

# Setting Sail 25 Years Ago

## The Vision That Propelled the Educational Travel Community

*Interview with J. Mara DelliPriscoli by Sherry Schwarz*

Like any intrepid explorer, Mara DelliPriscoli has gone the distance to learn the contours of uncharted territory. From a year abroad traversing the ruins of Ancient Greece to a three-year hiatus blue-water sailing from the Caribbean to South America to finding a home on the range in western Montana—to visiting some 50-plus countries in between—she has traveled a long and winding path filled with adventure, risk, adversity, and reward to bring to life and evolve the Educational Travel Conference and mark its place on the modern map.

When asked what spurred her interest in educational travel, she reflects: “It was my freshman study abroad year ...and the experiential focus on learning....arriving at Delphi for the first time at dawn..... reading Herodotus sitting in the Acropolis ...and being ‘transported’ into the living context of the past.”

Having worked in almost every sector of the travel industry, Mara’s advocacy for lifelong learning fortunately directed her to lay the foundation of the Educational Travel Conference. As she authored in a 2007 *Transitions Abroad* article: “My treks to Delphi have remained a compass point for many subsequent solo expeditions, as well as for professional planning of learning travel programs worldwide. Throughout the years I have seen the design of educational



*Mara DelliPriscoli pictured in 1988 organizing the second Educational Travel Conference (formerly NonProf-its in Travel Conference) from aboard the s/v Mandorla relying on a first-generation “luggable” computer.*

tours continue to evolve as travelers seek more authentic and transformative programs that offer both collaborative educational exchange and the freedom to pursue those spontaneous moments of solo discovery, which uniquely personalize travel. As we move toward new paradigms of what defines the educational travel experience from education that engages the mind to learning connections that engage the soul—*facilitated* lifelong learning through travel will eclipse the traditional model of *managed* group travel.”

That adventurous and spirited passion for travel has never left Mara and characterizes her today,



as she admits to being the “eternal rolling stone.” She’ll hop on a plane, train, or horse anywhere, having traveled in Saudi Arabia, Syria, Azerbaijan, China, Outer Mongolia, northern India, Dubai, and Mexico in only the span of the last 15 months largely for business and forging ETC connections. Fittingly, it was island hopping in the British Virgin Islands when Mara made the commitment to launch TLC into reality—at that time called Travel Learning Consulting.

Her vision of orchestrating a professional development venue for nonprofit travel planners to network, collaborate, and share best practices had long been percolating in her mind. “Having worked too many a trade show from the supplier side, far removed from the educational content of the meeting, I recognized the lack of professional development and training workshops for all involved with nonprofit travel, particularly the travel planners,” says Mara.

She was convinced that “there had to be a better way” to support the growth and diversity of nonprofit travel as well as promote “sustainable” nonprofit and for-profit partnerships.

Having bounced around the concept of Nonprofits in Travel for many a year with colleagues Diana Lee Crew (then directing the Denver Museum of Natural History’s travel program) and Bryan DeLeo (then directing the National Trust for Historic Preservation’s travel program), Mara took the plunge in 1987 and launched—with a six-week lead time only—the first Nonprofits in Travel Conference (NPTC) with a brochure and program in tandem with Diana Lee Crew. Mara remembers the decisions and trade-offs requisite to this bold move noting, “I just knew without hesitation that NPTC was an idea whose time had come. So I ignored every marketing principle about measured lead time in promotions, invested all my limited resources and just went for it!”

At that point in time the Conference was a “test” run—without a long-term business plan running on sheer determination and passion for a vision unfolding. In 1987, after the first NPTC conference, Mara set sail for the Caribbean—



*Mara DelliPriscoli in front of the new Library of Alexandria in 2000.*

and what she thought would be a temporary hop from Bermuda to the British Virgin Islands. Her “hop” lasted three years. Between thousands of miles sailing and diving, brushes with Venezuelan pirates and uprisings, she focused on enhancing and expanding the Nonprofits in Travel Conference from the s/v *Mandorla*.

In the first eight years, Mara convened the first Advisory Council of which Diana Lee Crew was a founding council member, and received endorsements from leading nonprofit institutions: the Denver Museum of Natural History, California Alumni Association, Witte Museum, the Alumni Association of the University of Michigan Alumni, and the Sierra Club. Since these early days, the ETC has evolved to a six-person core team with more than 20 on-site Conference staff, from a 35-person meeting to an international Conference with an audience of 450-plus attendees from over 40 countries, and an ever-growing member constituency in the online community.

“ETC is an extraordinary profes-

sional development network,” says Diana Lee Crew. “The fact that the group was founded over 25 years ago and has grown from a simple networking and sharing conference for some 30 nonprofit travel programs to the huge network it is today is an accomplishment worth noting.”

Whereas the constituency focus in the first years of the Conference was exclusively on museums, Mara’s vision was to cultivate the cross-fertilization of ideas across all nonprofit sectors diversifying the attendee base to include alumni associations, continuing education programs, conservation groups, and environmental organizations. With a strategic focus on building a strong and viable nonprofit constituency in the first three years, Mara moved forward to include the other half of the nonprofit travel partnership: tour operators, and then expanding to destinations and travel suppliers in the early ’90s. This strategy included expanding a then one-track travel-planner-only educational conference to a vertically rich and multi-layered offering of



*The 1998 ETC Executive Advisory Council meeting held at the Riverview B&B, West Dennis, Mass. Pictured from left: Jim Moses, Amy Kotkin, J. Mara DelliPriscoli, Ralph Janis, Joyce Barkley, Jeanne Cobb, and Carolyn Sheaff.*

concurrent conference sessions to appeal to all individuals within the educational travel market, including the for-profit constituency. Sponsoring partners contributed greatly to an economically viable expansion of educational programming, social venues, and Conference-related online services.

As the Conference continued to grow in size and scope, the Executive Advisory Council expanded to reflect the growing diversity in Conference attendees. Council members were selected on the basis of their expertise in the field of educational and special-interest affinity and alumni/member travel, as well as the industry sector they represent: travel planner, tour operator, tour supplier, destination. An Emeritus Advisory Council was founded in 2004 by former Advisory Council members wishing to remain active and engaged in the ongoing activities of the ETC.

Pushing the technology curve, Mara launched the first online registration for the ETC in 1999,

and placed on the agenda, as early as 1995, strong online marketing courses and the first all-day Technology Forum, which was “cutting edge but sparsely attended,” adds Mara with a laugh.

Almost from the outset, Mara envisioned the ETC’s activities beyond an annual Conference as a year-round resource and network-

ing forum. As early as 1992, she laid plans for “The Nonprofits in Travel Coalition Resource Room,” which was the precursor for her desire to evolve an online ETC community. The first Networking Database was launched in the late ’90’s and, now, many versions later, it serves as the basis for today’s ETC member website’s search capabilities, which include Organizational Searches, Member Searches, and Destination Reports. It was due to the direct and sustained support of the website’s sponsoring partners that three phases of the current ETC website were able to launch successfully over the past five years. Today the ETC website includes not only its robust search capabilities, but also many tools and resources that Mara has innovated from the personalized “task manager” providing each member with customized reminders and timely information to the recently launched Member Profiles, which are designed to facilitate community-building and networking.

ETC’s website is also an extension of the annual Conference,



*ETC’s Executive Advisory Council at the ETC 2011 Planning Meeting hosted by John Hendricks and Experius Academy in Gateway Canyons, CO, April 2010.*

insofar as it enables members to now listen to digital recordings of the majority of Conference sessions and to access speaker handouts year-round. This evolution has been particularly gratifying for Mara, who, from the outset, aimed to supply Conference content and collateral that could be accessed 24/7 by virtual members.

Every year since its inception, the Conference has focused not only on the issues, concerns and opportunities in nonprofit travel but also on the broader trends and strategic issues of the travel industry, recruiting top marketing and trends speakers, as well as educational travel industry leaders from within the community and candid discourses with industry partners.

“The Conference has never been cookie cutter,” says Mara. “Each year the ETC delivers on the basic how to’s but also brings to the forefront the ever-evolving challenges of staying relevant and creating program distinctions in affinity and alumni travel. Re-thinking travel programs for a rapidly evolving traveler, moving into the digital age

of marketing and social networking, strengthening partner relationships are all critical to the growth, leadership, and evolution of nonprofit travel programs.”

In addition to advancing education and professional development, the ETC has also prided itself on its outreach and advocacy over the years. Mara cites the launch of the ETC “Educationals,” in 1990, as a program of which she is particularly proud. The “Educationals” enable experienced travel planners to share their programming expertise with countries furthering the development of educational travel.

The ETC has also made important strides through presentations on tourism as a passport to peace and with the formation, in 1991, of the Nonprofit UBIT tax coalition. Included in its many “firsts,” the ETC hosted the first Voluntourism Forums and served as the first platform for Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland to launch co-promotional activities in the U.S. travel industry.

If materializing a vision teaches us anything, humility is among the

first of lessons—and it’s one Mara knows well. Even as the founder and president of the ETC, she is the first to tell you her part of the ETC story is but only one small piece. “It is witnessing a community evolving and the commitment of colleagues to raise the bar of professionalism in their industry that inspires and renews my commitment to ETC annually,” says Mara.

She adds: “It is the countless core of volunteer colleagues—participants in the Regional Roundtables...colleagues ‘giving back’ by teaching Jumpstart for the past 22 years...veteran ETC members leading the Executive Forum...delegates developing and leading sessions annually at the ETC...valued sponsors helping to deliver a quality educational platform, fun networking venues, and a growing online communications platform...the strategic counseling of the Executive Advisory and Emeritus Council members, and so many others—who have all tirelessly and heartfully contributed to the face of ETC today.” These are the leaders who Mara believes will set the pace for the next 25 years.

As Mara closes her reflection on the eve of the 25th Anniversary Conference, she is already looking toward the horizon for the next need to be served, the next challenge. When asked what’s ahead on the ETC agenda, Mara doesn’t hesitate: “aggregating industry statistics on the affinity and alumni travel market,” she says passionately. “The growth and development of a community with a leading industry voice is critical,” she says. “I expect that the resulting aggregated data will become an essential resource for researching, benchmarking, and advocacy in years to come.”



*Mara DelliPriscoli has designed the ETC “Educationals,” like this one in Israel, 2010, in collaboration with foreign government tourist offices to generate new tour ideas for Educational Travel.*