



Transcript: Taken from alifeintravel.net

Ep 3: Michael Issenberg – Simply put, it’s about the people

(Intro music begins)

Hi, I’m Siew Hoon and I love to travel. More than that, I’m in love with the power of travel to change lives. Welcome to ‘A life in travel’. This season is brought to you Expedia Group – Bringing the world within reach.

Sitting within reach of me in this episode is a man who, grew up in Boston and dreamt of playing for the Boston Celtics, but somehow ended up in Singapore, running one of the fastest-growing hotel companies in the world. Michael Issenberg is Chairman of Accor Asia Pacific, and he has more than 4,700 hotels in more than 100 countries, with Asia Pacific its fastest-growing region.

(Music fades)

SHY: Hello, Michael.

Michael: Good morning, Siew Hoon. How are you?

SHY: Very good, thank you. I'm feeling very lucky indeed this morning to catch you in Singapore because it's quite rare that you're in town. I mean, you run a huge hotel company. How often do you travel in your job?

Michael: I pretty much travel seven weeks out of eight. Not necessarily the whole week depending on where I'm going. If it's to Bangkok or maybe Indonesia, might be one or two days of the week. But if it's Paris or Sydney, then it tends to be the whole week. So, it varies.

SHY: Are you one of those people who count your miles?

Michael: [laughs] No, no. Definitely not. I have a lot of frequent flyer points and I get a statement. So, I do see those, but no. I definitely don't count.

SHY: You don't count those miles like “I’m a billion-point flyer” or whatever?

Michael: No. No, no, no. At one point, you just –

SHY: – you just give up?

Michael: Yeah, yeah.

SHY: You dreamt of playing basketball for the Boston Celtics because you are extremely tall [laughs]. With the amount of travelling that you do, that must be quite a challenge. You're quite an expert on travel, can you give us a few tips on how you travel? Other than flying first class?



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Michael: I don't fly first class, business class. But for me, probably two things. One is planning. Don't wing it, and think about when you're going to land and navigating everything quickly. So, I'd always think about, particularly, jet lag – I do suffer from that, so – what time and how to arrive, and trying to get to a city out of peak hour if I can, and really thinking about, particularly, the first day or two where I'm going, to make sure that that works, and then it just makes the rest of the trip easier.

SHY: Have you heard of this technology where you wear these glasses that make you look like an alien and then it sort of sends light into your eyes or something like that, fool you into thinking it's day or night?

Michael: No. Never heard of that one. Maybe I should try it [laughs].

SHY: So you're one of those who believe in old-fashioned tactics like planning. I know that I travel a lot too and I actually look forward to sometimes just staying home and enjoying time at home. How do you stay in love with the idea of travel, with the amount of travel that you do?

Michael: What I still love more than anything is meeting people. For me, travel isn't about seeing things. It's about experience and who I'm with and who I'm meeting. That's why I consider myself fortunate that I travel so much for work. Because when you're travelling for work, you're always interacting with people that live where you're going. For me, that's just so interesting. Every trip is different because you're meeting different people doing different types of activities. That's what keeps it fascinating.

SHY: But travel, I guess, is different now that you are travelling a lot for work. Do you recall your first ever trip outside the US?

Michael: Actually, I left the United States in 1985 to move to Sydney, that was for a two-year contract at the time. That was actually the first time I ever left the US, and whilst I've always been back but not to live (sic).

SHY: What was it like then, that first exit outside the US?

Michael: It was exciting. Little did I know, I was packing my bags and not returning. But back then, it wasn't common to have a direct flight – for I was living in San Francisco – to Sydney, so I had to stop over in Hawaii. I'll never forget I landed and the guy who I was coming to work with, you probably know, Tony South, picked me up. He was "Oh, we got to pick up another friend," who was Peter Barge, who you may know. He's a little bit taller than me. The three of us piled into his Toyota Corolla, and I had all my lifelong belongings, little did I know, and arrived in Sydney and stayed with Peter and went for a walk down to Circular



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Quay in Sydney. Yeah, there was the Opera House, and it was just like, "Wow, what a place," and man, it was from there.

SHY: So you fell in love with Sydney and never left –

Michael: That's right.

SHY: – and never returned back home.

Michael: Yeah. I'll never forget. My mother said – because I was going for two years, there were going to be adventures and all – "Don't go. You'll meet a girl, you'll get married. You'll fall in love and you'll never come back." I said, "Oh mum, don't be silly." And it's exactly what happened [laughs].

SHY: Mothers are always right.

Michael: That's right.

SHY: We know that now [laughs].

Michael: Mm hmm.

(Music break)

SHY: Let's talk about what you do. You're the chairman of Accor Asia Pacific; huge growing hotel company; big, big job. But you came from humble beginnings, right? Tell us a little bit about your childhood, other than the fact that you had a mother who was always right [laughs]. What was it like growing up?

Michael: I grew up in, I suppose, suburbia. It was about 15 kilometres north of Boston, which today would be a bedroom town to Boston. But back then, it wasn't. It was your basic went to school, played sport. You could go out, run around. There was the woods of bush right behind my house and no big deal to go and just wander around with your friends. It was very different to today because, obviously, no electronics, and life revolved around family, school, and sport.

SHY: Very carefree –

Michael: Yeah, exactly.

SHY: – and full of nature. How did you then get into hospitality? Was that something that you always wanted to do from that time?



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Michael: No, no. Pure accident. Because ironically, the first job I had I hated. So, I went to find something else, and I got a job, believe it or not, as a dishwasher. I was 15, and it was better than the previous job.

SHY: What was the previous job [laughs]?

Michael: It was something called repack in a factory, which you would take bottles out of a box because one had broken and you'd have to wash off the other ones, and then repack them into a new box. It paid \$1.40 an hour back then, and it was pretty boring [laughs]. I was washing dishes; I was in the kitchen interacting with people. And then —

SHY: And you could see the remains of what people ate [laughs].

Michael: Yeah, yeah. But there was a bit of fun. Then, I was a busboy, and then a waiter, and then I was actually a short-order cook. I just worked in all sorts of different parts of it. It was actually a tennis club that had restaurants and bars and a pool area, so I just did all sorts of different things. It was just so much fun and I loved it.

SHY: So you worked your way up through the kitchen?

Michael: Yeah, kitchen and waiting and — yup.

(Music break)

SHY: What were some of the early experiences like? You say it was fun, but was it tough though?

Michael: When you're 16, 17 years old, yeah, the chef threw plates at you occasionally when you did something wrong and —

SHY: Chefs are really like that, are they?

Michael: Yeah. Back then, definitely. He was a German guy. One thing about in a restaurant, there's always that peak period depending on which country you're in. But it usually lasts about two hours and it's super intense. But it's fun, you work up to that. I don't like comparing sports and business other than teamwork. Working in a restaurant, you become a team. Then afterwards, you'd sit down — I was too young to drink then — so I'd have a big bowl of ice cream with one of my mates. Then, later on, it became a drink after work —



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SHY: Now, I know why you liked the job [laughs]. Free ice cream.

Michael: – later on, it became drinks after work. Yeah, it was great, though I had no intention of it being a career. But fate is one of those things you just never know. When I was applying to university, even though I dreamed of being a basketball player, I was actually a better American football player than I was a basketball player. I wasn't great, but I was pretty good. I was recruited by what was referred to as Division II Schools. Not the top in terms of the big athletic ones, but the next tier down. One of the schools I was applying to was Cornell University, which is a great university, but not necessarily a great athletic university. The football coach who wanted me to play was showing me around the campus, and he looked at my grades and everything, and he said, "Look..." – and Cornell is unusual. It's divided into seven different, what they refer to as colleges. One was architecture, one was engineering, one was liberal arts, and one was the hotel programme. He said "Look. You'll probably get into the liberal arts, which was the biggest one, but because you've worked in the industry, you'll definitely get into the hotel school, and if you don't like it, once you're here, it's easy to transfer into one of the other colleges." Oh, okay. I got accepted, and it is a great university, so I decided to matriculate. I ended up playing one year of football and been in the hospitality industry the rest of my life.

SHY: Oh my gosh, so you got into the college because you had experience in the kitchens. I mean [laughs] –

Michael: The kitchen, yep. No question. Now as I look back on it, because it's not necessarily an easy industry, so the university wanted people that did have some passion for the industry because you don't want to go through four years of university, work hard, study, and then come out and say, "Why did I do that?" and so that's why it helped. It wasn't the only thing. Obviously, you had to have good grades and what have you, but yeah. But it certainly was not a plan at the time.

SHY: But times are different now, though. We talk to kids and say, "You should enter hospitality. It's a great industry," and all that. But a lot of them say that they just find it really hard, the hours. Plus, a lot of them don't want to do what you did, which is like four years in the kitchen washing dishes and all that. So how do you overcome that today?

Michael: It is a challenge because also (sic) the hours, right? Not just long hours, but they're not necessarily social hours. Ironically, for me, that was part of the fun because you bonded with the people you worked with because – and I remember when I worked at the night audit and you work 11:00 at night to 7:00 in the morning, and you go out and shoot pools and have a couple of beers at 7:30 in



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the morning, and I said, "Oh, how fun is that?" and I was in San Francisco. It's the quality of the people that you work with that make the experience, and that's been the same forever, but even in the beginning, that is, that's what made it fun.

Whilst what I do today has really nothing to do with what I did way back then, other than it being a people industry, people should be going into it because of the experience, wanting to meet people. It is a people industry. That's still, without question, its greatest attribute, and if you're a people person, you'll have fun. I often get asked career advice, and I always say the most important thing is enjoy what you do, because no matter what you do, to be successful, you have to work hard. You can be an artist, an athlete, a musician, and you'll have a certain amount of innate talent, but the people that do really well work hard at it, and they develop that talent, and business is no different. You will have some skills whether it's you're math-oriented, you're people-oriented, you can write well, you can speak well. But just because you have a skill, you still got to work hard at it, and if you don't enjoy what you're doing, you're not going to work hard, because then work becomes difficult. I believe you have to have fun at work. I mean, of course, you're always going to have bad days, but if you don't enjoy it, you need to find something else to do.

(Music break)

SHY: You have a huge hotel company, 1,070 hotels in Asia Pacific. How many people do you employ in APAC right now?

Michael: Over 100,000. I think about 115,000 about.

SHY: At the rate that you're expanding, you need to find new talent, right?

Michael: Oh yeah, tell me (about it). We employ – just to keep up with the growth – there's about 10,000 people a year. But then with the turnover – and it's inevitable – it's another 30 (thousand). So, we employ about 40,000 new people a year.

SHY: How do you go about finding everybody to enjoy their work, which is kind of impossible, right?

Michael: Correct. No, no. It is. No doubt. Again, every country is different. Every job is different, and some people, unfortunately, have to work just to scratch out a living, and some of those jobs can be difficult. Our responsibility is to make it as enjoyable as possible, as rewarding as possible. For me, one of the most



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rewarding things in an organisation as large as us, and how we really attract and maintain the best talent, is we develop careers. To watch young people blossom and have a career and stay with Accor for a long time – of course, not everyone does, but a lot of people do – that's probably the most rewarding part of the job.

SHY: So you've been at Accor how many years now?

Michael: It'll be 25 years in August.

SHY: Oh my gosh. So, you're clearly a stayer.

Michael: Yeah. It, of course, wasn't the plan. I didn't join 25 years ago thinking I'd be there this long, but it's been such an exciting company to work for. I mean, when I joined Accor, I think we had maybe 50 hotels in all of Asia Pacific. Not just growth, but we've acquired companies, we've sold companies, we've done all sorts of different businesses. So, it's always just been fascinating.

SHY: So from Boston, you went to Sydney?

Michael: I went to university in upstate New York, then San Francisco, then Sydney—

SHY: Then Sydney for how many years, and then how did you end up in Singapore?

Michael: What a lot of people don't know was that from 1993 to '98, Accor Asia Pacific was a separately-listed company on the Australian stock exchange. Accor S.A., the global company, owned 25%. The public company had the master franchise for Asia Pacific. Then the Asian crisis came in 1998, and Accor took over that company and we became wholly our own subsidiary. So that's why the headquarters were actually in Sydney. But as life moved on, it became apparent that the biggest growth opportunity was going to be Asia. We decided to move the office in 2007, and it was up to me; I could choose where to put the headquarters. At that time, our Asian headquarters was in Bangkok, and I had been responsible for Asia Pacific for about five years, and I would spend a week a month in Bangkok and then a couple weeks travelling and a week in Sydney.

I had to decide where, and it really came down to three possibilities. One, thought about Bangkok, but we had to make this decision in 2007. There had been a pretty significant coup in '06, and decided for an Asia Pacific headquarters, probably not the best place, as much as we all enjoyed Bangkok. So, it was really Singapore and Hong Kong, and (we) chose Singapore. The main driver was I felt that if we moved to Hong Kong, we would become a Chinese-centric company. As important as (we) saw China as part of the future, didn't want the corporate office to be solely focused on China. So (we) chose Singapore thinking it was going to be a much better place to focus on the entire region. I still, looking back



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on it, think it was a sound decision. We probably might have had a bit more success in China if we'd gone to Hong Kong, but I'm convinced we wouldn't have had as much success in the rest of Asia if we had.

SHY: So you're sort of much more spread out now. Even though China is a big growth market for you—

Michael: No question.

SHY: – but Southeast Asia is a very key market for you.

Michael: As remains the Pacific as well.

(Music break)

SHY: Fast-forward to today's Singapore, when you came, was a very different place, and a lot of people diss it. Some people say it's really regimented, boring, sterile, and then some say it's too contrived and trying too hard to be cool. What does Singapore mean to you?

Michael: I probably have a slightly different view than most. I've lived here for almost a dozen – my first time, actually, was visiting, was 1985, and have been a constant visitor over all those years. Because I travel so much, for me, Singapore is really an oasis. I'm very lucky that I live pretty close to the Botanic Gardens, which is awesome, UNESCO protected, or listed, and it's just a beautiful place. Also, I love my dog, and so the greatest thing I do is, on the weekend, I take my dog for a walk in the Botanic Gardens. Singapore is this green, beautiful place. That, to me, is what I think of Singapore.

Yes, it does work, which also, when you're travelling all the time, living somewhere that works, because [laughs] when you go somewhere that – you go to Sydney or Paris or Jakarta and the traffic drives you spare and the things that don't work drive you around the bend. Singapore is great that it works, and there's great restaurants, great food. I don't go to bars too much anymore, getting too old, but I do know that they are here. We run some good bars as well, and there's plenty to do. But for me, I think of it as an oasis of calm, and...

SHY: It recharges you for the next trip. I also find it interesting how in businesses, you really have to be prepared for any kind of event or unexpected development, and I find it interesting that in Singapore, Accor is now the largest hotel group. I was going through the list, and you say you now have more than 10 hotels in



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Singapore. Let me count them. You have the Raffles, you've got Fairmont, you've got two Swissôtels, you've got two Ibises and an Ibis Style. You've got two Novotels, two Mercures, one Grand Mercure, two Sofitels, and one Sofitel So. Did I miss out anything?

Michael: No. 15 hotels. That doesn't include the ones that are on the way, but yep, those are 15. Ironically, one of the reasons why I also chose Singapore for our headquarters is that we have offices in Jakarta, Bangkok, Shanghai, Sydney, Delhi, and this office is not responsible for the day-to-day operations. I actually wanted it to be in a place where we didn't have that many hotels because I wanted to stay out of the way of the guys who truly run the hotels, and now we're the—

SHY: And now look what's happened [laughs].

Michael: – and now we're the largest operator in Singapore. That's right.

SHY: So that's going to change the dynamics of the corporate office then.

Michael: A little bit. A little bit.

SHY: So are you going to move the corporate office somewhere else now?

Michael: (laughs) No, no, no.

SHY: If you had to move it, where would you move it to?

Michael: I don't know. Don't know. I think we'll stay with Singapore.

SHY: Why have so many properties in such a small market of 4.5 million people? Really, isn't having all these brands very confusing?

Michael: First, when you think about it, the hotels aren't for the people that live here. Yes, we do get staycation, but they're really, it's for all the visitors, and Singapore has over 65 million visitors a year. Well, obviously, in transit through the airport, but over 18 million visitors. It's actually a very big travel market, and so having a strong presence here makes a lot of sense.

The second part of the question is "Are all the brands confusing?" and in fact, in today's world, I don't think you can have too many brands, because people are looking for variety, they're looking for experience. The same traveller will do something different. I won't say, someone who's staying in Ibis might stay at Raffles, but if you're coming through Singapore and you're here for one night, you're arriving, leaving the next morning, Ibis is great. But if you want to have a resort experience, you go to Sentosa and stay at the Sofitel. Or you want to



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experience the best hotel in the world, well, you might stay at Raffles. So, all these hotels serve different markets, different market segments, for people travelling for different reasons.

SHY: So people want choice and variety.

Michael: Absolutely.

SHY: If we are talking about size, we can't not talk about China, right? That's where Accor is growing the fastest. Now, everywhere I go, Chinese travellers have changed the face of travel around the world. You can go anywhere now, Paris –

Michael: Absolutely.

SHY: – secluded spots in New Zealand...

Michael: The Maldives?

SHY: Yeah. How do you feel the Chinese traveller has changed? How do you feel their habits have changed? How can we in tourism prepare for the impact that their numbers are going to have on our tourism spots?

Michael: I have been around this industry for a while, so I often think back to the days of the Japanese traveller. It was a little bit similar, except this has happened much faster, that initially, a country starts travelling and they do group travel, and then it becomes independent travel, then it becomes adventure travel and pretty much all types of travel. That's exactly what's happened to the Chinese market. Of course, it is a massive market, and it's not homogeneous. The Chinese traveller travels for different reasons, at different times for different experiences. For me, the concern is – and not just the Chinese but because it's such a big market – it's some markets getting overrun.

That's always been one of the things that you have to balance as a travel industry, that a destination opens up because of its beauty and its interest. Then tourists come, and then more tourists come in, and you just need to be careful that it doesn't become too crowded to lose its authenticity. Resort destinations are the first to suffer from that. But even cities like Barcelona at the moment, there's this backlash and not (against) the Chinese traveller, but just travellers in general, because it's become too crowded...

SHY: And Japan too. I've been reading reports about Japanese small towns being swamped by travellers.

Michael: Because Japan, ironically – that was the first Asian country I looked after, when I was living in Australia – for a very long time was under-visited. It was remarkable



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how few visitors went to Japan. It doesn't have the infrastructure, which is also part of its charm, exactly what I'm saying, and then you have this influx. If it's not well planned and well managed, it can actually ruin the destination.

(Music break)

SHY: Would you say that the travel industry has done a good job so far of managing this influx on tourism spots?

Michael: It's mixed. Look at Bali, that one of the original exotic destinations, and it's overrun. The traffic's one thing, but that's kind of now a weird part of its charm, if you will. But it's more the pollution and the fact that the other services are not up to scratch and the hospitals aren't what they need to be for a destination like that, which also impacts the locals. We've improved since then, because Bali only really get (sic) discovered in the 70s. Whereas, say Phú Quốc in Vietnam which is a brand-new destination, the Vietnamese government's trying to learn from what's gone before, and it looks to be well planned at the moment. I'm sure the original visitors to Phú Quốc that I remember at one point we had one hotel with 46 rooms, and now we just opened one with 750, another with 250. It's a big destination, but the infrastructure will be there to keep up.

So those travellers are always looking for the newest, unspoiled remote destination that gets harder and harder to find. The industry is doing better in terms of protecting the environment, which is most important and also protecting the people because that can also, unfortunately, sometimes tourism brings an unsavoury element that can negatively impact the local people as well.

SHY: As travellers, I guess we shouldn't expect everything to remain the same, just because we want to go and visit somewhere exotic. I mean, life is evolutionary. So, as long as the travel industry does a better job of maintaining the infrastructure, that's a good thing.

What drives me in my job is the fact that I believe that there's a lot of diversity in travel, lots of small businesses, and we try to do what we can to champion the small businesses. So, that's what keeps me going. What keeps you going?

Michael: What keeps me going? Well like I said, I still very much enjoy what I do, and still, the part of my job that I enjoy the most is the travel aspect. Not the get into the airport, getting on the plane, and getting through immigrations and all that. But being out in the field as we refer to it and meeting people, and whether that's



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colleagues that work for us, partners, clients, it's fascinating because it's always different.

I'm always looking at what makes a destination or a city tick because we're opening a hundred hotels a year and signing new deals of probably 150 a year, and wanting to make sure we get those right. So, always being out and about and seeing how a city or a resort destination's changing, where the future is, meeting people that can help you understand that, which is difficult when you have so many people working for you. But getting to know the people that work for us.

SHY: 100,000?

Michael: You can't know them all. But still, you want to know what's going on, and being out, and meeting people is still great. I'm very lucky I don't spend much time sitting behind a desk.

(Music break)

SHY: Growing up in Penang, I remember as a young kid when the first international resort hotel opened, which was the Rasa Sayang, and looking at it through the eyes of the local person, I have always been very admiring of the way hotels really do create real jobs for local communities. That's one of the things that I've found sort of covering hospitality in my career as a journalist. I think maybe hoteliers perhaps underestimate what you do, in terms of really creating jobs for local communities and impacting lives.

Michael: I don't. Because as I said, of all the responsibilities I take most seriously, it's the people that work for us. I believe one of the keys to our success is creating a culture that fosters that. No culture is perfect, no culture is bulletproof. Particularly in today's world, you probably learn more about your mistakes, which is a good thing. But when you create a great environment and allow people to thrive, that's the most, as I think I said before, that's the most rewarding aspect of what I do. (I) don't underestimate that. It's not just in a remote community, even in cities where a lot of the jobs that we have mean an awful lot to people. They're either their first jobs or because they're young or their first jobs because they've actually emigrated to a country, which is very daunting. So (we) try to create a welcoming environment.

We do have a lot of turnover, and that's okay because some people join the workforce in a hotel knowing that this is a stepping stone to something else, and



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that's okay. But you still want them to have a great experience. You want them to be an ambassador when they leave and go on to either another career or another hotel. I think when you have that attitude and you create a great environment, that's also what then makes it a great place to stay because that still, we come back to why do people travel. It's because they want to meet people, and the people in the hotel are part of that. Everyone always thinks of leisure travel, but even business travel you get people, the road warriors, constantly on the road. If they interact with friendly people and help when they're away from home and make them feel more comfortable and better at what they do that's also great. Then people that come to a destination for the first or second time and tipped to where to go or just made to feel welcome, it's a buzz. It's great.

SHY: But at the same time, we live in a world of the technology giants. Their valuation is insane compared with a company like Accor or, let's say the Marriott and the Hilton that have real brick and mortar, and really create real jobs and give contracted employment to poor communities or rural communities. What do you feel about this misalignment, in terms of how people are perceiving the value of companies?

Michael: Well, there's a lot of parts to that question. If you look at startups now or new companies, they're valued on revenue which, I suppose as an old person and someone whose been in business a long time, I struggle a little bit. Because until someone can turn that revenue into profit, is it a real company? Obviously, a lot of technology companies have been very successful and have done that, but then there's also those that have crashed and burned. There are some that want to build a company to flip, that's okay. But that's not what I want to do. That's not what I've ever wanted to do. I enjoy the process of building a business, a sustainable one, and it takes all types.

You can worry about what some other industry is doing or you can focus on your own business and making it as great as possible. Not that we don't have the occasional tussle, particularly with OTAs and who owns the guest and all that sort of thing, but they're different businesses, they're a different process. That's where I believe very much in having a strategy, sticking to it until – you need to adapt your objective and your tactics of course. We still have a solid business model, and people are always trying to build a new business. It's a tough world out there. Someone's always trying to take a bit of your lunch and you need to protect it. But if you're good at what you do, you're going to be successful.

SHY: Wow, you create a huge buffet there. Everybody can take part in [laughs].

Michael: Sure.



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SHY: You seem to have a pretty good job. You still love what you do and all that. But what keeps you awake at night? Other than the tussles with OTAs which are online travel agencies.

Michael: I suppose it's security, (the fact) that it is a dangerous world out there. We are looking after people when they're away from their homes and you never know when a crisis is going to occur. Having been responsible for hotels that have had some awful crisis happen there, and you're dealing with people's lives and protecting them and the people that work for you as well, their livelihood and their safety, and it's hard. In this day and age security – and it's physical security, it's emotional security, cyber-attacks. Technology is wonderful but it also, as you know, has its downside. So all types of security that, of all the things that would keep me awake at night, it would be that.

SHY: It's good to be reminded that the travel industry, people from the outside think it looks very glamorous. People say, "I want to work in travel because I love to travel." But actually, travel carries with it a host of responsibilities. But that doesn't mean that we stop travelling because it's a dangerous world or the tourism spots are being overcrowded. I mean, we keep travelling. Right?

Michael: Absolutely.

SHY: Because that's the human drive.

Michael: Of course. The same security risk happen (sic) at home as well, people just tend to forget that. It's just going back to, we're responsible for their safety when they're out of their comfort zone, but bad things can happen anywhere even when you're at home.

(Music break)

SHY: Let's get back to you as a traveller. Clearly, you've travelled a lot, not just for business. Let's ask you about your most unforgettable holiday.

Michael: I've had a lot because I also do a lot of b-leisure – combining business and leisure travel – but I suppose if I had to pinpoint one, it's the Kimberleys in the north-west of Australia. I went with my family, my kids at the time when I think they were about 11 and 8, and of course my wife. It's the most amazing part of the world. It's so remote, it's incredibly rugged. The sky is just like nothing you've ever seen. You go hiking. Not that I'm into fishing... but my daughter, she was



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eight. She was the only one who caught a fish, and it was the first fish, I think probably the only fish she ever caught in her life. They were croc spotting one night, and it's just an extraordinary part of the world.

SHY: It is. I remember going to I think an outdoor cinema in Broome –

Michael: We went there, yes.

SHY: – and that was really quite amazing.

Michael: Yes. Yeah.

SHY: Okay, so most forgettable holiday?

Michael: We often laugh about it as a family and it's not the destination, but we refer to it as crabby in Krabi. Krabi, obviously in Thailand is K-R-A-B-I. But we were talking crabby as in crabby children, because my kids at that time were, I think about 14 and 17. Being teenagers – it was a long weekend here in Singapore – they didn't want to go away with their parents. They wanted to be here with their friends. So, they managed to take what was an extraordinary [laughs] destination in a beautiful hotel and make it a miserable weekend. So travel is not just about the place and the hotel, it's also about circumstance.

SHY: It's also about knowing what your customer wants.

Michael: Yes, yes. And our customers did not want to be with their parents [laughs]. So that was one that we try to forget [laughs].

SHY: Rail or cruise?

Michael: Probably neither, but I've become increasingly intrigued with cruise. I haven't really done any. Our honeymoon was a short cruise in Fiji. Since then, haven't done one. A common friend named Graham Wilson he swears by cruising, so I've got to give cruising a try. But rail, that doesn't do.

SHY: Isn't that wonderful that you still have this new terrain that you have yet to explore? That's the new world of cruising which is getting really big in Asia as well. So, being American, you must love to drive, right?

Michael: I love a road trip. Absolutely.

SHY: So, best road trip ever?

Michael: I was very lucky. I went one way across the US, five different times, and probably the best one was when I moved to San Francisco. Me and my best mate that I grew up with did what was called the 'driveaway car' of someone who wanted



Transcript: Taken from alifeintravel.net

their car to go from Boston to San Francisco. We drove the car across (the) country and we took a couple of weeks to do it and –

SHY: Don't they call it ride sharing these days?

Michael: No, because they weren't in the car with us, they just wanted their car moved, so I shared it with my mate. It was fun. We didn't have a set itinerary, we could just go when we please and stop where we please. I was 20 years old at the time and that was a great road trip – especially living in Singapore. Our car is five years old, it's got less than 15,000k(m) on it, so [laughs] I still love a good road trip –

SHY: What's the music that you play on a good road trip? What's the soundtrack?

Michael: One of the things I love tapping into Spotify is putting something called '70s road trip [laughs]. It's music from the 70s, but designed for road trip. I'm a rock-and-roller and I still love the '60s, '70s, and '80s rock music.

SHY: Don't you love this tech where you don't have to think and then they just feed your stuff.

Michael: I remember making mixed tapes...

SHY: Giving away your age, Michael [laughs].

Michael: That's all right. But now it's fantastic, you don't have to do that. You just put it into Spotify, if you don't like that you change it and put in whatever mix you want. It's unbelievable.

SHY: Therefore, at this ripe old age that you're at and you're playing '70s [laughs] music for your road trip, what advice would you give to young people who want to enter travel and hospitality?

Michael: Make sure you enjoy the work environment. You know how the airlines have those staff discounts for flying. Don't do it for that. Because you won't enjoy – if that's the only reason why you're going for a hotel company. We also have great benefits but if you're only doing it for the benefits, you're not really going to enjoy. It's okay for short-term but go into it because you like working with people. Yes, there's your job where you're interfacing with guests and that's obviously something you can be good at. But even if you're not necessarily an outgoing person, but you enjoy working in a team. We still are an industry of people, and that camaraderie is fantastic.

But you also have to be prepared to work hard, you have to be prepared to work different hours. I'm a big believer in mobility. I think you need to be prepared to probably do a couple or more moves in your career, partly to advance your



Transcript: Taken from alifeintravel.net

career, but also to experience different things. I always found every time I moved – I've moved a number of times – that not only has it enhanced my career, it's been a life-enhancing. Because it's just like travel where you're in a different environment, work and living with different people. If you're going into the industry make sure you're up for that, and if you are, I think you'll enjoy it and you'll go a long way.

SHY: So finally how has travel changed your life?

Michael: Exactly what I just said. It is because I've met this incredible tapestry of people – whether through travel or whether through moving – that I believe has made me, I won't say smarter, but wiser. Definitely more tolerant. Made life more interesting and therefore made for a more rich (sic) life.

SHY: Happy travels, Michael –

Michael: Thank you.

SHY: – and going on your road trips again.

Michael: I will. Definitely, I don't have as much time as I'd like, so I tend not to do driving trips but I will do more. That's for sure.

SHY: Thank you.

Michael: Thank you, Siew Hoon.

(Music begins)

You've been listening to 'A life in travel', a podcast hosted by me, Yeoh Siew Hoon.

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