



interview

Enjoying a slower pace

Sara deRuiter and **Neil Haapamaki** had plenty of travel experience under their belts before building the Diplomat Boutique Hotel. We asked a few questions about their journeys.

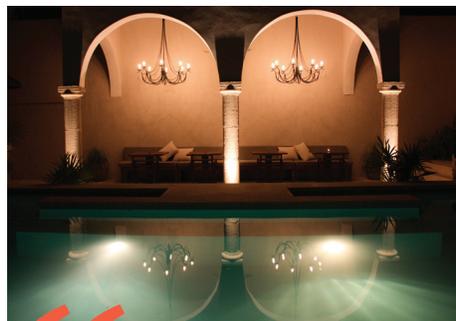
Can you tell me more about yourself? I think you told me before you both grew up in the Niagara Region and met at university in Toronto. Tell me more about your “previous lives,” if you will.

We’re coming up on our 16th anniversary, we’ve spent nearly half of our lives together exploring the globe and taking the road less traveled.

Was there anything about your “previous lives” that was helpful when you conceived The Diplomat?

We truly believe that every part of our education, travels and life experiences have lead us to being here in Merida, following our dream. Also, having an amazing fan club —made up of family, friends and inspirational people — has always given us the courage to seek out new experiences.

We spent five years living and working in China and Taiwan, and this is when our



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true love for travel started. It brought us throughout Asia and to the small town of Luang Prabang where the seed of owning our own little boutique hotel (in a foreign land) was planted. Every hospitality experience from then onward was a critical evaluation of the things we loved and loathed about the hotel industry.

After years away from home we returned to Canada to settle in, returned to our careers, bought a house, a car and everything that goes along with it. We traveled as often as possible and it was wonderful to be close to family and friends, but we both still longed for something different and for something more. We wanted to be devoted to something we were passionate about.

From a very young age Sara dreamed of being an entrepreneur. She has a background in interior design, but prior to leaving Toronto she was working in the hospitality sector as an executive director

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for some of Canada's top spas. Sara used her design experience at The Diplomat to create well thought-out spaces, designing everything from the chandeliers to the logo, the tables to the tiles. What guests appreciate most, however, is Sara's love for cooking and cocktails. Breakfast at The Diplomat is always an unforgettable experience.

Neil's degree in geography only came in handy when deciding where to book flights to explore the planet. Otherwise he was most recently employed as a web producer and photographer with the Toronto International Film Festival. Managing digital assets and developing a web presence were key at the film festival, and the same methodology has been applied to The Diplomat.

What were your influences when you decided on the look and feel?

We were very specific in creating the look and feel of The Diplomat. We wanted the space to feel comfortable, an oasis amongst the hustle and bustle. The design is stylish and contemporary while bringing in elements of the Spanish colonial charm that our guests love about this city.

We took the time to find local craftsmen that could custom build our furniture, fixtures and even made tiles according to our exact specifications. In designing every detail of The Diplomat we wanted to create a space that we would want to visit.

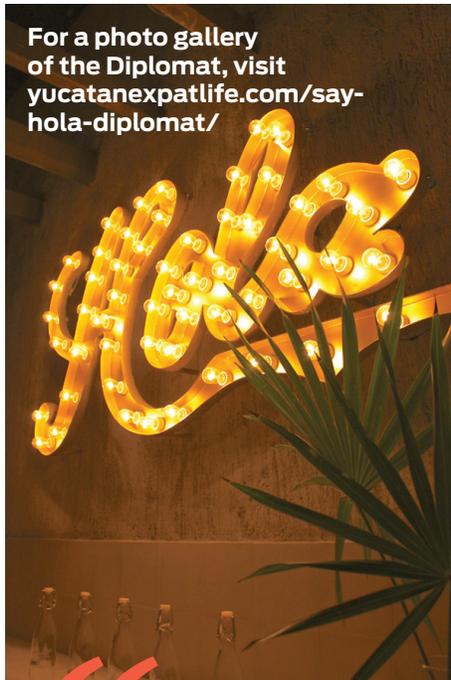
How many times did you visit Merida before you finally bought a property?

The honest answer is once. We had visited the Mayan Rivera and beyond into Belize many times for vacations and loved it, but felt that we wanted to live in a city with a little more history and culture.

We came for five days in July 2013 and searched through property after property from ruins, to nearly complete homes to sketchy old doctors' offices. We felt like we saw them all.

Our place in Santiago was the last place we saw on our very last day in Mérida and we both went back to Toronto dreaming about it. We returned to our house in Leslieville and spent the rest of the summer completing our renovations and getting our Toronto dream house up for sale. With bully offers and a bidding war we said goodbye to it all.

For a photo gallery of the Diplomat, visit yucatanexpatlife.com/say-hola-diplomat/



“Life moves at a slower pace. Being here is like stepping back in time.”

Construction here can be such a headache. Any funny anecdotes out of your experience of building or decorating?

We quickly learned that patience is a virtue — everything takes twice as long and costs twice as much — and that you can't depend on anyone but yourself. We also did it all with a sense of humor. Laughter can get you through just about anything.

One of the tips we would give those going through construction is that you need to be very clear of your expectations and simply be there, on site, every single day. If you're not, decisions will be made in your absence and they will literally be set in stone (or in concrete at least). Keep the team

motivated and if you're working along side them you gain their respect. We worked hard for four months straight through all of the dust and destruction.

What's Santiago like these days? I see a big restaurant opened near you, on 59 and 68. What's your favorite part of your neighborhood?

Santiago is the perfect place to experience Mérida. The Diplomat is close to all of the action, yet our quiet street allows our guests to feel a sense of calm. We love the mercado where we buy our flowers, fresh fruits and vegetables. Tuesday nights come alive with Salsa in the park when all of the couples come out for a night of dancing. The sound of the music echoes in our courtyard. The little eateries around the market are excellent for tasting panuchos, tortas and salbutes on a dime. In the afternoon, bells ring in the streets with deliveries of coconut ice cream, milk, cheese and freshly baked breads. Our neighbors are lovely and we're just thrilled to be part of the community.

Perhaps the nice thing about Santiago is that it hasn't changed too much. Life moves at a slower pace, being here is like stepping back in time.

Any other businesses in your future? Or plans for expansion?

We absolutely love what we're doing and I think it shows in the details. We also enjoy the wonderful friends we've made here and the new lifestyle we've created. No more meetings, hundreds of emails and no more of the daily grind to work. Our long-term plan is that we will create many more Diplomat Boutique Hotels either in other colonial cities or beach towns. Neil's dream is to open a Diplomat on Koh Tao, a little island in southern Thailand; we'll just have to see where life takes us. For now we'll enjoy the ice cream, the slower pace and the great company.

If you go

► The Diplomat Boutique Hotel has four spacious suites equipped with HD flat screen television, free WiFi, fan, premium linens and towels, a hair dryer and air conditioning. An ever changing complimentary vegetarian breakfast with fresh coffee, tea and juice is served every morning at 9 a.m. Gourmet *botanas* and fresh cocktails served after sunset. Guests have access to the honesty bar at any time, day or night. Visit at Calle 78 between Calle 59 and 59A, or online at thediplomatmerida.com.