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Tiffany Hines is ever-evolving Global Escapes
to serve the luxury traveler

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TIFFANY HINES, here shown at Hotel Indigo Athens Downtown, says, "Luxury means different things to different people, so it's always a goal of ours when we sit down with people that we really find out what it means to them. It doesn't always mean spending a 'gazillion' dollars on a vacation, it could mean having very curated, private attention."

Southern Comfort

Tiffany Hines is ever-evolving Global Escapes to serve the luxury traveler.

BY MATT TURNER

Tiffany Hines of Global Escapes has seen her agency's business grow by double digits in each of the last six years. The agency, a member of the Signature Travel Network, now pulls in \$7 million in annual revenue. Hines, who is the president, CEO and co-owner of Global Escapes, based in Athens, Georgia, has always put people first and sees that as part of her success. Five years ago, she cleaned up the agency's website to get rid of a lot of the brand "noise," and instead focused on her team, which includes four leisure advisors, two corporate advisors and two independent contractors.

"We really focused on Global Escapes, and who we are as a company and how we can help you accomplish your travel bucket list," she tells *Luxury Travel Advisor*. "We are the people who really love to get into the weeds, learning about destinations and the best way to see them," she says.

She also dropped "travel agency" from the company's name. Her website's homepage now reads, "Global Escapes is different. We are a full-service travel consulting company." It was a necessary update for someone who has been with the company since it was primarily booking airline tickets. But more on that later.

"We've put more of an emphasis on being a little bit more purposeful about our marketing and how we try and inspire people ... It's definitely brought about a more educated clientele," she says.

All this has helped Global Escapes find a niche in the luxury market, which currently comprises 65 percent of the agency's leisure sales. Hines also credits this shift to luxury to a focus on relationships — both with the company's clients and its supplier partners.

"One of the things that we explained to a lot of our newer clients is that everybody has different travel preferences," Hines says. "Everything we do is tailored to the client that we're meeting with and planning something for. Even if it is something as simple as spring break to the Caribbean, it's always tailored to the people that are traveling — what their preferences and priorities are for that particular trip."

To create these custom trips for clients, Hines says her advisors must maintain strong relationships with their preferred suppliers. "It's critically important that we have good relationships with the companies that [we] work with, because when you start getting into more luxury travel, it's so important for people to get that personalized attention," she says.

Hines adds that the agency has a part-time marketing director who stays in touch with all of the suppliers they work with most often and the ones that they want to build a better relationship with.

Home-Grown Roots

"Southern hospitality is at our core," Hines tells *Luxury Travel Advisor*.

It's been that way since her mother, Ella Grondahl, started the agency in 1988. "It was meeting people and being able to feel like you're helping people," that Grondahl enjoyed most, according to Hines. These remain some of the most important characteristics that she looks for in new employees. "We want to make sure that they really enjoy people and helping and that they're creative."

Since just about the beginning, Global Escapes has been housed in a Victorian home in the heart of Athens, where they prefer to meet face-to-face with as many of their clients as they can.

Walk-in business used to be the norm, but Hines says that they

mostly work by appointment now. "What's really nice about having appointments with clients is that they can come into our building and sit down with an advisor and really have our undivided attention," she says. "They don't have to worry about the advisor trying to juggle the phone or juggle other people walking through the door."

"It's helpful when you can sit down with people face-to-face and kind of force them to turn off all the distractions and really think about something that is very important to them," Hines adds, noting that "it's those little nuances that you pick up on with people when you can have those face-to-face meetings" that are also key.

Hines says that if a client can't make it into the office, she or her advisors might just jump

GLOBAL ESCAPES

Location: Athens, Georgia

President and chief executive officer:

Tiffany Hines

Chief financial officer: Chris Hines

Founder: Ella Grondahl

Number of advisors: Eight total (four leisure advisors, two corporate advisors and two independent contractors)

Annual volume of business: \$7 million

Advisory board positions: ASTA National Board of Advisors, Athens Area Chamber of Commerce Board

Agency website:

www.globalescapes.com

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in the car and drive a few hours to meet with them. Just the same, Hines will always try to send someone from Global Escapes to Atlanta (about one-and-a-half hours driving) when suppliers are in town, if she can't attend.

Global Escapes' clients are largely based throughout the Southeast; others are spread out across the U.S. They're mostly made up of Baby Boomers and Gen Xers, Hines adds.

Before taking a new client on, an advisor will have a 20- to 30-minute conversation with the potential client to learn more about their aspirations and explaining how Global Escapes can help them. "I think we've gotten really good at realizing the type of clientele that might not be a good fit for us," Hines says. "As much as we give our prospects and leads an opportunity to ask us questions and interview us, we are doing the same thing with them."

Italy remains the favorite among the agency's clients, while Iceland, Greece, and the South Pacific, Australia and New Zealand are growing in popularity.

One of the larger bookings that Global Escapes is working on right now is a trip to Italy for a family that likes to settle in one



FAMILY VACATION: Tiffany Hines' extended family at the Grand Velas in Puerto Vallarta. From left, Tiffany's daughter, Emerson; husband, Chris; Tiffany; her mother and founder of Global Escapes, Ella Grondahl; Ella's husband and Tiffany's stepdad, Mike Bridwell and her older daughter, Christiana.

place for a full week. They'll do Florence for six nights and then Milan for another six before Lake Como for a day. The itinerary includes wine regions in Tuscany to learn about Etruscan history before heading onto Milan, arriving just in time for Men's Fashion

Week. The oldest daughter intends to pursue a career in design, and so they'll spend time with exclusive designers and visit their ateliers during their stay. Finally, they'll finish the trip with a day on Lake Como before heading back to the U.S.

"It's always tricky when you're planning for a family because you've got to make sure that the parents have enough downtime and the kids stay busy enough to keep their interest," Hines tells us. "For a lot of the trips we plan, it's like taking a 1,000-piece puzzle and dumping it out on a table and spreading it out, and then putting it back together so it all fits nicely together."

Another big trip Global Escapes is working on is a three-week "Best of Africa" trip aboard a TCS World Travel private jet for a couple. This trip begins and ends in Athens and travels to many areas of Africa, including Rwanda, Kenya's Masai Mara, Cape Town, Namibia, Botswana and Madagascar. "Everything is included," Hines says.

Since the husband is "getting to an age where it's a little bit more difficult for him to travel," the couple will be traveling with a doctor (and a cook!). "It is totally private, handheld the whole way," she adds.

"Luxury means such different things to different people, so it's always a goal of ours when we sit down with people that we really find out what it means to them," Hines



IN PARIS: Tiffany and Chris Hines spent a few days in the City of Light before sailing aboard the *Viking Heimdal*, from Lyon to Avignon.

tells us. "It doesn't always mean spending a 'gazillion' dollars on a vacation, it could mean having very curated, private attention."

To that point, Hines says that "luxury" to her was spending her 50th birthday in August with three of her college friends at One&Only Palmilla Resort in Los Cabos. "The property itself was very hands-on, very service-oriented," she says. "Having two teenage girls, to get away and get a little break for a few days, it was really, really nice."

"This is what I mean by luxury means something different to different people and at different points in their life. That was very luxurious for me," she adds.

Global Escapes is trying to get its clients to plan their travels further in advance — and it's showing positive results. "We're trying to encourage them to sit down and plan the next year, the next three years, next five years," Hines tells us. She adds that, fortunately, "more and more people [are] realizing they need to plan ahead to conquer their bucket lists."

"You really need to have a plan, and you need to think through the best time of year to travel to various destinations, and different milestones that you might be celebrating with your spouse, or family or kids," she notes.

Hines tied this concept in with overtourism. By taking the time to work with an advisor to plan out where a client wants to go, the advisor can educate the client on best times of year to visit — both helping alleviate overcrowding but also offering the clients an even better experience because the destination isn't overrun with visitors.

Regarding Global Escapes' advisors, Hines prefers if they have a specialty — whether that's a destination or a type of travel. "Especially with luxury travel, it is critically important for the advisors to have focus on certain types of travel or certain destinations that they are going to commit to going to every couple of years to visit, and get a refresh and stay on top of," Hines tells us. (Back when she sold travel, Hines focused on destination weddings and honeymoons, we're told.)

Getting to travel is one of the top perks of being a travel advisor, Hines says, "but for those of us who really love to learn and really want to help our clients the best, there's nothing like being able to put your feet on the ground in a destination and taste it, and touch it and be able to explain that to a client

with firsthand knowledge."

In order to help get her advisors into the field to learn more about destinations or brands, Hines says Global Escapes has invested a lot of money in the last 10 years, affording them a travel budget, which is separate from their salary or compensation. This comes back to promoting and marketing the people who make up Global Escapes: In order to make the advisors as successful as possible, Hines had to empower them.

A New Role

Looking back, Global Escapes was founded by Hines' mother, Ella Grondahl, in 1988 — the summer before Hines' sophomore year at

Grondahl was one of four partners who owned the agency, but she ultimately bought them all out within several years and purchased the historic home that Global Escapes operates from.

Despite most of the business coming through airline ticketing, it was a big change for the family as they never really traveled much. (Most of Hines' travels growing up consisted of visiting the beaches of Florida and lakes within a couple hours of her home.) "I can remember sitting on the floor [of the office] when the boxes of brochures started arriving — we didn't even have furniture yet. Just opening these brochures and looking through them, my eyeballs were enormous,



HINES' TEAM: From left to right, Kourtney Prater, Betsy Harter, Abbey Beckham, Christine Smith, Beth Barnett, Tiffany Hines, Chris Hines, Natalie Horton, Mollie Siddens, Jenny Owensby, Joy Meadows and Hannah Angel. Since taking over Global Escapes, Hines has spent less time working with clients (although she will still work on group itineraries) and has focused on hiring new advisors and training them.

college. Back then, Global Escapes was more of a booking agency — "there wasn't as much consulting and advising," says Hines, who joined at the beginning, working part-time through college, where she was studying to become a schoolteacher. ("I always enjoyed kids and teaching," Hines tells us. "Now, I get to use some of that love with training new people to join our industry.") Originally,

like, "Wow," Hines recalls.

After sticking with the agency throughout college, Hines made the decision to join full-time upon graduation (the travel industry "gets in your blood and you just can't give it up," she says). The mother-daughter duo made a good team: Grondahl took care of "the daily bookkeeping and accounting, along with sales and booking flights," while Hines was "a little

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bit stronger with management, working with the employees and travel planning.”

Their roles largely remained the same for more than a decade, until 2008, when Hines took over leading the company. Her mother maintains a small role with Global Escapes — still bookkeeping — but she doesn’t work with clients anymore. Since taking over, Hines has spent less time working with clients (although she will still work on group itineraries) and has focused on hiring new advisors and training them. “My focus

Hines adds that she’s constantly reading books and listening to podcasts. Her current favorite podcast is “Building a StoryBrand with Donald Miller.”

“He talks about how most companies try to be the hero but [instead] it’s that your customer’s the hero and you need to position yourself as the guide to help your customer be the hero in the story,” Hines says.

She says the podcast has helped her clarify her agency’s message, better informing potential clients who Global Escapes is and how

started taking off: One big change was Global Escapes joining Signature Travel Network. (The company was previously with another consortium and even another before that.)

“Our business has doubled in size since joining Signature and I credit much of that success to their marketing and technology,” Hines tells us.

In addition, “They (Signature) constantly remind us that they are an extension of our office and, so, if we need help or we have a struggle here or there, we’ve got this network that we can lean on and collaborate with,” she says.

Hines says she likes how Signature’s print marketing highlights Global Escapes and not the Signature logo and brand (“We always order extra print pieces, so when we host events or attend functions in our community, we always have plenty of collateral to share,” she says). The fact that e-mail marketing program can be customized to the agency’s client’s interests and preferences helps ensure Global Escapes is always sending relevant content and remains compliant with e-mail regulations.

On the tech side, Hines commends Client Reach, which allows her to customize messages, so Global Escapes can stay in touch with its clients more easily.

The value of Signature can also be seen in the number of preferred partners that Global Escapes uses. Hines says 90-plus percent of the company’s supplier partners belong to the travel agency network.

Another benefit of being a member of Signature? Executive vice president Ignacio Maza. “He’s so energetic and so passionate about the world and traveling,” Hines tells us. “He gets everybody energized when we have our sales meeting.”

Hines also credits TAMS (that is, travel agency management systems) benchmarking for her agency’s success. The program comprises 15 to 20 agencies of varying sizes — as far as sales volume and number of employees — from all over the U.S. and Canada, and the owners discuss best practices and take a deep dive into each other’s finances, in order to learn from each other but to also hold each other accountable.

“It’s been amazing,” Hines says. “It’s been really, really good to really be able to

CHRIS AND TIFFANY HINES
in Amsterdam before
boarding the *AmaKristina*
and sailing through the
Netherlands and Germany as
part of the Signature Member
appreciation trip.



is learning how to be the best business owner and leader I can be,” she tells us.

Her tips? Be a constant learner. “I don’t think you ever get to a point where you feel like you’re there (being the best leader you can be),” Hines tells us. “There are constant challenges and changes ... I’m just constantly trying to stay involved with local business organizations and other business owners because the challenges that I face with running our company, I realized are really very similar challenges that companies face across all industries.”

they can help the clients in their life.

One book that Hines recommends is Simon Sinek’s *Start with Why*. Each new employee at Global Escapes is asked to read the book and then asked what’s their “why” — as in, why they’re involved with the travel industry?

“I do think it’s very important for people to be passionate and enjoy what they do,” Hines says. “If we take good care of our employees, our employees will take good care of our customers, and it just creates a cycle that just continues to roll forward.”

Back to five years ago, when business really

know where you fit in the scheme of things compared to other agencies.” The good news: Global Escapes is doing pretty well. In fact, Hines won a “TAMSY” award last year for her agency’s practices.

Expansion on the Horizon

Less than two years ago, Hines’ husband, Chris, joined Global Escapes as the CFO. His primary responsibility is assisting Hines with her goal of expanding the agency in the next five to 10 years. First on the list is a second office location in Atlanta; however, Hines tells us that other locations — including throughout Georgia, South Carolina or Tennessee — are all on the table.

Hines sees expansion as a twofold solution: Recently, Global Escapes has had more business than it could handle at times but expansion is also a way to bring more people into the industry. “A lot of companies talk about younger people, and, yes, we need younger people in the industry because we need that fresh perspective and energy, but I see a lot of people entering our industry from other careers,” she says.

While Global Escapes has two ICs, Hines says the best way for someone to learn the industry is in an office atmosphere, making an additional location a necessity. Between all the airlines, tour operators and cruise lines, not to mention marketing, consulting and sales, there’s a lot to learn when starting off from scratch. “I believe there is an opportunity to bring new talent into our industry and develop them through hands-on training, mentoring and collaboration with seasoned advisors,” she tells us. “I love that technology allows our team members to be flexible and work remotely but humans crave connection and belonging.”

Overall, Hines is very excited for the future of travel and the agency, although she admits she is “cautiously optimistic for 2020 pending the election and predicted ‘economic downturn’ cycle.”

Regardless, she’ll keep the agency’s core tenet at heart.

“One of the things that’s really touched me over the last couple years is as divided as some issues can be in our country and in our world, to me, at the core of it all, there is nothing like traveling to a destination to

BIRTHDAY SURPRISE: As Christiana turned 13 in 2015, the family celebrated a long weekend in New York City.



create empathy and understanding of other cultures and other people. We’ve talked about this a lot in our company, in the last six to 12 months: If we really want to change the world, you have to travel the world — you’ve got to be able to understand and empathize with other people, where they come from, what makes them tick and why they’re the way they are,” she says.

The good news, according to Hines, is that upward of 10,000 Baby Boomers will be retiring each day for the next 11 years, finally affording them all the time to travel. “It’s

exciting to think about being able to help those people finally try to realize some of those dreams they’ve had,” she says.

Hines is also excited by the prospect of younger generations who grow up traveling — like her children, ages 13 and 16 — and who see it as a part of their normal lives. “That’s the future of our industry,” she adds.

“When you really think about how life-changing it can be for people to go and experience some of the things we plan, it’s really cool that we all get to be part of this industry,” Hines says. ■