



‘We plant a tree for every night booked’

Personally, he ‘can’t stand’ holiday bungalows in parks. ‘Right from the moment you arrive. You have to go through barriers, there is always a restaurant and the stereotypical swimming pool with slides. It’s all so standardized and the guests are all herded together.’ No, Tim van Oerle (31) and his brother Luuk (29) are more the do-it-yourself types. The Van Oerles would rather reach their weekend house over a bumpy track, preferable in the middle of



TIM VAN OERLE, CO-FOUNDER OF NATURE.HOUSE:

‘I wanted to be an entrepreneur; that’s a profession in itself’

Tim van Oerle was still a student when he and his brother started Nature.house, the booking platform for getaways in nature. Now they have 18 employees and took well over 120,000 bookings this year. ‘Seems we’re not the only ones who hate holiday parks.’

TEXT RENÉ DIDDE PHOTOGRAPHY BRAM BELLONI

nowhere, where no one will bother them if they light a fire, go birdwatching (Tim) and photograph birds (Luuk). With this ideal in mind, the brothers launched their now successful business and booking platform Nature.house (starting with a Dutch website, Natuurhuisje.nl) back in 2009. ‘I was studying in Wageningen and my brother and I wanted to go birdwatching in the Extremadura region of western Spain. I searched and searched for a quiet house

where we could do our own thing undisturbed, but all I could find was bungalows in those kinds of holiday parks.’ This is weird, thought the brothers. So they got the idea of starting something that would meet their own need for nature. But they both thought it would be sensible to finish their degrees first. Tim was studying Economics, Environment & Policy at Wageningen, and Luuk was doing Finance at Tilburg University.

Their fascination with nature and birds goes back a lot further than the Extremadura trip, though. Their father had spent a gift of money on a tract of forest near the home where the brothers grew up in Prinsenbeek, near Breda. ‘We went into our own woods every weekend with a bird book.’ When they were still students, the brothers spent time in between exams creating a simple website for holiday lets. Later on, they involved fellow students as >

programmers. Tim had enthusiastic discussions with his housemates in De Heerlijkheid student house, Hoogstraat 26. 'I was sharing the house with Pepijn Meddens, now chief technology officer for companies such as Wonderkind (a platform for matching candidates with jobs) and Billink (an electronic system for payment after receipt of goods). And I also talked a lot about entrepreneurship with Thijs Verheul, the founder of United Wardrobe, a kind of eBay for second-hand clothes.'

BECOMING AN ENTREPRENEUR

His degree course in Wageningen confirmed Van Oerle's idea that the environment and economics don't have to clash. He learned that nature can have real economic value, not least because people can relax more and are less illness-prone and therefore less likely to be off work if they are out in nature frequently. 'But I'm not the type to spend four years working this out down to the last detail in statistical models. I wanted to become an entrepreneur, and that is a profession in its own right. You can't learn it anywhere, and that includes Wageningen.' After graduating in 2013, Tim van Oerle and his brother got down to serious business – true to form, in an attic. Not on the Hoogstraat in Wageningen, though, but in their parental home with its patch of forest near Breda. 'Originally, our concept, Natuurhuisje.nl, involved offering people renting out accommodation an annual subscription,' he explains. 'That meant people could rent out a house in a natural setting through our site. They got the rent and we got an annual fee.'

In the early days of their business they received support from the Startlife bureau in Wageningen. Startlife aims to promote entrepreneurship and help people turn innovative ideas into sustainable businesses. 'We also got an interest-free startup loan of 10,000 euros from Startlife. And there was absolutely no hurry to pay it back. Startlife



TIM VAN OERLE (1987)

Wageningen University & Research, BSc in Forest and Nature Management, MSc in Economics, Environment and Policy - 2008–2013

Co-founder with his brother Luuk of Nature.house - 2009

also forced us to put our ideas into a business plan,' says Van Oerle. He has good memories of the drinks and meals he had with other Startlife participants. After a year, the brothers changed their business model, partly as a result of critical discussions Tim had in that period with the then KLV director Paul Besten, who was involved in Startlife. 'We switched from an annual subscription to a "no cure no pay" system. Just like a website like Booking.com, we get a fee from the property owner for every booking made on Nature.house.com. Ten per cent of the rent (excluding VAT)

of the holiday home comes to us.'

It is no longer just a case of holiday houses and bungalows, though. If you look on www.Nature.house, you'll also see a variety of glamping options, yurts and gypsy caravans, all 'in the most beautiful nature and often in undiscovered spots,' as the website says.

CHAT

'To give people the nice feeling of having a complete getaway from the hustle and bustle of their daily lives,' is how Tim van Oerle sees his mission. And, he adds, 'above all, I want them to see how lovely nature can be. We want to bring people closer to nature.' The brothers aim to create a community around Nature.house as well. 'Through a chat system, for instance, to improve communication between owners and guests. Also through the reviews that guests can write, like on Airbnb, including criticisms or points for improvement. Owners can respond to reviews and can also answer guests' questions in advance, so they know what the facilities will be like.'

Nature.house has really taken off. In 2017 the platform handled 20 million euros' worth of transactions. By October this year, the Van Oerles had seen the 120,000th booking. They now have 18 people working for them. 'It seems we're not the only ones who can't stand holiday parks,' jokes Tim. 'I really believe nature is far more popular among a broad section of the population than politicians realize. Nor can the success entirely be put down to the fact that people want to get away more often, and closer to home, now that they have more money to spare,' he adds. 'When we started, the economic crisis was still going on, and even then we grew rapidly, against the market trends.' The majority of guests are busy over-45s, but there are a growing number of young people too. 'At first we mainly attracted birdwatchers and people looking for peace and quiet, but we now we get renters across the board who need a break from the stress of their hectic lives.'



‘Nature is far more popular than politicians realize’

Van Oerle is alert to the need to preserve the principles of the concept, and to make improvements where possible. The criteria the brothers use for ‘nature houses’ are simple. ‘They can’t be in a large holiday park, and the park mustn’t have a swimming pool and a reception, or more than 20 hous-

es. Because we want it to be far from the hurly-burly, the accommodation can’t be in a town or village, or near motorways or the railway,’ he says. Houses that do not meet the criteria are turned down. Meanwhile, the brothers have launched their English-language website and spread their

wings across Europe. More than a quarter of their 8000 houses are in the Netherlands. There are 1000 in Belgium and 2000 in France — in both countries most of the owners are Dutch or Belgian. But the brothers are beginning to get a foothold in Germany and Scandinavia too. Nature.house is now honing its sustainability principles. ‘We plant a tree for every night booked. So this year we will have planted 120,000 trees in the damaged mangrove swamps of Madagascar. We have been there to see how the foresters are going about it. And we may support afforestation projects in Spain and Portugal as well.’ ■