



PEOPLE

Virtual Vacations: Margot Kong Of Journeys Unparalleled

by [Ruthanne Terrero](#) Aug 17, 2020 10:13am



(Photo by Jennifer Graham of Jennifer Graham Photography) Margot Kong is providing customized virtual private tours to clients, keeping them happy, engaged and dreaming about travel.

The COVID crisis forced Margot Kong of [Journeys Unparalleled](#) to cancel her family's spring break trip, but she didn't let that ruin their vacation. With a quick pivot she planned a

virtual trip to Ecuador and the Galapagos and her family (including a nine-year-old and a 12-year-old) spent each day as if they were traveling.

“Each day we’d do things that related to what we would have been doing had we really been traveling,” says Kong of her “trip” to the Galapagos. “My daughter snorkeled in the bathtub wearing all her gear, we drove through the car wash to simulate going through the rainforest, we made a paper mâché volcano and the next day made it explode, we listened to Ecuadorian music, tried Ecuadorian dances, watched a virtual Quito tour on YouTube, each night watched National Geographic documentaries on Galapagos and Darwin, and every evening we made and feasted on Ecuadorian meals.”

Kong even posted about their adventures daily on social media and then blogged about the weeklong adventure: “Virtual Ecuador & Galapagos Trip” for all to read about.

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It didn’t end there. She also partnered with John Montgomery, co-founder of Landed Travel, to co-host a webinar on Ecuador and the Galapagos for her kids and about 25 of their schoolmates from the Chinese American International School in San Francisco.

“I received so much positive feedback from the trip that clients ended up hiring us to put together customized virtual private tours for them as well,” says Kong, who planned and presented trips to London, Delhi/Agra, Spain, China (complete with video introduction in Chinese by David Goodman-Smith), and Thailand.

“From that, we also introduced smaller, one-off customized virtual experiences for groups of clients including ‘live’ virtual tours of the Louvre and Old Town Barcelona, both led by actual guides in France and Spain, as well as a Thai cooking lesson led by a San Francisco-based Thai cooking instructor,” adds Kong.

Noting quickly that these took a lot of time to put together, Kong charged for her services. “Planning virtual trips for people is challenging in that it requires as much work — if not more — as planning an actual trip but the planning fees and commissions are much lower,” says Kong. “That said, it does bring in some revenue while also keeping clients happy, engaged and dreaming about travel. So, I think of it as a marketing investment. Plus, the research I’ve done for virtual tours keeps my destination knowledge up to date.”

The Journey

Pivoting is not unusual for Kong, who grew up in Southern California and went to Barnard in New York City. She majored in sociology and English but because she had been intrigued with the stock market since fifth grade, she also studied and had internships in finance. Merrill Lynch in Manhattan was her first job after graduating and she stayed in the industry until 2001, first on the retail side, then selling institutional equities, then in investor relations at a high-tech PR agency.

“When the tech bubble burst, I quit my job and traveled around the world for a year and a half, off and on, with San Francisco as my home base,” says Kong. Realizing travel was her

passion, a new idea for a career opened up. Her intent was to launch a company leading tours to South Africa (she is third-generation Chinese-South African and was born there).

A friend introduced her to Guy Rubin and Nancy Kim who just two years prior had started their business, Imperial Tours, a luxury specialist in China travel. They corresponded online; giving her advice on how to start a DMC. After a few months, they suggested she join them for a luxury travel conference in Las Vegas so she could see how they interacted with travel advisors.

Join them she did and Kong got right into the groove. "I started selling right away because I had sold stocks, and if you can sell a stock, you can sell a tour," says Kong. When she went home, there was a long email from Rubin asking her to join Imperial Tours in sales and marketing as she got her business off the ground.

"I ended up staying a very long time," says Kong.

Fourteen years later, Kong had still not started her tour business. As she consulted with friends Hope Smith and KC Hoppe, who were affiliated with Montecito Village Travel, she got the idea of being a travel advisor, and joined the host agency. After not too long she switched to Travel Experts and has loved every moment of it.

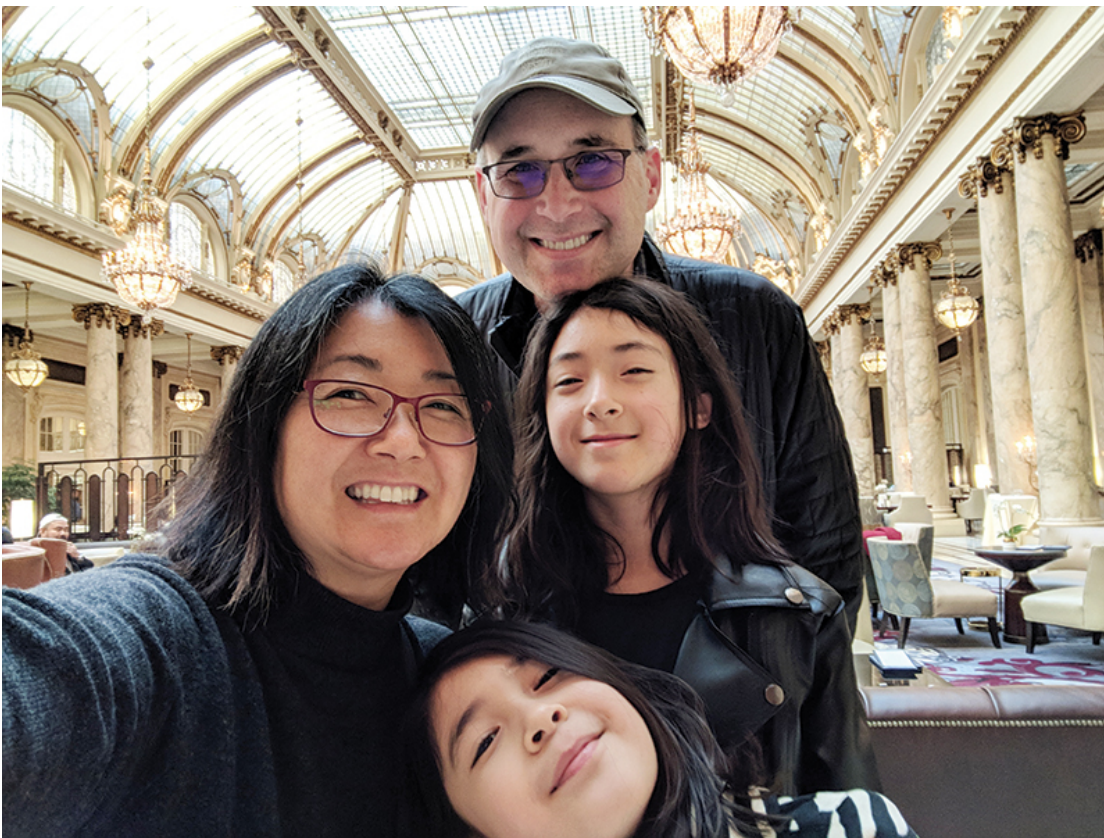
"I drink the Travel Experts Kool-Aid," she says with a laugh.

Perhaps that's because just after she joined the network, owner Susan Ferrell, along with Claire Canady and Heather McIntyre took her to lunch; Sharon Fake, who was traveling, also called her to welcome her aboard. "They embraced me right away. I never felt so supported. They said, 'We're here to help you grow your business, and we're providing the tools, the support and the resources to help you do that.'"

The support that Travel Experts has provided during the COVID crisis is also a standout, says Kong. “They are genuinely concerned about their ICs,” she says.

Being in Travel Experts means Kong’s agency is also a part of Virtuoso.

“I’ve been with Virtuoso since 2002 on the supplier side and since 2014 on the advisor side. I like the amenities that I pass along to my clients as well as the opportunities to meet new suppliers, develop deeper relationships and friendships with suppliers I already know, and network with and learn from fellow advisors,” says Kong.



Margot Kong, who always tries to travel as a family, says, “I want people to see that every place can be a family-friendly destination.”

Fast Growth

Kong has now been running her agency full time since 2016 and has seen her business grow rapidly since then, with revenues well over \$1 million. Luxury travel is about 75

percent of the business, which specializes in family travel all over the world.

“Given that I sold China for so many years, I would say that it is the destination I know best, though my experience on the supplier side has afforded me contacts all around the world and the ability to ask the right questions to get up to speed quickly in a variety of geographies,” she says.

Kimberly Burns, her fellow advisor, specializes in luxury family ski holidays, ranches, honeymoons, and sun and sand destinations. Burns recently relocated to Lake Tahoe after living in San Francisco for 15 years; originally from the East Coast, Burns has clients located throughout the country.

As for Kong, the majority of her clients are from the Bay Area. “Forty-seven percent of my clients are people of color: Asian-Americans, black or Latinos,” she tells *Luxury Travel Advisor*, and diversity is a topic she is keen to explore in the travel industry (see sidebar).

About half her clients come from her daughters’ private school, as well. That piece of the business germinated when Kong was in the coffee shop right next to the Chinese American school. She was chatting with the woman behind her and told her she was a travel advisor.

“Oh. What does that mean?” was the response. “Why would you need a travel advisor?”

Kong ended up planning a trip for her to Montreal and Fogo Island and the client said it was the best trip she’d ever taken. Even better, her husband was on the board of the school and told the other board members about Kong.

“All of a sudden, they became my clients and it just blossomed from there,” says Kong. “It’s a Chinese-immersion school, so everybody there is already globally minded. They all travel a lot, so there’s a built-in pool of business.”

Another source of business evolved from Kong's "Moms' Getaways."

"Once a year, I would plan a getaway for all the moms. It started out just going nearby to Napa and then it grew from there. One year we did **Miraval**. Our getaways would be anywhere from 15 to 30 people."

When we asked Kong if she goes along with the group, the response came quick.

"Oh, yeah!"

Business, of course, has slowed down in the COVID environment, and Kong says things have been both challenging and interesting.

"One good thing that has come out of this is that I'm heartened by the connection and support for one another that I've seen in the industry social media networking groups. I love that even though everyone is hurting, people are eager to help each other, and give support and advice," she says.

Business is picking up again incrementally as stir-crazy clients are eager to leave their homes, if only for a few days. Kong's home base of San Francisco makes it doable to create close-to-home itineraries since there are some great destinations nearby, such as Napa, Sonoma, Mendocino, Tahoe, Carmel and Big Sur. Some clients are interested in traveling even further from home.

"I'm seeing a smaller handful of clients looking to do self-drive road trips, either in their own cars or by RV. My associate Kim Burns has also booked some ranches this summer," says Kong.

Her clients' main concerns these days? Safety. "They want to know that the hotels are being careful about cleaning and strict about masks and social distancing. Kim and I have been traveling with our families this summer to show our clients what precautions the

industry is taking,” says Kong, noting that earlier this summer, Kim went on a multi-month epic road trip by car and RV. Her stops included **The Resort at Paws Up, Brush Creek Ranch, The Ranch at Rock Creek, River Dance Lodge** in Idaho, **Rockaway Beach** in Oregon, **Tetherow Resort** in Bend, **Mazama Cabins** at Crater Lake and **Conestoga Ranch** at Bear Lake, UT. The RV portion of the adventure included stays in Yellowstone, Glacier and Grand Teton National Parks.

Kong has stayed closer to home but has stayed busy, taking family trips to **Bardessono, Hotel Yountville, Solage, Calistoga Ranch, Carneros Resort, Inn at Newport Ranch**, and **Cavallo Point**, and has plans to visit **Edgewood Tahoe** in the fall.

“We think of it as ‘sheltering in a different place,’” says Kong.

During more typical times, Kong makes it a point to travel, but always tries to do so as a family. “I take my kids with me everywhere. I’ve taken them, for example, to the **Fogo Island Inn**. As we were walking through the restaurant, I heard another guest say, ‘Why would you bring your kids here?’ My answer would be, ‘Why wouldn’t you bring your kids here?’ It’s an amazing experience to see how people on the other side of this continent live, that you’re out in Canada, but you’re hearing Irish and English accents, which is so crazy. We went foraging for berries and things like that ... You wouldn’t think of Fogo Island Inn as a family-friendly property, it doesn’t have a kids’ club. It doesn’t cater to children. It doesn’t have a playroom, right? But in so many ways, it is, and they get so much out of it. I want people to see that every place can be a family-friendly destination.”

Kong also feels it’s important to see and experience destinations, DMCs and hotels first-hand so she can speak to her clients from a place of knowledge.

When Kong is home, she spends about 75 percent of the day working with clients, dividing the remainder of the time equally between marketing/social media and managing the

business. Prior to 2020, she had a very aggressive five-year growth plan, but considering the current unpredictability of the future, she's thinking of other ways to steer her business.

"I hesitate to make solid predictions until there is a vaccine for COVID," says Kong. "What I do know is that it's important for us to stay nimble and to capitalize on opportunities as they present themselves. I am never one to sit and wait for things to come to me."

This means Journeys Unparalleled is staying on top of all the industry changes and news coming in from around the world, but it's selective at the same time. "We receive so many webinar invitations on a daily basis; we're being strategic and only participating in the ones that are most beneficial for our clients at this particular point in time," she notes.

Regardless of the future, it's safe to say that travel is part of Kong's DNA. Her earliest recollections of family trips were to Johannesburg, South Africa to visit family.

"My earliest memories of travel were sleeping on those very long plane rides. Back then the airlines did not sell every seat, so I would stretch out across three or four seats to sleep. That's pretty much all the travel I did as a kid except going to annual national Latin conventions around the country in high school (yes, I was/am a nerd and revel in it!) and women's marches in college. After college, I caught the international travel bug and never looked back," says Kong.



Kong has recently taken family trips to Bardessono, Inn at Newport Ranch, Solage and Calistoga Ranch.

And, she is optimistic about the future for several reasons. “I feel we will get back to where we once were, but it will take a long time to rebound — and that recovery will only really start after there’s a vaccine. I hope that when the economy does recover and people are able to and start traveling again, we will think about travel differently.”

Her hope is that this break offers an opportunity for an industry “reset” along two fronts. “First, my hope is that we can travel again with a greater consciousness about the environment,” says Kong. “I know that many are starting to push towards this already, but I feel we can be much more aggressive about it: no single-use plastic; a greater emphasis on sustainability; a focus on local, reusable, and recyclable. It is possible to experience luxury travel and still be good to the earth.

“My second hope is that we can reset with a push towards diversity. The travel industry needs more people of color on both the supplier side as well as the advisor side, at all

levels all the way up to directors, GMs and CEOs. Working towards these two goals and introducing the world to more people, and a wider diversity of people, is what makes me both optimistic about the future of travel and excited to wake up each morning,” says Kong.

Diversity Is a Priority for Travel Industry

Margot Kong is serious about helping the travel industry become more diverse. When she travels, she frequently sends trip reports to the general managers of the hotels she has stayed at. Aside from suggestions about the condition of her guestroom and high fives for sustainability efforts, and things that can be “fixed” throughout the property’s grounds, Kong is candid about how the hotel represents itself online, and in real life.

She shared a portion of a report she sent to a hotel earlier this year as an example of how she’s trying to effect change.

“Diversity: I know I was there for only a very short time, but during my stay, I did not see any people of color at the valet, reception/concierge or restaurant hosts/servers (only bussers and housekeeping). [The hotel’s] website photos are also very, very white. I only see a black woman in two or three photos and it’s the same woman in each photo, and one Indian or Indian-American couple. In terms of guests I saw on-property, I did see one black guest but aside from her and my own family, everyone else was white. Nearly 50 percent of my client base is made up of people of color — black, Latinx and Asian, so seeing increased diversity both in terms of staff and travelers throughout the industry is something that is very important to me.”

“I want to get the conversation going,” Kong tells *Luxury Travel Advisor*. “As with climate and sustainability, I feel like we could be doing so much better, so much more than we are.”

Journeys Unparalleled LLC, an independent affiliate of Travel Experts

Headquarters: San Francisco, CA

Managing Partner and Travel Advisor: Margot Kong

Associate Travel Advisor: Kimberly Burns

Business Manager: David Goodman-Smith

Annual volume of business: \$1 million-plus

Affiliations: Travel Experts, Virtuoso

Agency website: www.journeysunparalleled.com

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