-exciting and interesting, and never repeating the same itinerary is akin to reinventing the wheel with every tour.

It requires not just being supremely well-travelled, but also well-informed – of how the fabric of different countries change; how travel culture evolves and with it, clients' expectations.

Destinations such as Azerbaijan and China have not only changed beyond all recognition since Lakani first started putting them on the "menu", they change every time she takes clients there. China has advanced by a century since 1979, she says, whereas Azerbaijan is like the West Coast gold rush.

Global travellers have changed too. They are busier than ever and want to see more places in a shorter space of time. Once they have identified their favourites from a smorgasbord of highlights and destinations, they go for individually tailored travel experiences.

Lakani is meticulous in her preliminary research and seems to approach it as a matchmaking exercise: she connects with clients and tries to establish where they have been, what they have enjoyed, what their particular interests are, what their families are like and what their food preferences are. She is so good at it, she says she almost "feels" what they want. And for some clients, what that is has less to do with sightseeing these days and more to do with level of comfort and cultural experiences.

Lakani's strength is in that she is a solid tour operator, rather than a marketing figurehead. Her

core business is Designed Travel Experiences on scheduled flights – something she has been doing since 1975. She would arrange travel for clients pretty much anywhere they can get a visa for and where there is no fighting.

"We know most countries so well and have been there so many times that we have a connection with them."

She designs for "country collectors" – people who want to check a place off their list and move on – and for people who have a very specific brief (e.g., visit all there is to visit in India).

At this level travel is, of course, addictive. Most clients who come to her for a one off trip of a lifetime return within a year or two – because they cannot get the same service elsewhere. Word of mouth endorsement and the recommendation of travel agents mean that she doesn't need to mass market the product.

Her clients are smart, powerful and sophisticated and, like Oscar Wilde, have simple tastes: they are always and only satisfied with the best.

Heidi Lakani knows this and wouldn't dream of resting on her laurels. "If I don't give them the best, I'll never see them again.", she says.

She must be mixing her ingredients just right every time – her tours sell out fast and some people go on them just because they like to be a part of it all. The world is her clients' oyster and she makes sure they find a pearl of an experience in it every time.

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Lakani World Tours Around the World Private Jet departures feature:

- 757 aircraft reconfigured for just 30 passengers in luxurious leather club seating and a restaurant style Sky Lounge for dining and socializing.
- No overnight flights.
- Suite Accommodations in most hotels.
- One Lakani Tour Manager per 15 passengers offering 24/7 concierge service.
- A unique itinerary on every departure with a focus on a variety of experiences in each destination.
- The Private Jet departs from and returns to U.S. gateway cities.
- Dedicated onboard staff who carefully and totally handle all passenger luggage from start to end.
- Comprehensive sightseeing excursions limited to 15 passengers with window seats for all.
- Fine dining at any restaurant of choice.
- Lakani also offers small group regional/single continent private jet tours with slightly different features.