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[COOL JOBS] Globe Hopping with Claire Soares



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If you've already been thinking you need to step up your passport stamp game, well then, you do. And Claire Soares can help you. The owner of *Up in the Air Life*, a luxury travel tour business, says one of her company's founding missions is to encourage more African Americans to experience the wonders of the world beyond traditionally traveled channels.

Up in the Air Life, which has gained more than 4,000 Facebook members in just under three years of existence, organizes comprehensive itineraries and upscale accommodations in brag-worthy international destinations such as Croatia, Cuba and Thailand.

Soares, who has traveled extensively for business as a software sales rep and for pleasure as a worldwide adventurer, now uses her global knowledge (plus her taste for life's finer things) to expertly plan once-in-a-lifetime excursions for clients.

EBONY.com caught up with Soares in-between her jet setting to discuss her company, her journeys and favorite travel tips.

EBONY: You went from traveling for yourself to planning these destination tours for others. What sparked the new direction?

Claire Soares: Probably over the last three or five years in the [Facebook] travel groups that I've been in, I've planned group trips to Paris and a group trip to Thailand. So I was planning these international trips, and I started planning this massive yacht week... I was like, you know what? I should probably create a business, because I think I want to do this long-term.

EBONY: Why select some of these nontraditional destinations for your tours?

CS: If you want to go to the Caribbean, it's amazing. But I think there are so many different people offering something like that. I want to go places that the average person wouldn't go. We go yachting in Croatia. That's not very common for people. I like to expand people's minds when it comes to travel. Even the Cuba trip, that's not common—being able to go on a legal trip [through] the People to People [Citizen Ambassador] Program, where you get to interact with the Cubans in different formats. And you get to learn the history.

EBONY: When you think of group tours, you think of traveling with fanny-packed American stereotypes. How does the group travel experience work for your trips?

CS: If you book with us, it's really about knowing there will be other brown people. And I think that is what's really important. There is definitely a benefit to be able to connect with people who have similar backgrounds and similar cultural experiences.

I think another cool part is the people who come on these trips. They are executives at Disney, they work at Microsoft. They are power players. From a business perspective, you get to rub elbows, which I think is also great. So you're not just going on a trip to have fun. You are also making connections for many things in life, whether for friendship or for future business opportunities.

[Additionally], any place you go where there is no chance you can read anything and no chance you can understand anything, there is a huge level of discomfort. By being able to go to these places like Thailand in a group setting, I think it makes people a lot more comfortable.

EBONY: It sounds like when you book with Up in the Air Life, no stone is left unturned in terms of planning hotels, restaurants and excursions. But is there a specific experience in your past travels that made you become a better tour planner?

CS: The thing for me earlier on in the days when I traveled was not having a hotel that was vetted. So I remember being in Marrakesh in Morocco. It's a Muslim country. [So as a woman], you need to cover up there; you need to be a little more cautious. I didn't have the best time because of where



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[our hotel] was. The place was nice on the inside, but the outside at night made me feel very unsafe and uncomfortable. It's very dark at night, and you have to walk through alleys to get back to your place.

[With Up in the Air Life], just about 90 percent of the places we go are places that we've already been to. Our staff has been there several times. So when we're picking what to do, it's usually the best of the best.

EBONY: You've been globetrotting for years now. How do you think travel has changed in the last 10 years?

CS: One of the things that we think has changed is the online booking and do-it-yourself thing—that whole concept [of] save money, book it yourself. I think for a while we switched from calling a travel agent to going to Expedia and Orbitz. But I feel like people are coming back to wanting a personalized concierge experience. And that's why we created Up in the Air Life.

EBONY: How has social media affected travel and tourism?

CS: Social media is really exposing more people to travel. I was traveling anywhere from 13 to 16 countries in a year. And with social media, it brought this ability that people I knew or my online friends saw me going to all these places. They saw me go to the Australian Open. They saw me go to the French Open, seeing this all online. If they didn't have social media, then they wouldn't. So what that does, it breeds a curiosity.



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EBONY: You've been to 40 different countries. Do you have a favorite destination out of all of them?

CS: Thailand is definitely one of my favorite places, for the food, for the beauty, for the temples and for the history. I went to Thailand I think maybe for the first time three or four years ago. It was my first time being in a country that was so different—from the culture to the religious influences there. Also, when you compare the American dollar and how strong it is, you can get street food—a whole meal for a dollar or less. Or you go to a restaurant, and it's like \$3 to \$7. Or an hour-long foot massage is \$6, a body massage is \$15 to \$20 USD. That's mind boggling.

EBONY: Do you have a favorite food that you discovered out of the country?

CS: Brazilian feijoada. It's a Portuguese dish. It's a stew made with beans, pork and rice. That's probably one of my favorite things. I've been to Brazil several times, and I had that for the first time in São Paulo, and it was just amazing

EBONY: You're probably an expert at navigating the airports. Can you pass along a helpful travel tip?

CS: Probably my favorite tip is to get lounge passes for the airport. What most people don't know is, you can get United, American Airlines lounge passes, and they sell other ones too. You can get them online on at eBay, where people sell them and re-sell them.

But the useful thing about lounge passes is, when you have long layovers and you are traveling internationally, those passes may cost you \$25. But you are getting unlimited drinks, snacks and, internationally, there is a buffet. Lounge passes are something that I always have in my back pocket. Whenever I have a layover, I'm always in the lounge, powering up my devices. I'm reading. I'm having a glass of wine or I'm grabbing some food.

EBONY: Do you have a weird travel habit?

CS: I almost always wear the same thing every time I travel internationally. I have these legging pants, and they have a leather strip on both sides and have zipper pockets. So they're stylish and comfortable. And I always wear a black Up in the Air Life shirt. I always wear all black every time I travel, and a jean jacket. Because jean jackets go with everything.



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