



PIX COURTESY OF ROSEMARIE JOHN AND JOSEPH ELLIS

A COUPLE'S love for travel and writing has taken them from being blogging newbies to owners of an award-winning site within five years. Rosemarie John, 34, and Joseph Ellis, 44, are the blog owners of *Travel and Beyond*, which recently garnered two awards from leading global travel search site Skyscanner. It bagged the Skyscanner Singapore Best Travel Blog of the Year 2014 and beat five contenders from Australia, Indonesia, Philippines, Thailand and South Korea to win the Skyscanner Asia Pacific Best Travel Blog of the Year 2014. *Travel and Beyond* was also awarded The Best Singapore Blog 2013 by HotelClub, a global online accommodation community for savvy travellers. "It started when I got married and moved to Indonesia in 2008," says Rosemarie. "With a lot of time on my hands and a new place to explore, I started a blog called *Scribbles of an Electronic Gypsy*. I spent time learning about blogging and watching tutorials on how to set one up. "I then started writing about my

- 1 Wat Phra Si Sanphet is a restored temple ruin located in Ayutthaya, Thailand
- 2 The Tirta Empul Temple in Bali, Indonesia
- 3 Shimla is the capital city of the Indian state of Himachal Pradesh, India
- 4 Boudhanath, one of the holiest Buddhist sites in Kathmandu, Nepal

From blogging newbies to award winners

Rosemarie John and Joseph Ellis, founders of award-winning travel blog *Travel and Beyond*, are committed towards creating a platform that will inspire and motivate their readers to chart their own travels



BY OOI SUE HWEI

thoughts, the initial horrendous cooking attempts as a new wife, and a few culture and travel-oriented posts. After a year of experimenting, I realised that readers from all corners of the globe were actually reading my rants but were more keen and responsive to my travel-oriented posts." Not wanting to be constricted by the limitations of a free blogging account, she launched *Travel and Beyond* in 2011 when the couple moved to Singapore on a paid hosted platform and purchased a new domain (www.travelandbeyond.org). The blog focuses on Rosemarie and Joseph's journeys during their holidays, and it's obvious they enjoy sharing their adventures with travel enthusiasts around the world. "Blogging started out as a pastime for me, which then changed into a platform for my family to keep track of what I was up to, which then metamorphosed into what *Travel and Beyond* is today, an engaging travel information blog that portrays a kaleidoscope of all things travel-related mixed with a dosage of history and culture," she says.

Fulfilling their wanderlust

► From page 34

The husband and wife team, when not travelling or working, spend their free time working on the blog, about close to 30 hours a week. They take turns writing blog posts and to them, writing and developing it is a journey in itself.

"When we started our blog to write an electronic diary of our travels, it was meant to be a place for our family and friends to keep track of our lives because we lived so far away from all our loved ones. The unexpected response it got from strangers from around the world really surprised us. When we realised that what we had written touched people from across the globe, it inspired us to write engaging articles and be truthful in our opinions. It is a continuous effort to improve the blog and we never take a single reader for granted," Rosemarie says.

According to her, *Travel and Beyond* stands out from other blogs as it specifically caters to travel aficionados who share their passion to discover the world. "We like history, culture, geography, art and architecture, and this is reflected in almost all our posts," she says. "The significance of a landmark, the scenic beauty of a place, the flavour of food or the sounds of the surroundings all involve history, culture and geography. Like all things in life, travel too must have a purpose if it is to be truly enjoyed.

"We write as we see it. We believe that we have a responsibility to write positively and steer away from overly commenting on some bad travel experiences. Our site has hardly any advertising and our goal has always been to inspire people to go on their own voyage of discovery through our writings and photographs... to discover the world one step at a time."

It is clear that Rosemarie and Joseph, who runs a supply chain management company, put a lot of effort into their blog as the feedback they get are mostly positive. "Initially, we had some comments about the alignment of our sidebars which we corrected in the current layout. Readers also said they prefer more photos and shorter stories. The best feedback we received was over how organised our blog is," she says.

For Rosemarie, the toughest part of maintaining the blog is dealing with the frequent plug-in updates as some updates can completely alter the look of the blog. "When this happens, it takes a lot of time to readjust everything. This can put a damper on things and be really frustrating. There are also a lot of

The couple enjoying the snow at Himachal Pradesh, India



Their sense of adventure has taken them to exotic places like Istanbul, Turkey

spam comments, and identifying which comment is from a genuine reader is time-consuming. Understanding website technical changes can be tough as I do not have a website programming background," she says.

She also struggled at the beginning because her photography skills were, in her own words, "somewhat non-existent". However, she soon realised that photos make the words come alive and she made an effort to learn photography techniques by joining a group of friends on their photography sessions.

"On one occasion, we stood on the top floor of an old car park building in Chinatown to photograph the city's Chinese New Year décor. I learnt a lot from them and also from reading magazines my brother gave me. My first DSLR camera was a gift from him and it was a Nikon D7000. After four years of using it, I sold it and purchased a lighter camera, a Sony Nex5n, as my DSLR can sometimes be heavy to lug around."

Twist of faith

While they were still residing in Indonesia, their blog caught the attention of the Singapore Tourism Board. This developed into a great collaboration when the couple moved to Singapore. "Invitations to cultural events started pouring in, which meant media passes, therefore giving us access to both content and opportunities to take photographs from amazing angles. Apart from that, we have also received invites from tourism boards and hotels. It started proving to be a good platform for readers to get inspired and motivated when charting their own travel ideas," Rosemarie says.

However, she stresses that they blog

not for personal benefit as that was never the original intention and the couple only accepts assignments that meet the blog's objective, which is to provide unadulterated opinion about travel. "So if we feel that a product or service does not bring value to our readers, we refuse the assignment. Our readers' trust in us is priceless," she adds.

Travel and Beyond is fully financed by the couple's own savings. "There are times when we get invited by companies and we choose those offers at our discretion. We do not support annoying pop-ups, readers' surveys and even Google ads. A visitor to our blog must have an enjoyable reading and viewing experience. So we don't compromise on the quality of the blog for the sake of ads."

On the couple's future plans for the blog, she says: "We have recently invested in new equipment and will be posting more video content on our blog to accompany our text and photos."

For Rosemarie, blogging is for people who enjoy documenting their adventures. "It is a great way to look back at where you have been and how your tips may have helped others on their trips. I have come across people who want to start a blog just to get free travel or hosted stays. Not surprisingly, their blogs fail to take off as nothing is really free in this world.

"Hosted stay invitations come after a lot of hard work is put into your blog, which in turn generates interest from travel organisations. How you handle those opportunities will enhance your blog's reputation. Blogging is serious work if you want it to be. It all depends on what your intentions are. So be true to yourself and if you stand out, you will be noticed."



Their most recent trip was to Terengganu

Vacation tips from seasoned blogger travellers

SINCE the inception of their blog, Rosemarie John and Joseph Ellis have travelled to many countries, including Australia, Indonesia, Thailand, Vietnam, India, Nepal, Dubai, Turkey and the United States. One of their most memorable trips was back in 2012 to Ephesus in Turkey, which Rosemarie describes as "such an awe-inspiring place that left a lasting impression on us".

More recently, their relaxing getaway to Tanjong Jara Resort in Terengganu exposed them to a plethora of cultural experiences which they detailed in their blog, such as their cycling adventure through a fishing village, attending a cooking class and their immersion in *kampung* life.

For those who want to make the most of their holidays, the couple has some travel tips to share. "Generally, the first thing we do when we arrive in a new place is to get on their hop-on and hop-off bus, should they have one, and get our bearings of the city. If there are some touristy attractions you want to see, the hop-on hop-off bus is a cost-efficient way to get to them.

"You can spend the second day onwards exploring more off-the-beaten track places. Again, it depends on what they want from their vacation. We enjoy history and architecture so we find ways to figure out how to find the best spots. Spend time doing research on the Internet, get to know the basic laws and customs of the country you are going to and be safe," she says.

Rosemarie, who is from Kuala Lumpur, makes frequent trips home to visit family and friends. However, that will soon change as the couple are preparing to migrate to Canberra, Australia.

Despite her extensive adventures and travels, she readily admits to missing the local food. "I miss the dark rich colour and flavours of *bak kut teh*. I miss the soft texture of *roti canai*. I had the best *roti canai* in a fishing village in Seberang Pintasan, Terengganu. Food brings people together and it is also the best way to connect with the land from which you came. I will always miss my family and friends who live in Kuala Lumpur and will always long for the sights and sounds of my country but adventure awaits," she says.