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The World

lonely at the top

MEET DANIEL HOUGHTON, THE 27-YEAR-OLD FORMER PHOTOJOURNALIST WHO HAS BEEN TASKED WITH GUIDING THE WORLD'S LARGEST GUIDEBOOK COMPANY THROUGH THE DIGITAL AGE.

Writer Margaret Littman Photographer Josh Anderson

DANIEL HOUGHTON RECKONS HE'S COME "AS CLOSE TO MASTERING JET LAG AS ANYONE CAN". HIS SECRET: NEVER EAT ON AN AIRPLANE, AND DRINK SO MUCH WATER "YOU THINK YOU'RE GOING TO THROW UP".

The 27-year-old has definitely had plenty of opportunity to hone this approach. As the CEO of the world's largest guidebook publisher, Lonely Planet, he spends between 150 to 200 days per year travelling.

Houghton came to the job in April 2013, and knew from the outset that he was joining a company with a storied past.

Lonely Planet was founded in 1972 by Melbourne couple Tony and Maureen Wheeler (themselves just twenty-somethings at the time). Their first release was a hand-stapled guide called *Across Asia on the Cheap*, which retailed for around two bucks apiece. Over the next three decades, things snowballed, and they found themselves in charge of a publishing juggernaut, selling books, apps and magazines to all corners of the globe. In the late 2000s, though, the Wheelers decided to sell up to the BBC for a reported sum of around £132 million. But almost immediately it was clear that 'Auntie' couldn't turn Lonely Planet into the moneymaker it wanted. And that's where Houghton and his mentor, the U.S. billionaire Brad Kelley, came in.

Kelley, who made most of his money in the tobacco trade, managed to buy Lonely Planet from the Brits, and instill Houghton as the boss. The pair met a few years prior when Houghton was working as a budding photojournalist. One of Kelley's employees took a liking to a movie he made called *The Beauty of Digital Film*, and set up a meeting. Shortly after, Houghton was hired, and took charge of the Kelley-owned media company NC2.

From the outset, much was made of the birthdate on Houghton's well-used passport. However, he quickly began speaking and acting like a CEO: one of his first major tasks was overseeing substantial layoffs. The tough measure was all part of his strategy to keep the company fit and relevant in the internet age. "This is one of those brands that will be around for an incredibly long time," he says. "It will far exceed my time on Earth."

During his tenure, he's put a focus on expanding Lonely Planet beyond just guidebooks. He's stepped up the brand's food coverage by introducing a new series of cookbooks, and is in the process of launching a magazine in North America.

Some critics have expressed concern about Lonely Planet's growing affection for crowdsourced TripAdvisor-style writing, but Houghton thinks they've got it wrong. He says the brand still depends on trained authors to visit each and every site mentioned in its guidebooks. And finding the best people to do this job remains a primary concern. "One of the things that fascinates me is to see people line up to come work here because of their passion for the brand," he says. "Part of my job is to help protect that and help continue to foster it."

While Houghton's years of management experience can be counted on one hand, his love of travel stretches way back. His parents worked for airlines (Mum: flight attendant; Dad: airplane mechanic), and that enabled him to indulge his wanderlust from a young age. Houghton still loves to explore, despite the fact that much of his current travel is hard work.

"On the weekends, I'm very outdoorsy and spend a lot of time hiking with friends or camping," he says. "I used to spend that time travelling, but I get enough of that at work now."

One thing that Houghton's recent time on the road has reinforced is his belief in the power of travel. For him, it's about more than just pretty photos and souvenirs – it's a way to profoundly expand one's world view. "It's something that I think unites a lot of different people. I think if everyone could travel we'd all be maybe a little better, a little nicer to each other." •