

# Can travel make you a better leader?

Four female founders illustrate on the many professional learnings they have gained from globetrotting.



Sep 27, 2022 | by Humra Afroz Khan



Research, over the years, has established that travelling (and not simply sitting behind a computer screen) comes with several, scientifically-proven physical and cognitive benefits. One of the greatest? Better overall well-being, which then contributes to better productivity. The occasional vacation has also been associated with decreased risks of heart attacks and depression, and even improved brain health. It's true: the shortest of getaways can work as a wondrous relaxant, significantly ebbing stress levels, invigorating both the mind and spirit. Here's the secret—if done right, travelling can also act as a potent antidote to the vapidness that can sometimes fog up a professional life. The exposure that comes with exploring new lands, people, and cultures also polishes your personality—and that, subsequently, bolsters your performance. Without even realising it, you come back a changed person, a more effective leader—more open to seeing through stereotypes; readier to adapt, compromise, collaborate, and negotiate. In fact, 94 percent of business leaders in the US admit that “being well-travelled has provided them with a competitive advantage in the workplace”—according to a report by Brightspark Edu-Travel, a reputed Chicago-based travel agency.

Bazaar India spoke to four female, Indian professionals to understand how their travel experiences have shaped them as professionals, and if these trips-away-from-work have made them more impactful leaders...

## **NUPUR GARG, FOUNDER, WINPE**



“Travel is an opportunity to break away from the usual, and free your mind to explore things other than the daily commitments of your life. It is also a rewarding opportunity to refresh, spend time with yourself, gather your thoughts, and reconnect with what ignites your passion. In fact, that is how the idea for WinPE (a Venture Capital and Private Equity platform) was born. After I quit my job at the International Finance Corporation, I was on holiday in Europe, getting ready for the next phase of my life. I was searching for something meaningful, that I would enjoy. That vacation gave me time to contemplate—and one morning, the future became crystal clear to me!

I equate travelling with the opportunity to open yourself up to new points of view. With every trip, I develop a deeper appreciation for diversity, and an acceptance for different people and behaviours. In the workplace, this translates into having respect for varied opinions, and patience for varied working styles. You begin to recognise that there is rarely one correct answer. And you learn to handle the differences with more empathy. These characteristics make you a better leader and team member.

I remember, right after completing college, I was travelling in the US and Europe. We landed in Paris late in the evening, with massive bags full of the shopping we had done in the US. Our cab driver dropped us off in the wrong lane, and nobody around spoke English! Suddenly, two students came out of nowhere, took us to our hotel, and helped lug our bags—then invited us out for wine and pizza. While our initial instinct was to deem all Parisians as unhelpful, this was an important reminder that it takes all kinds to make the world. And that has been a fundamental belief with which I approach life now: every place has good people, and most people have good in them.



Travel also makes you aware of the goings-on in the rest of the world—as well as the global standards that are in place. Whether it's your experience with an airline or a hotel, you get to appreciate the bar set for the quality of service. That, alone, can make you a more discerning consumer. And, as a professional, you realise you need to build a business based not only on what you see in your immediate, local market, but globally. You gain more exposure to worldwide trends and practices, and that helps keep up standards at work.”

**NAMRATA ASTHANA, CO-FOUNDER AND CMO, BLUE TOKAI COFFEE ROASTERS**



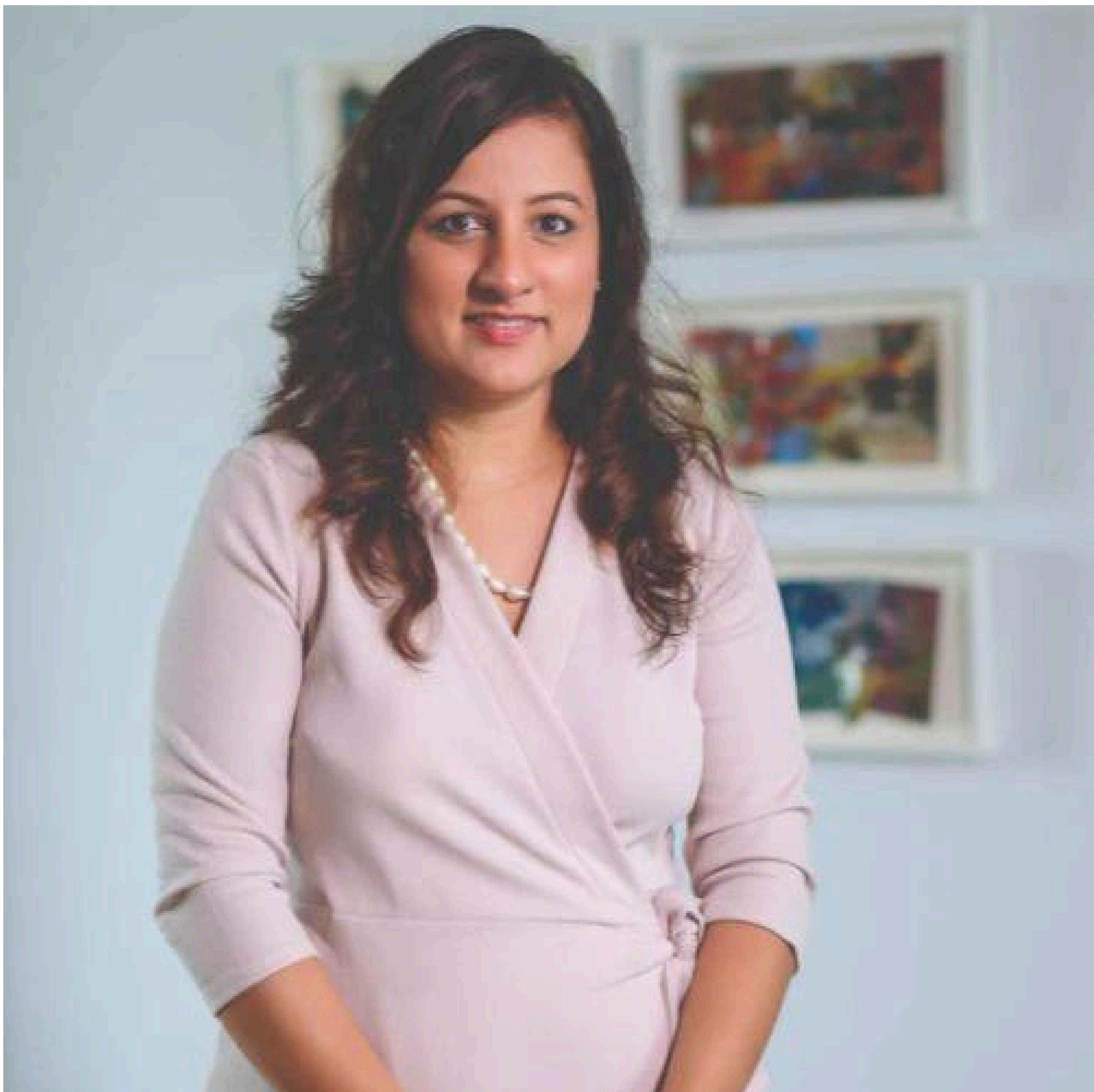
“It was during our trip to Ladakh, in 2012, that we decided to launch Blue Tokai. So, travelling has been a genuine game-changer for me. It has provided me with inspiration, given me a new take on things, and ignited a sense of action and working towards solutions. Travelling also showed me that there isn't just one way of doing things. One needs to be receptive to suggestions and new ways of implementation. A great idea can come when you least expect it...anywhere, from anyone.

I consider travelling extremely educating and exciting. However, as much as newness pushes me out of my comfort zone, it can sometimes be scary. That said, each trip has also taught me to let go of control and just enjoy the journey. Travelling also forces you to experience different ways of life, to try new things. For instance, in Berlin, we had to ride bikes to get around, and I hadn't ridden one in decades, so I was terrified. Sure enough, I fell off a few times and almost hit a few pedestrians. But it was important for me to face my fear—and to show my daughter (and myself) that you can learn a skill at any age.

Travelling, especially solo, has taught me to rely on my instincts—particularly when it comes to safety. While I usually err on the side of caution, after all the exploring and meeting so many incredible people, I've learnt to balance out my cautionary side...and I'm able to trust others more. This one quality is crucial at work as well: stay alert, have faith in yourself, but also trust others.

Ladakh and Berlin in summers, and Hampi in winters, are some of my favourite places, and I'd highly recommend them. Try to do something that makes you a bit uncomfortable (I know I'll be riding bikes a lot more now!). Sometimes, we prefer taking the familiar route, but you'll see just how great it can be to take a leap of faith. Second, don't overbook. At the end of each day on the trip, take some time to recount what you did, and talk to others about their favourite experiences. At work, too, it's important to have that downtime—to look back at the things that worked, that didn't, and what were the most enjoyable aspects of the process.”

## **NAIYYA SAGGI, CO-FOUNDER, THE GOOD GLAMM GROUP**



“Travelling is full of surprises. You can plan the perfect trip, but the bus may break down, or the flight could get delayed, or you might just meet a traveller whom you decide to go on an entirely new route with. There's a lot of the unknown. And it's very similar to the journey of entrepreneurship. So the way I see it, travelling not only broadens your horizons and refines your thought-process, it also enables you to accept and welcome dynamism in the way you approach life and your business.



A big mindset shift that travelling has made me consciously inculcate in myself is to welcome the unexpected and see the best in every situation. Also, travelling, to me, is about taking risks. Often, you begin the journey with a certain expectation, but something else comes out of it. What do you do then? Travelling certainly opens you up to challenges, to having experiences you didn't technically sign up for, and to making the most of what you end up with... All great assets for a business leader, any professional will concur.

My travels have encouraged me to take a different approach towards viewing myself as well—and discover newer sides to me. The first phase of my travels, for instance, made me feel proud of myself...an Indian, brown woman out on a journey, literally and figuratively. It was a path to the realisation of self-identity and to gaining confidence. Over time, travelling has made me undergo an interesting evolution, where I realised there are so many layers to me, and others, than what appears.

That truly changed the way I think and interact with others now—it has helped me connect with myself and people on a more profound level. That has been key in my transformative journey as a leader, too. It's easy to take things at face value, both for people and situations— but taking the time to delve deeper is crucial.”

## **HARDIKA SHAH, FOUNDER AND CEO, KINARA CAPITAL**





“As a global professional, you’ll be interacting with people from all types of backgrounds. Finding a way to connect with someone who, say, grew up on a farm, or someone who only knows the city-life, is much easier when you’ve travelled around and met different people. Travelling also opens up new influences and perspectives. Each of my travels has brought with it interesting, eye-opening insights. Whether it’s a remote village in Tamil Nadu, or an ancient European town square, I’ve encountered inspiring people, with unique ways of life and perspectives. My wanderlust continues to shape me as an individual, and as a leader.

Travelling can also infuse in you the spirit of adaptability. My experiences have helped me bounce through crises easier, because each expedition has tested and improved my problem-solving abilities. While travelling, all it takes is one failed booking to realise how crucial good planning and back-up plans are. The entire itinerary can come crashing down if just one leg of a journey is delayed or disrupted. You have to be quick to think and act. This is also true for running a business. An organisation rests on solid planning, and, as a leader, troubleshooting is part of the process. Whether it is making difficult budgeting decisions, or negotiating a plan that works for everyone, or changing course because of unprecedented circumstances, there is a lot that travel teaches you.

My tips to best leverage your trips would be to experiment with all kinds of globetrotting: go solo, with friends, with your partner, and with a group. Broaden your travel groups—each relationship dynamic is different, and improves your people skills. Also, localise your itinerary to soak in more unique experiences. Take local buses and trains; drive, too, if possible. Explore small markets and unknown cafés. And if someone is willing, engage in small talk. I also scout around for local events, like an art collective or a music performance, or enrol in local classes, like dance or cooking.”