

TRACING MAPS

For Argentinian-born Victoria Aguirre, the only way to make Australia home was to bring with her traditions of her motherland. Together with creative partner, Carl Wilson, the couple have made it their mission to preserve and promote the rich, multi-generational artisanal culture of Argentina. This led to the creation of Pampa, a business that sells photography prints and a selection of handwoven Argentinian rugs, blankets, cushions and throws. We sat down to have a chat with Victoria in her current home, Byron Bay.

WORDS BY MOLLIE O'SULLIVAN | PHOTOS BY VICTORIA AGUIRRE

Years ago, working as a journalist for a magazine called Adventure, Victoria was sent to cover a story of two surfers who were chasing waves along the pacific coast of Latin America. Joining them was close Australian friend, Carl Wilson. Victoria and Carl bonded over a shared passion for photography and they quickly realised there was something more meaningful intended for them beyond the chance meeting. Soon enough Carl's trip was coming to an end, with him due to return to Australia.

"We had to make a decision," says Victoria, "Whether he was more into Argentina with me, or if I was more into Australia with him."

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VICTORIA AGUIRRE

She made the decision on a whim, quit her job and jumped on a plane to the Gold Coast.

“For a whole year I was crying - homesick. I got thyroid problems, I put on weight. I was terribly depressed because I couldn’t find myself. I didn’t have a job, I didn’t have a visa. It was all very messy.” Victoria was 28, living in a foreign country and pining for her home like a missing limb. She decided that if she was going to stay in Australia she needed to do something that connected her to Argentina.

Carl too was experiencing a kind of disassociation with his life, having had a year abroad he had realised that he didn’t want to return to the trade he had worked in for years.

“So, it came that together we were both in a crisis,” says Victoria, “and from that crisis, this idea came to life. You know when you hit the bottom of something, you kind of emerge. That’s how Pampa started.”

The word Pampa means ‘fertile earth,’ it’s also the region in Argentina where Victoria grew up. The name has been very important for Victoria, shaping the brand by linking the products to an earthy sentiment, a sense of place where things grow.

After a year in Australia, Victoria and Carl returned to Argentina to source cultural objects. With no real clue of what it was they were actually after, they set off to explore, soon finding themselves lost in remote regions of Argentina without phone reception or internet. It was in these more remote regions that they started seeing families and communities who were weaving. They watched as locals toiled over beautiful rugs crafted with patience and expertise, that were worth so much more money than what the families would receive for them at the local market. What they learnt was that lack of demand for the products, and a lack of knowledge on where or how to sell them, has meant that the art of weaving in Argentina is slowly vanishing. Upon realising this, Carl and Victoria saw their opportunity and started buying up rugs, traveling back with 30 in their luggage.

Back in Australia, they now had to sell the rugs. They threw everything in the car and drove to Sydney, knocking on doors and walking all over the city, trying every store only to get ‘no’ after ‘no’ after ‘no.’

“Many people told us that what we were doing was not the way,” Victoria says, “we got told that we had to make an appointment, we got told to go away.” But they felt passionate about promoting the crafts, “There was a story behind the brand, it was a preservation of an art. To empower that, to preserve that and to support that... I think that’s why our fight was so hard and so insistent, because we knew this was much more than just a product.”

They got their break when they knocked on the door of Koskela, one of the biggest interior design companies in Sydney. Russel and Sasha of Koskela loved the story of Pampa and started representing them, throwing them a launch party, and placing an order for more rugs of over \$10,000. Victoria recounts how crazy that was for them at the time, as they had each put all of their savings into getting Pampa off the ground.

Orders started coming in and Victoria and Carl would keep going back to Argentina to buy again, hand selecting each rug and reinvesting each sale to expand their collections. They sourced their rugs the same way they had sourced a representative, “Yep, knocking on doors,” she said, “Literally, arriving to a little town in the middle of nowhere and knocking on one or two doors.”

As Victoria explains, the rugs are woven on looms, which are usually kept in the backyard under a tree, so once they knew what to look for they could spot them from the road and would yell “stop!” and knock on the door.

“Each community works differently from each other, so that’s why all our collections are different types of weaves and weights. One collection of cushions is woven in one community, a different collection in another. All the throws we have come from different places, and each collection has a name that refers to its place of origin.”

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Fast forward three years later, Pampa has a popular online store, 10 stockists across Australia, and orders coming in from Dubai, Norway, South Africa, the U.S and most parts of Asia. However, like any startup, along with the success, Pampa has had its own set of challenges. “Early years we had some terrible cash flow issues of having our account in minus, asking for money from our parents to pay our bills. That was scary, that was really scary,” Victoria says. But Carl was always reassuring, knowing that they’d get through it. In the first year Carl was still working part time as an air conditioner mechanic to support the business, and it was only when the business had evolved enough that he was able to become fully self-employed.

However, the biggest challenge for Carl and Victoria is managing their weaving communities, of which they now have around 50. Ranging from solo weavers to families and communities, every year they gain more.

“None of our weavers have an email system,” Victoria says. She describes an especially challenging customer order that came through. As each design and weave belongs to and represents a family, there was only one weaver who could weave this particular rug.

“So, they don’t go to school to learn how to weave, they learn it from the grandfather, or grandmother, or mum, and it travels through generations. Only this particular weaver knew how to do this rug for this client. He doesn’t have a phone, and he lives on a mountain 4000 meters high, so there’s no reception. We had to call his son who was living in a city four hours from there, and ask him if he was planning on going up the mountain, to see if he

could ask his father to weave that particular rug, in those specific colours. But he couldn’t go all the way to see his dad because he had to go back to work. So, he went to the post office nearby and told the postman. He drew up the rug on a piece of paper, and a bus, the local community bus, took that paper to this weaver.”

Despite the challenges, the greatest reward for Carl and Victoria is seeing first-hand the impact that providing more work opportunities has had on families in Argentina. Fathers who used to have to travel for days to work in remote farms have come back to live with their families to help with weaving. Daughters who were once ashamed of weaving now take pride in their family heritage and want to learn. They have strong familial ties and Victoria says parents will often give everything they earn to their kids, paying to send their son to university, or so that their daughter can give birth in a hospital instead of a house.

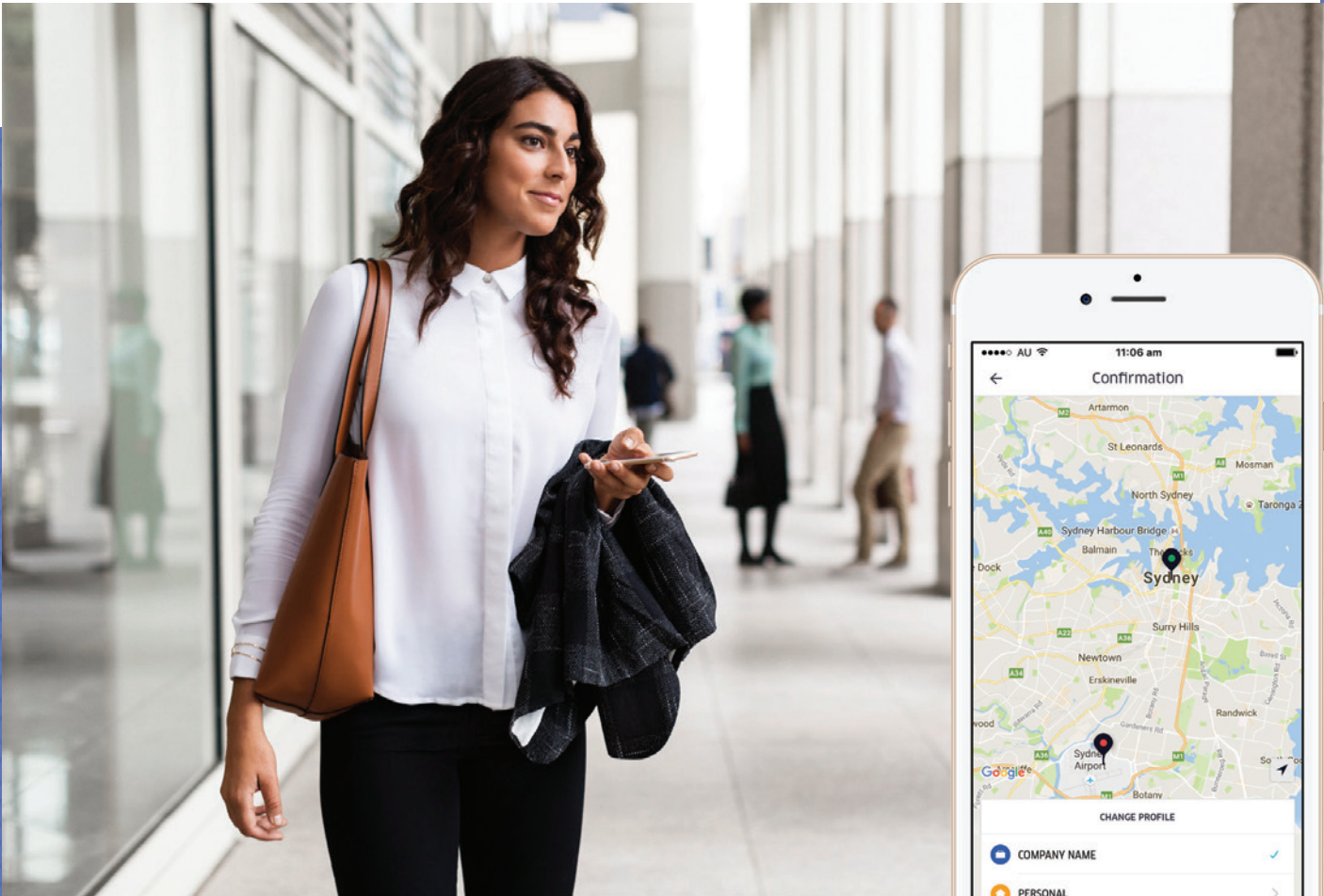
When asked about the future of Pampa, Victoria says, “the goal is adding more weavers, giving more job opportunities to the ones we have now, and getting new collections in.” This year they’re planning on releasing a short film to show how much effort goes into each piece, and to help tell the story of Pampa.

“We are tracing a map between Australia and Argentina.” With every rug, pillow and throw, Pampa is doing what so few companies care to do – investing directly in the lives of less advantaged people.

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