

## THE WORK IN PROGRESS

# 'I found a gap in the market to make travel fun, safe and social for the increasing number of women travelling alone'

**CAROLYN PEARSON, 52**, lives in Leeds, West Yorkshire. She is founder of a travel network, Maiden Voyage, allowing women travelling alone to meet up.

**➔ THE IDEA** I travelled a lot for my work as Head of IT at large corporations. About eight years ago, I was in LA on business and had a couple of days spare. It was great to see the sights, but a bit boring on my own. At night, dining alone and feeling a bit vulnerable was even less fun. Almost before I'd got on the plane home, I'd fleshed out an idea to create a website which allowed women travelling alone to meet up for dinner and sightseeing. Because I was in a job I loved and had no plans to leave, never mind set up my own business, this was something I just wanted to do altruistically, to help other ladies. As an IT expert, I knew how to create a basic site and started to spread the word. It really started to take off and it didn't need much management from me. You just put in where you were going and what dates you'd be there, and waited for someone to match you and then private message each other to meet up.



Connect with other women who are travelling on business



*My certification scheme attracted hundreds of hotels'*

**➔ COULD IT BE A BUSINESS?** The site grew to the point where I had to make the functionality better, so I asked a web company to develop and improve it. Women were using it for business and leisure travel, so it was quite busy and I realised this could be my own business, although I was still working full-time. I thought it was just a slow burner, which would eventually make money if I spent time building the database up and getting more and more advertising.

**➔ TURNING POINT** A member travelling to Beijing rang to ask if could I recommend a female-friendly hotel. It was then I had my light-bulb moment. I could offer certification and training for hotels who wanted to provide a quality service to women. I did lots of research and asked female family and friends what was important to them about the hotels they used. They talked about everything from double locks on the hotel doors to well-lit entrances. I started off doing the checks myself whenever I stayed abroad. I'd then approach the hotel manager and congratulate them on passing my tests. I then said I'd feature them on my website. After this, things really took off. My certification scheme attracted hundreds of hotels from around the world who wanted accreditation and training in

how to become female friendly. I was able to give up my full-time job in 2013 and take a small salary from the business.

**➔ BREAKTHROUGH MOMENT** I did a small interview for the *New York Times*, who'd picked up on my website, which in turn was covered by CNN news channel. When it went on TV, everything snowballed.

**➔ WHERE I AM NOW** I've been mentored by ESpark, an entrepreneurial scheme run by NatWest bank, which is fantastic and gives you lots of support. I've also had investment from a business angel last year, who has put around £500,000 into the business and has become chairman of my board. I have seven staff, and over 11,000 members in 100 countries.

**TIP** Resilience is really important. Use every knock to learn and improve.

### BUSINESS IN FIGURES

**Launched: 2008**  
**Start-up costs: £12,000**  
**Turnover: £1million projected**  
**Website: maiden-voyage.com**

### BUSINESS BREAKDOWN

**Website and domain name: £5,000**  
**Research and marketing: £5,000**  
**Sundries: £2,000**