

Nunaia proves beauty is more than skin deep

A journey of self-discovery to South America led Nicola Connolly to set up Nunaia, an innovative beauty business inspired by the people and plants of the Amazon.

What led you to set up Nunaia?

I spent 12 years living in South America, on the Galapagos Islands, in the Amazon and the Andes mountains working with traditional communities and tribes. My work was sustainable development - helping communities develop sustainable businesses so that they could improve the quality of their lives and protect their cultural heritage. We did this by looking at the natural resources around them. These are unique habitats with pristine environments. I fell in love with working in nature every day. That's how this journey began - I saw how connected they were with nature and how they used it as their own, natural pharmacy.

I was learning all about the different plants they used to stay healthy. If they got the flu or they had a stomach ache, they would go outside and pick leaves and treat it. I was absolutely fascinated by that. I observed how content they were. They seemed to have a lot more connection with one another and with nature. They used a lot of ritual in their lives to keep that balance.

When I came back to Ireland every year to visit, I'd see the complete opposite - how stressed and busy we were. I decided to do something that would combine ingredients, particularly from the Amazon where 30pc of our pharmaceuticals come from, with ritual. That's how the idea for Nunaia came about.

How do you set your product apart from others?

We create what we call superfood skincare rituals - skincare products that are made with our super food ingredients. We have access to these incredible plants that are little known in the West and have amazing properties. That's one of our key USPs. Our other active ingredient in our products is our wellness ritual. We build wellness into our products - our Nourishing Radiance Serum comes

with really simple steps, whether you have 30 seconds or five minutes it brings a little bit of mindfulness into your skin care. The idea is to help people pause and check in with themselves. You get a better skin result and the benefits from the aromatherapy help to reduce stress and prepare for sleep. It's something we're passionate about but it also helps differentiate us in a crowded market.

What have some of the ups and downs been of running your own business?

We launched 14 months ago with a single product. We won the top four Irish and UK beauty awards for our first product, which is our Nourishing Radiance Serum, within eight months of launching. The awards we won were out of a thousand brands from 14 countries. Another one of our highs was receiving Enterprise Ireland funding when we started out. Having a bit of money in the bank to get up and running and put the vision into reality was really helpful.

<https://www.instagram.com/p/B4vH3YKnZ1e/>

What are some of the challenges you encountered and how did you overcome them?

I started the business on my own so I didn't have a team around me. Initially one of the challenges was that some of the decisions were taking longer than necessary to make. This is common when you're looking at something in such detail every day. Now I have a panel of mentors at the other end of the phone, so if I really need some external input or feedback, I can get that within a few hours and move forward.

The other challenge was facing the fear. This job forces me to push my boundaries everyday - that can be uncomfortable but the payoff is big because it's hugely rewarding when you watch the dream turn into reality and see products on peoples' shelves all around the world.

What advice would you give to people setting up their own company?

Be really clear on why you're doing what you're doing. Work every day on strengthening your own self-belief in your vision because when the seas get stormy and they will, that is what will get you through - having that absolute self-belief and clear vision of why you're doing what you're doing.

Surround yourself with a great team and mentors who get your vision. In my case the vision is very much about connection, not necessarily all business, there's more to it than that. Finding mentors and a team who actually understood this vision but are also willing to challenge me on it, to help the company expand has been amazing. You just get a whole other insight into possibilities. One of the ways to do this is through Enterprise Ireland's mentoring programme, which is hugely valuable,

with access to mentors in all different fields. I also did a programme called Going for Growth, which has been incredible in terms of access to peers. It's a network of incredible businesswomen and entrepreneurs who are so helpful.

You have to be a self-starter - to connect with other small businesses because it's hard for people who've never run their own business to understand some of the day-to-day challenges. I have been quite proactive in terms of connecting with other small businesses and forming mini mastermind groups - where we can ask questions. It is quite isolating working alone.

What are your plans for the future of the company?

We are just 14 months on the market. We launched with a single product and we are delighted with the progress. We have hit all our Irish targets. We wanted to prove the concept in the Irish market first, we've done that very successfully. We will be launching our latest product, the Superfood Cleansing Balm in mid-January, so we are excited about that.

Our next steps for 2020 involve international expansion. We're building out our ritual range and are negotiating some exciting retail partnerships overseas. There are lots of new things in the pipeline with development continuing in Peru. I am going out there soon, that's always the fun part – being be out in the field - in the rainforest.

Interview by Olivia McGill

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