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Syracuse travel company brings women to destinations of rejuvenation

by Alexandra Rojas

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SYRACUSE— One morning in November 2014, Tracy Hogarth, founder and owner of Blue Zaria, LLC — a Syracuse-based online travel curator company for women — was sitting at her job as an instructional math coach in the Syracuse City School District with tears streaming down her face.

The one-year anniversary of her daughter Kelsey’s unexpected death was approaching. “Kelsey lived in Ecuador, traveled to Paris, started her own business, and she was finishing her master’s degree at Syracuse University,” Hogarth says. “Traveling and getting away had become respite for me.”

So Hogarth decided to buy the first plane ticket out of Syracuse and asked her friend and former Blue Zaria business partner, Juhanna Brown, if she would join her on the trip. A few days later, the friends were in the Ritz-Carlton Dorado Beach spa resort in Puerto Rico.

She wanted to go on a trip that was completely indulgent where she would be immersed in the culture and eat local foods, Hogarth says.

That experience was the inspiration for starting Blue Zaria in January 2015. “Even when we’re going on trips, we [women] are the ones planning the trip and taking care of our kids and

husbands,” Hogarth says. “Part of what Blue Zaria tries to do is to give women the opportunity to take care of themselves to rejuvenate and renew.”

Blue Zaria is a tour company that says it “designs extraordinary experiences to nurture the woman’s soul, inspire the spirit, and celebrate the essence of each woman.”

It takes travelers to opportunities to volunteer and interact with the community, eat local foods, and go to places where locals go instead of where hotels recommend, Hogarth says. “That’s the backbone of how I plan the trips.”

Blue Zaria provides its travelers with transportation, accommodations, activities, and some meals that can be paid through a monthly payment plan. The firm charges an additional service fee for Hogarth’s services.

“Blue Zaria specifically targets women of color that are 30 to 60-years-old,” she says. “But anyone is welcome on the trip and the connections are made for everyone.”

Nine women will be traveling to Cuba in July on a Blue Zaria excursion that is sold out. The itinerary will include a salsa-dancing class, meeting local people, going to a farm, visiting schools, and seeing the vintage, authentic cars of the island nation.

To help make the trips happen, Hogarth works with the big hotel chains Hilton, Marriott, and Hyatt for rooms. She uses Gate 1 Travel, a Philadelphia-area-based agency, as a tour supplier and JetBlue for flights.

She is scheduling trips to Bali and Iceland in 2017, which are booking now. A trip to Martha’s Vineyard next year will be booking soon, according to the Blue Zaria website. Tanzania and Zanzibar are planned destinations for Blue Zaria in 2018. Hogarth makes the decision on where to travel based on whether the group can have an atypical experience and based on demand, she says.

The countries that Hogarth would like to bring the group to in the future include Morocco, France, the Netherlands, Jamaica, Brazil, and South Africa.

In late April, Hogarth was in Italy scouting Milan, Venice, and Florence for more information about a future trip. “You can read all you want but you really have to go there to see,” Hogarth says. “It’s about making local connections and finding folks who make wonderful experiences.”

Hogarth travels five to 10 times a year, which includes group trips and the times she goes scouting for destinations. Hogarth is Blue Zaria’s lone full-time employee as of now, but an intern is expected to start in May.

Blue Zaria’s annual revenue in its first year reached \$50,000. Hogarth says it’s too early to project 2016 revenue totals, but her goal is to increase Blue Zaria’s revenue by 25-50 percent annually. Hogarth continues to work as a math coach with the Syracuse City School District.

Past travel groups have averaged nine women each, and Hogarth would like to increase that to about 15 per travel group. But no more than that, because Hogarth wants to encourage the travelers to connect and get to know each other over the course of the trip, she says.

Her customers have come locally from Syracuse as well as from New York City and even Florida. “My hope is to get the word out beginning on the east coast and then to grow,” Hogarth says.

To promote Blue Zaria, Hogarth has connected with the online magazine *Blavity Bulletin*, which says it is “the voice of black millennials.”

During a trip to Iceland last February, the group traveled to the Blue Lagoon Geothermal Spa and documented their visit on the spa’s Snapchat. After the trip, the group posted their trip pictures on Blavity’s Instagram page to promote Blue Zaria and the magazine posted the pictures on its website.

Hogarth plans to start an Instagram account to work with more online magazines and women’s groups to connect with their online audiences and increase brand recognition. She wants to increase the company’s social-media traffic and add more personal experiences from the women who have traveled with Blue Zaria on the website, including highlights of friendships and their travel experiences.

Blue Zaria has a monthly newsletter where Hogarth would like to include recommendations of phone applications that can be used for traveling, and a brief essay with pictures written by one of the travelers.