

By Eugene Yiga

Where design, hospitality and business meet

The LIFE Group of Companies was born from a passion to combine business, design and hospitality. CEO, Maira Koutsoudakis, explains how they achieved this and where LIFE is headed.



maira Koutsoudakis is the CEO of the LIFE Group of Companies, a luxury lifestyle and hospitality specialist she owns and operates together with her husband and business partner, engineer **John Koutsoudakis**. **The group owns seven upmarket restaurants and bars in Johannesburg and Pretoria, and will open its first restaurant in Cape Town at the V&A Waterfront in November.** Included in its stable are two new eateries – **The Potato Shed** and **The Gentlemen's Arthouse** – in Newtown Junction.

A Greek South African, born and bred in Johannesburg, Maira is also the founder and CEO of LIFE Interiors Architecture Strategic Design, which designs and develops luxury properties around the world. The company has completed projects in 13 countries, including private island resorts, luxury lodges, restaurants and private residences.

What did you do prior to starting your own business?

I worked as a designer at DSGN, a top design practice. I worked on large civic projects such as the Sandton Convention Centre, Mpumalanga government offices and various hotel projects.

Where did the idea come from?

The idea came from an inability to accept limitations and traditional business models. I was studying post-grad in Milan and felt the conflict of wanting to marry my love for business, design and hospitality. I decided that, on my return, I would build SA's first lifestyle store and bring together all these passions. I did this and we operated for the next decade, after which we had grown to such an extent, that we had to separate

the business, with food hospitality and design having independent locations and strategies.

When did you officially start operating?

LIFE was established in November 1999 in Sandton's Nelson Mandela Square as a lifestyle emporium comprised of an interior and architectural design practice, retail store, furniture showroom and restaurant.

When did you make your first sale?

When I designed and sold doll's furniture and houses while the other little girls were playing with their dresses!

How did you get funding to get the business started?

From the age of 16, I worked at my own business at flea markets where I had a permanent stand. Customers could make modern art paintings on a centrifugal machine and it was running this business where I cut my teeth in basic business practice. Later, I had a small design studio before undertaking post-grad studies in Milan, and working for a big design practice on my return to SA. I saved some money during this time and, with my conviction and sound business plan, asked my mother – a single mother and self-made success story – for a start-up loan. I was 25 and that was the last time I asked for any contribution or loan for my business.

What have been the three biggest difficulties you've had to overcome?



FROM TOP:
The Sala Lounge at Villa North Island, Seychelles.



LIFE Grand Cafe's chicken korma.

Cocktails from the Gentlemen's Arthouse.

From the outset, choose a career trajectory that sets your soul alight and then work hard to be the absolute best at that.

Images: Mariska van den Brink and David Ross

1. Going from an owner-operated mom-and-pop store to a multi-business model in various cities via hands-on and remotely controlled operations.
2. Growing the business organically; our growth so far has been self-funded and, while this pays dividends, has strict requirements on self-discipline and strategic far-sightedness.
3. Finding like-minded individuals with whom to build these businesses; from looking outside the businesses, to growing talent from within.

How tough is competition in your sector, and what differentiates you from others?

In the LIFE Grand Group, we approach our restaurants as hospitality businesses. We treat people as guests, not as patrons, with lifestyle and design at the core. Competition is tough in this sector and price-to-value ratios are crucial to success in a saturated and sophisticated local food sector.

In the design business, LIFE Interiors Architecture Strategic Design inhabits a more exclusive, unsaturated space as we create bespoke luxury properties in remote locations (such as protected biomes and private islands) and with a much higher entry barrier. **Our differentiating factor here is our soulful approach, which is multi-disciplinary and transcends architecture, interiors, hospitality, and experience management.** It is a unique niche in which our practice and projects have garnered over 52 international awards, which is a calling card in itself. The difficulty lies in that these long-term projects are more infrequent due to their entry barriers.

How many people do you currently employ?

We employ just short of 400 people across nine businesses.

What is the best business advice you've ever received?

From the outset, choose a career trajectory that sets your soul alight and then work hard to be the absolute best at that, whatever it may be. You cannot avoid those 10 000 hours. Become an expert at something.

What was unexpected?

That you can run diverse businesses and make a serious business out of a passion and that not all professional relationships have the ability to evolve at the rate of your growth.

How do you stay motivated?

The Confucius quote "Choose a job you love, and you will never have to work a day in your life" motivates me into understanding that the work is a choice; we are not victims but captains of our destiny. This maxim as well as "Good is the enemy of great" hold true when motivation is needed. The pleasure of opening a successful new business and seeing it flourish and the immediacy we have with our audience, our valued guests and satisfied clients, is motivation enough.

What are your non-work habits that help you with your work-life balance?

Laugh a lot. Yoga at least once a week combined with cardiovascular exercise to keep the ticker working and the mind clear, combined with eastern medicine and a healthy Mediterranean diet, including some good rosé! Short, frequent breaks, whether work-related or recreational, and especially in my happy place, a little island called Serifos in Greece, where there is limited access to WiFi.



Also, my children and real family time; their energy and ability to distract and diminish any problem with their effervescent nature and optimism is priceless. Pro-bono work with excellent not-for-profit organisations like the Tomorrow Trust and Doors of Hope assist me with maintaining a sense of gratitude, social responsibility, and work-life balance in a life that could easily spin out of control due to its intensity.

What is your three-year goal for your company?

By the end of this year, we will open a 1 000m² heritage LIFE Grand Cafe restaurant and Members' Club right on the water's edge in the V&A Waterfront. This will be followed by further expansion of our three brands – LIFE Grand Cafe, the Potato Shed and the Gentlemen's Arthouse – into Cape Town and expanding our national footprint.

As we design, develop and operate new brands (as we have done for the tashas brand and a number of properties in the Wilderness Safaris portfolio), **our expansion would involve the growth of our current hospitality brands and a further penetration into African cities, Indian Ocean islands** and further afield where we have had vast experience developing hotels, resorts, and private islands for the past 16 years.

From the perspective of our design practice, our goal involves doing more unique properties for clients, as well as growing our own portfolio of hotel projects.

Our goal is to show value and growth and create a sustainable global business with design and the enjoyment of life at its core. ■ editorial@finweek.co.za

FROM TOP:
The Potato Shed serving crate.

LIFE Grand Cafe, Mall of the South.

Gentlemen's Arthouse interior.



Maira Koutsoudakis
CEO of LIFE Group of Companies



John Koutsoudakis
Co-founder and CEO of LIFE Grand Group