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By Elyse Glickman

# SHANGRI-LA

Found and Expanded Horizons:  
Songstam's Customized Journeys

Father-daughter duo Baima Duoji and Florence Li explain how they approach elevating luxury travel to new heights of enlightenment.

Shangri-La is a real place, and thanks to the novel "Lost Horizon" and its film iterations, it continues to capture the imagination of intrepid travelers throughout the world. With the establishment of Songstam (translated into English as "paradise") in 2000 by Baima Duoji, the goal was not only to open the gates to Shangri-La and other remote areas, but also share the Tibetan culture he grew up in with foreigners and personalize the way they experience these one-of-a-kind destinations.

When Baima, an acclaimed Tibetan documentary filmmaker, pivoted to the role of Founder and Chairman of the Songstam Group, he envisioned that its 16 authentic luxury properties across the most pristine areas of the Tibetan Plateau would go beyond curated environments, astute service, and refined interior design. Li, who serves as Director of International Business Development, explained at a recent Los Angeles presentation that every tour is a full-on, thoroughly customized immersion into the traditions, customs, nature, and histories of the areas expressly planned for each client or group.

"We are the only luxury collection of Tibetan-style retreats within the wellness space," she said. "The concept of Tibetan meditation is built into each of them by combining physical and spiritual healing elements together in a sensory way. We really want to think of ourselves also as a tour company, since we work with our guests to curate their own experiences by combining stays at Songstam various hotels and lodges with activities that present the region's diverse culture, rich biodiversity, incredible scenic landscapes, and unique living heritage in a way that will be meaningful to them."

Songstam's mission is to inspire guests to find a personal "Shangri-La" as they encounter diverse ethnic groups and cultures and gain a full understanding of how its inhabitants pursue and understand happiness. We followed up with a conversation with Baima and Li of how Songstam's curated experiences transcend the usual "once-in-a-lifetime" travel trope into something that is more transformational.

What initially drew you into documentary filmmaking, and how did your years of experience parlay itself into the cohesive experience of a Songstam tour?

Baima Duoji: I became a documentary filmmaker because I have always loved my hometown.



onset of depression and anxiety are common among business travelers. We hope that everyone can return to nature, connect with nature, and find healing. For corporate retreats, we provide unique Tibetan health care programs, unique Tibetan breathing methods, and yoga programs to provide business travelers with a platform for wellbeing.

Activities for children traveling with their parents include opportunities to learn more about biodiversity and connect more with nature for healing. There are many special animals in Yunnan and Tibet, such as the Yunnan snub-nosed monkey, Tibetan horse pheasant, yak and so on. By observing it, children can learn more about biodiversity. Special plants include snow lotus and alpine rhododendron. Children can make special specimens, which is a very meaningful activity.

In addition to hiring staff from the area, how do you work with members of the communities to ensure they have positive interactions with the visitors and the experience is mutually beneficial?

BD: We consider the biggest product of Songtsam is not the hotel, but the people. The most successful thing is that after 20 years of operation, we are still like a family, and many employees have expressed that no matter how big Songtsam is, they hope that we are still a family. Guests come to Songtsam because of the environment and experience we have created. With local culture as the core, hotel + travel as the model, and local employees as the medium, what Songtsam provides to guests is incomparable comfort. There are mountains and rivers, and there is sincerity, warmth and smiles between people. Such encounters often inspire them to see more possibilities in life. As a result, the guest has a special attachment to Songtsam.

With most of the staff consisting of locals and those indigenous to the surrounding villages, how have women benefited in terms of work/career opportunities?

FL: We have a policy of insisting on hiring locals in order to give more opportunities to ordinary local people. At present, 92% of Songtsam's 1,000 employees are locals. More than 50% are female employees. This approach also makes Songtsam's impact on mountain villages and the effect of improving the rural economy sustainable. Every Songtsam hotel is a leader in the revitalization of the mountain villages' industries and promoting industrial upgrading. Travel helps drive the local economies through the demand for both local agricultural products as well as local handicrafts. Hotels and travel are like a bridge that enable more Songtsam guests from the cities to better understand

and appreciate the unique traditions of the local communities and thus create a demand that results in a greater commercial value for these local products.

What would be the best way to explain the work culture of your employees? BD: The uniqueness of Songtsam comes from the mission: to pursue "Shambhala," or inner freedom and tranquility. Our corporate culture emphasizes altruism, and employees recognize from the bottom of their hearts that "the best and most direct way to obtain happiness is to give happiness to others" and wish to work hard for the common mission. We emphasize the atmosphere of home, which is felt by both employees and guests.

As the Songtsam network of properties and tour circuits expand, what's needed to keep everything fiscally viable?

FL: In order to realize the internationalization and modernization of the back office, the personalization of the front-end Songtsam is key. The biggest challenge is how to transform from a family business to a modern enterprise system, so that things can be done more efficiently and the system more reasonable while maintaining a family atmosphere.

With your newly opened, first low carbon property, how did you select the architects, designers, and engineers to ensure the result would live up to your vision?

BD: Songtsam, from the very beginning, has been committed to both environmental and cultural sustainability. We achieved one major sustainability goal this September when Songtsam opened its first low-carbon hotel, the Songtsam Linka Retreat Lake Basong Tso in Tibet. This 122 room and suite Retreat will be Songtsam's 16th and largest property.

Have some of the innovations found at this new property been implemented (or will they be implemented) at the existing resorts?

BD: Every Songtsam hotel selects a site first, and then conducts a new design according to the local environment. The design must take into consideration the local elements. When it comes to architecture, it is of course necessary to design according to local conditions so that the hotel can live in harmony with the environment. For example, our Lijiang Hotel is a Han Dynasty building imitating the Tang Dynasty, which echoes the history and culture of this area. The interior of the hotel will also vary according to the environment, to maximize the echo between the world outside the window and the world inside the window. Therefore, each hotel has a large number of new designs and initiatives, making each hotel's design unique unto itself.



*Songtsam is a Virtuoso Preferred Partner. Songtsam welcomes all travelers including families with children, travelers with disabilities and is LGBTQ+ friendly. For more information, visit [www.songtsam.com/en/about](http://www.songtsam.com/en/about)*