

Maira Koutsoudakis on building a luxury lifestyle brand



By Eugene Yiga

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Maira Koutsoudakis is the CEO of the Life Group of Companies, a luxury lifestyle and hospitality specialist, which she owns and operates with her husband and business partner, engineer John Koutsoudakis. The group holds the Life Grand Cafe brand of five upmarket restaurants across the country. The Life Grand Group also owns The Potato Shed and The Gentlemen's Arthouse in Newtown Junction.

A Greek-South African, born and bred in Johannesburg, and a lover of the city's relentless energy and vibrant, entrepreneurial spirit, Koutsoudakis is also the founder and CEO of [Life Interiors Architecture Strategic Design](#), which designs and develops luxury properties around the world, having completed projects in 13 countries in Africa, the Indian Ocean and Europe, ranging from private island resorts (North Island, Seychelles), over luxury lodges, 32 restaurants, private residences, both in its own portfolio and for a select group of clients.



■ *What did you do prior to starting your own business?*

I worked as a designer at DSGN, a top design practice in South Africa. I worked on large civic projects such as the Sandton Convention Centre, Mpumalanga Government offices, and various hotel projects.

■ *Where did the idea come from?*

The idea came from an inability to accept limitations and traditional business models. I was studying post-grad in Milan and felt the conflict of wanting to marry together my love for business, design, and hospitality. I decided that, on my return, I would build South Africa's first lifestyle store, bringing together all these passions, which I did and which we operated for the next decade, after which they had grown to such an extent that they required a separation and for the two strongest parts of the business – food hospitality and design – to have their own independent locations and strategies.

■ *What motivated you to turn it into a business?*

I have always been fascinated by the enjoyment of lifestyle and the business of design: taking what is instinctive and converting into a contextually-relevant and commercially viable enterprise. I was always interested in both design and

architecture, but also food, hospitality, and business and dreamed of meshing a myriad of passions into a lifestyle business.



▣ ***How did you make your first sale?***

When I designed and sold doll's furniture and houses whilst the other little girls were playing with their dresses!

▣ ***When did you officially start operating?***

Life was established in November 1999 in Sandton's Nelson Mandela Square as a lifestyle emporium comprised of an interior and architectural design practice, retail store, furniture showroom, and restaurant.

▣ ***How did you get funding to get started?***

From the age of 16, I had worked at my own business doing modern art paintings which customers would make on a centrifugal machine at the flea markets where I had a permanent stand and where I cut my teeth in basic business practice. Later, I had a small design studio before undertaking post-graduate studies in Milan and working for a big design practice on my return. I collected some money during this time and on my conviction and business plan, asked my mother – a single mother and self-made success story - for a startup loan. I was 25 and that was the last time I asked for any contribution or a loan for my business.

▣ ***What have been the three biggest difficulties you've had to overcome?***

First, going from an owner-operated 'mom and pop' store to a multi-business model in various cities via hands-on and remote control operations, which we overcame thanks to our experience in building projects in 11 countries around the world, combined with the professional ability from our architectural design and engineering backgrounds to plan, project, set standards, and create formulas for our businesses to operate in.

Second, growing the business organically; our growth so far has been self-funded and, whilst this pays dividends, has strict requirements on self-discipline and strategic far-sightedness.

Third, finding like-minded individuals with which to build these businesses; from looking outside the businesses to growing talent from within.



■ ***How tough is competition in your sector, and what differentiates you from others?***

In the Life Grand Group, we approach our restaurants as hospitality businesses, i.e. treating people as guests, not as patrons, with lifestyle and design at the core. Competition is tough in this sector and price-to-value ratios are crucial to success in a saturated and sophisticated local food sector.

In the design business, Life Interiors Architecture Strategic Design inhabits a more exclusive, unsaturated space as we create bespoke luxury properties in remote locations (such as protected biomes and private islands) and with a much higher entry barrier. Our differentiating factor here is our soulful approach, which is multi-disciplinary and transcends architecture, interiors, hospitality, and experience management. It is a unique niche in which our practice and projects have garnered over 52 international awards, which is a calling card in and of itself. The difficulty lies in that these long-term projects are more infrequent due to their entry barriers and 'covetability'.

■ ***How many people do you currently employ?***

We employ just short of 400 people across eight businesses.

■ ***What is the best business advice you've ever received?***

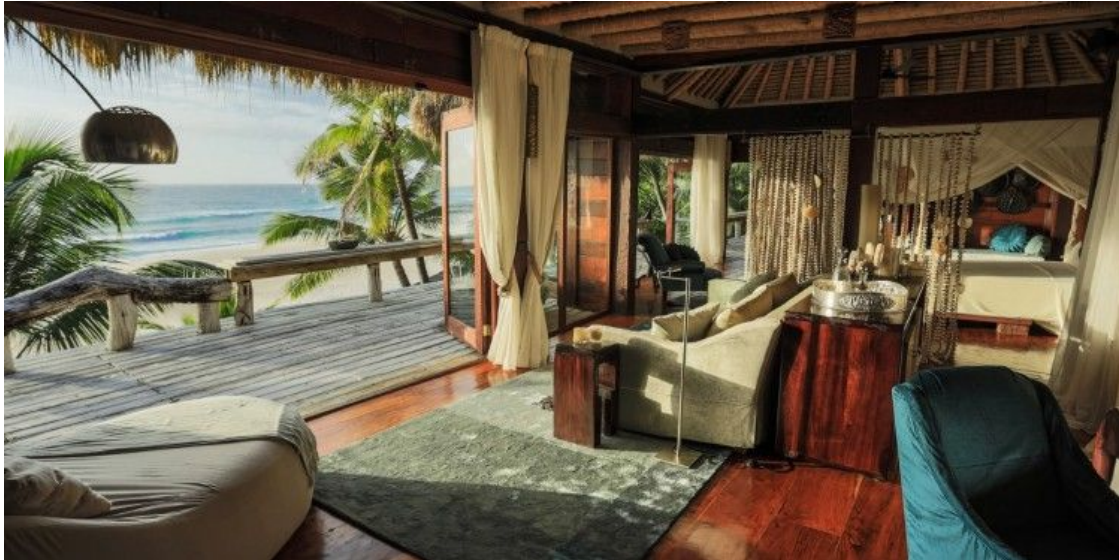
From the outset, choose a career trajectory that sets your soul alight and then work hard to be the absolute best at that, whatever it may be. You cannot avoid those 10,000 hours. Become an expert at something.

■ ***What was unexpected?***

That you can run diverse businesses and make a serious business out of a passion. That not all professional relationships have the ability to evolve at the rate of your growth.

▣ How do you stay motivated?

The Confucian quote “Choose a job you love, and you will never have to work a day in your life” motivates me into understanding that the work is a choice; we are not victims but captains of our destiny. This maxim as well as “Good is the enemy of great” hold true when motivation is needed. The pleasure of opening a successful new business and seeing it flourish and the immediacy we have with our audience, our valued guests and satisfied clients, is motivation enough.



▣ What are the non-work habits that help you with your work-life balance?

Laugh a lot. Yoga at least once a week combined with cardiovascular exercise to keep the ticker working and the mind clear, combined with Eastern medicine and a healthy Mediterranean diet, including some good rosé! Short, frequent breaks, whether work-related or recreational and especially in my happy place, a little island called Serifos in Greece, where there is limited access to Wi-Fi from a hyper-connected world. Also, my children and real family time; their energy and ability to distract and diminish any problem with their effervescent nature and optimism is priceless. Pro-bono work with excellent not-for-profit organisations like the Tomorrow Trust and Doors of Hope assist me with maintaining a sense of gratitude, social responsibility, and work-life balance in a life that could easily spin out of control due to its intensity.

▣ What is your three-year goal for your company?

In the near future, by the end of this year, we will open a 1000m² heritage Life Grand Cafe restaurant and Members Club, which our design practice Life Interiors Architecture Strategic Design has been restoring right on the water's edge in Cape Town's V&A Waterfront. This will be followed by further expansion of our three brands – Life Grand Cafe, the Potato Shed, and the Gentlemen's Arthouse – into Cape Town and expanding our national footprint.



Elegant dining at the V&A's Life Grand Café

Ruth Cooper 17 Feb 2017



As we design, develop, and operate new brands, (as we have done for the Tashas brand in the Famous Brands stable to North Island and nine other properties in the Wilderness safaris portfolio) our expansion would involve the growth of our current hospitality brands and a further penetration into unsaturated African cities and Indian Ocean islands where we have vast experience developing hotels, resorts, and private islands for the past 16 years.

We will also be focusing on consolidating our current assets and continue to vertically integrate our supply chain to serve our hospitality brands to ensure supply quality security and profitability.

From the perspective of our design practice, our goal involves doing more unique properties both for a select group of private clients and hospitality groups whilst also growing our own portfolio of projects in the area of beach restaurant and resort as well as luxury residential and commercial properties.

Our goal is to show value and growth and create a sustainable global business with design and the enjoyment of life at its core.

ABOUT EUGENE YIGA

Eugene graduated from the University of Cape Town with distinctions in financial accounting and classical piano. He then spent over two-and-a-half years working in branding and communications at two of South Africa's top market research companies. Eugene also spent over three-and-a-half years at an eLearning start-up, all while building his business as an award-winning writer. Visit www.eugeneyiga.com, follow @eugeneyiga on Twitter, or email hello@eugeneyiga.com to say, um, hello.

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