Circulation: 718,986
Gourmet coffee. High-end cosmetics. Ridesharing services. These founders hit the road—and came back inspired to start something big.

THE TRIP THAT CHANGED EVERYTHING

A Different Perspective
The mountain village of Al Hajarah, southwest of Sana’a, Yemen. Port of Mokha founder Mokhtar Alkhamis traveled throughout Yemen trying to find reliable sources of high-quality coffee beans that he could import to the United States. Then war broke out.
TRAVEL, Mark Twain famously wrote, "is fatal to prejudice, bigotry, and narrow-mindedness."
That's true in business as much as in life, as countless founders have discovered: Blake Mycoskie of social-entrepreneurship shoe stalwart Toms, Paul English of search engine Kayak, and Dave Gilboa of eyewear empire Warby Parker can all trace their companies back to formative travel experiences, as does super-entrepreneur Richard Branson, who was so irritated by a canceled flight that he arranged to charter a replacement for himself and his fellow passengers—creating the idea for what became Virgin airlines.
Travel's inspirational effects on business have been widely chronicled in academia, too. A 2015 study published in the Academy of Management Journal found that professionals who worked abroad and deeply engaged with their host culture produced more creative innovations than their non-traveling cohorts. And a study published this summer in the Journal of Applied Psychology found that building friendships with people from different cultures can enhance an individual's creativity, innovation, and, believe it or not, the likelihood of becoming an entrepreneur.
"When you're in your home and your routine, you're less likely to step out of your boundaries," says Koel Thomae, who tasted a new kind of yogurt during a long-delayed trip to her native Australia. Thirteen years later, Thomae has turned her version of that recipe into $170 million, 240-employee Noosa Yoghurt.
"You get into ruts," she adds. "Travel automatically pushes me out of that rut."
On the following pages, successful founders describe getting way, way out of their ruts—and emerging with the inspiration for a company. —KRIS FRIESWICK

His R&D Trip Landed Him in a War Zone

Growing up in San Francisco's Tenderloin as a first-generation Yemeni American, Mokhtar Alkhanshali had heard stories of the rich tradition of coffee cultivation in his family's homeland. In recent decades, economic hardship had forced many Yemeni coffee growers to switch to growing the more profitable drug khat, and the country's legendary coffee was becoming harder to find and poorer in quality. Alkhanshali decided to try to help build up the coffee industry in Yemen and traveled there to find growers. But a subsequent trip nearly cost him his life.
I had my first cup of specialty coffee in San Francisco five years ago and immediately became intrigued. I did a lot of research on the market, and I even bought a popcorn maker so I could roast my own beans at home. When I talked to coffee traders, they all said the best coffee they ever had was from Yemen 15 years ago—but now it was really rare, really expensive, and often full of defects. So I thought, how could I replicate that one perfect cup they had?

I realized I had to go and see these farms in Yemen. But I'll be honest: I did not have a master plan. I knew I wanted somehow to connect my family's country with the U.S., and I thought coffee could be a way to do that. And I knew there was a growing demand in the specialty coffee market. So in the summer of 2013, I dropped out of community college to go. I figured, best-case scenario, I'll find amazing farmers and start a supply chain. Worst case, I would have a break for the summer. I didn't know what I was getting myself into.

For every farm in Yemen growing coffee, there were seven growing khat. I thought that if I could pay them a higher price, and find the right buyers, I could help them replace this drug. I went across the country for more than four months visiting farmers. I got malaria and tapeworms; I lost 40 pounds.

I brought back samples from 21 farms. Nineteen failed basic standards tests, but two were rated by a coffee-quality expert, Willem Boot, as very good specialty-grade beans. He said it was coffee of potentially extraordinary quality. So I went back to Yemen in mid-2014, to the two areas where the coffee was rated highest, and sent back more samples—but they were horrible because of the way they were picked and sorted. I realized I had to slow down and put into place more rigorous protocols. I also had to have vertical integration so the quality would be good. I spent nearly a year doing that.

Then, in March 2015, two days before I was supposed to take my new samples to a big international coffee conference, the Saudi Arabian–led military coalition began to bomb military targets in Yemen, to deter a Houthi rebel takeover. There was a no-fly zone declared. I had worked the whole year to produce these coffees to bring them to this conference, and I was stuck, along with thousands of other Americans. The State Department wasn't helping us.

I decided to take matters into my own hands. I went to the port city of Mokha, a very old, very historic port. I hired a boat to take me and my samples across the Red Sea to Djibouti. I remember being in the middle of the ocean on this little piece of wood, the waves tossing us up and down, thinking, "Why did I do this?" But I made it to the airport in Kenya.

When I landed in San Francisco, there was a media frenzy. A legal aid organization I had previously worked for had put out the word about my journey, and I was interviewed by NPR and the BBC. I made it to the conference—and our coffee scored among the highest of all the coffees around the world. Blue Bottle bought our coffee and eventually sold it for $16 a cup.

I'm trying to go back to Yemen in a month, to see the farmers. I spend a lot of time on marketing and sales, but it's important to stay connected to the farmers as much as I can.