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MEET THE OWNER: BEHIND THE ECUADOR-INSPIRED, ECO-LUXE COLLECTIONS OF NINAKURU

APRIL 21, 2020 NO COMMENTS

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By now you all probably know I consider sustainable fashion and consumption an integral part of [sustainable travel](#), and I'm constantly on the lookout for eco-friendly and ethical brands. It's no surprise then that I was thrilled to come across the brand NINAKURU who exemplifies all of the business practices I look for: sustainable materials, ethical treatment of employees, and products which don't sacrifice style or durability for the former.

And then I learned that NINAKURU's owner was a woman who found inspiration for her business through her travels. I am absolutely thrilled to share this interview with Jennifer, the stylish entrepreneur behind this fashion-forward brand, and her story of what led her to launch her own business. I know I am personally both inspired and planning a trip to Ecuador after seeing these photos.

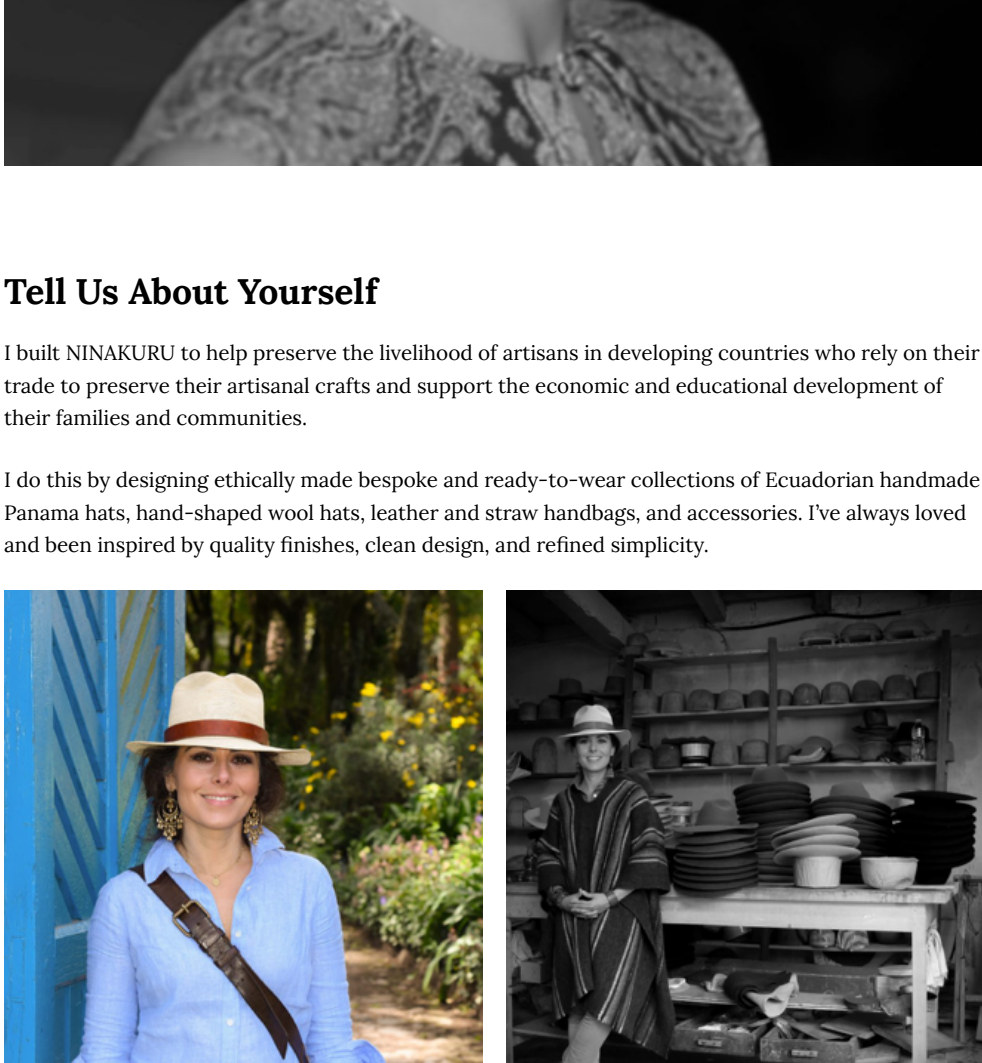
Bio

Name: Jennifer Moray

Job title: Owner, NINAKURU

Education: Dual college degrees in International Business and Marketing.

Lives: Grew up in the United States, spent 16 years living, working and traveling throughout Ecuador. I currently live and run NINAKURU in Ojai, California.



Tell Us About Yourself

I built NINAKURU to help preserve the livelihood of artisans in developing countries who rely on their trade to preserve their artisanal crafts and support the economic and educational development of their families and communities.

I do this by designing ethically made bespoke and ready-to-wear collections of Ecuadorian handmade Panama hats, hand-shaped wool hats, leather and straw handbags, and accessories. I've always loved and been inspired by quality finishes, clean design, and refined simplicity.



What's one place you'd like to visit again?

I have a very special place in my heart for Ecuador. In my post college years, I had the pleasure of living and working in Ecuador for over 16 years. It is a beautiful country, dotted with magnificent snow-capped volcanoes, crystalline blue lakes, and lush cloud forests. Ecuador is also the source of the original, authentic, Panama hat, an accessory I love and wear almost every day.



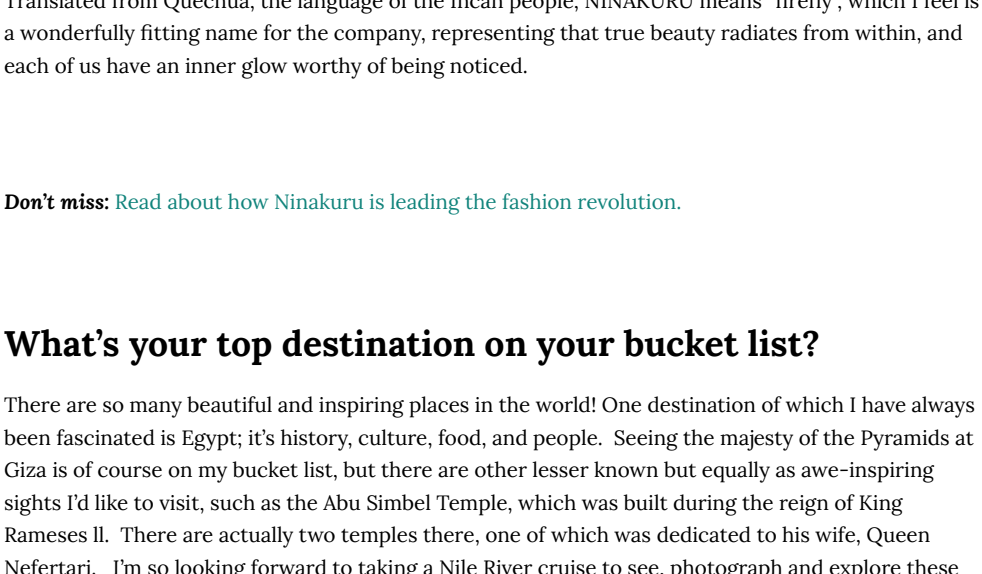
How did you get into this career? What's your background? What led you here?

After college, I moved to South America and launched my career working for a multinational flower brokerage based in Quito, Ecuador. It was there I managed the operations team where I oversaw sales, purchasing, and logistics, and honed my skills in international trade and business development.

In my work and travels during my time in Ecuador, I had the honor of meeting many resourceful and talented people, including Panama hat weavers and artisans in towns, large and small. However, I soon learned many of them abandon their beloved craft – which is a time-honored talent handed down through the generations – to accept jobs in the service sector, as demand for their handmade goods decreases in favor of lower quality, factory-made products.

I also became keenly aware of the concept of how time has a cost, and how it is often under-valued, after seeing how hard weavers and artisans work for such low salaries. I couldn't justify the idea that a beautifully woven, handmade Panama hat made in Ecuador, selling in the United States or Europe for \$300 USD or more, often barely generated \$5 or \$8 USD for the Ecuadorian hat weaver. A quality Panama hat takes many days to make; the higher quality hats require many weeks to weave. The retail cost of the hat simply did not appropriately value the time the weaver spent in making it.

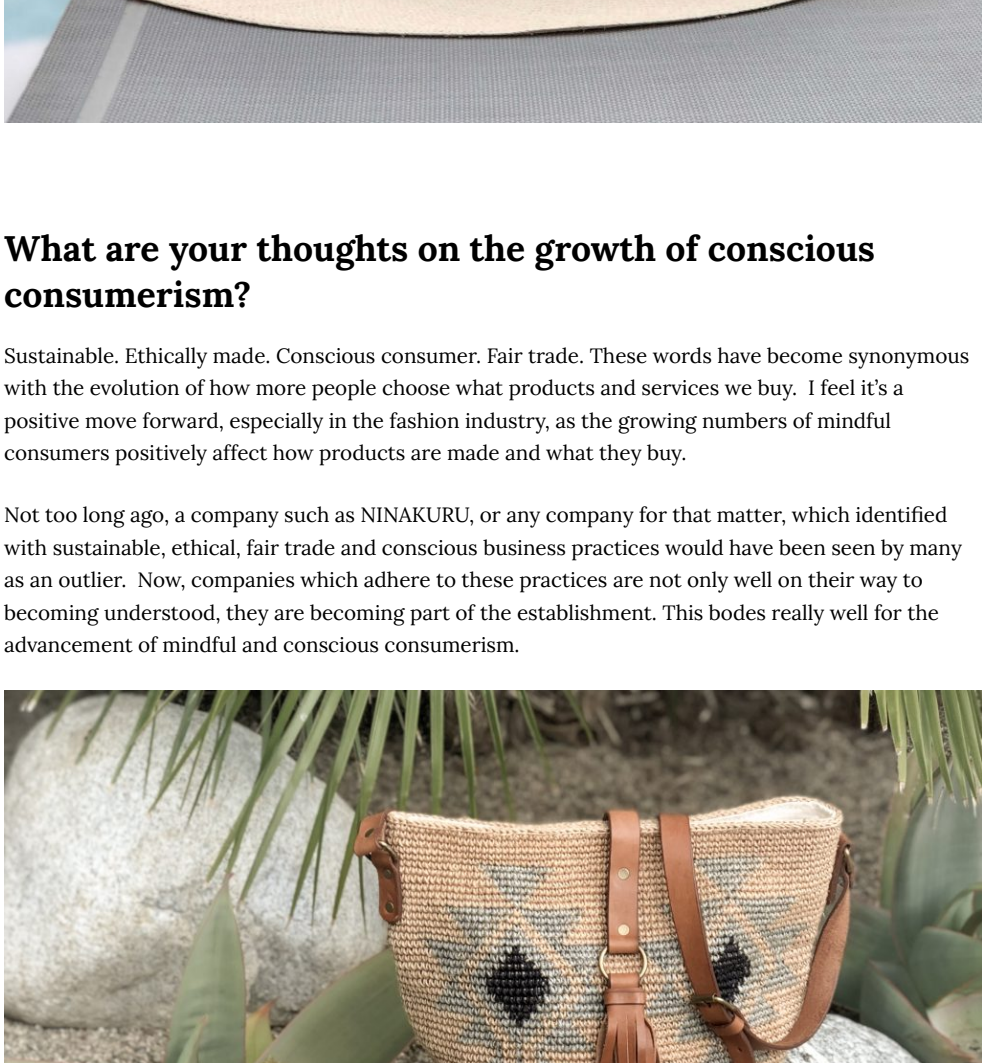
It became clear to me the weaver's time was not being respected and honored appropriately. She should be receiving more of the revenue from each hat she makes. She should be able to better support her family with her talents. I found it grossly unfair that a talented weaver whose craft passed through the generations was getting paid pennies on the dollar for what many correctly see, as a work of art. An art so worthy of appreciation that in 2012, the hand weaving of Panama hats was added to the UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage list.



The heartbreak of learning a generational craft was being abandoned, the frustration of seeing people exploited, and the realization that economies value people's time less in developing countries, called me to action.

I wanted to turn my frustrations about this exploitation into a force for good. I felt I needed to be an advocate and supporter of these talented people and promote the ethos that in addition to the monetary cost of products, we all should consider the human and environmental costs of the products we choose. This was in 2014, before "sustainable" and "ethically made" became the terms as prevalent as they are now, but I knew I couldn't be alone in this thinking. I felt strongly that there must be a wider market for quality products made responsibly. Buying less, but buying better. It was time, for me anyway, to address these issues.

Which is why I founded NINAKURU.



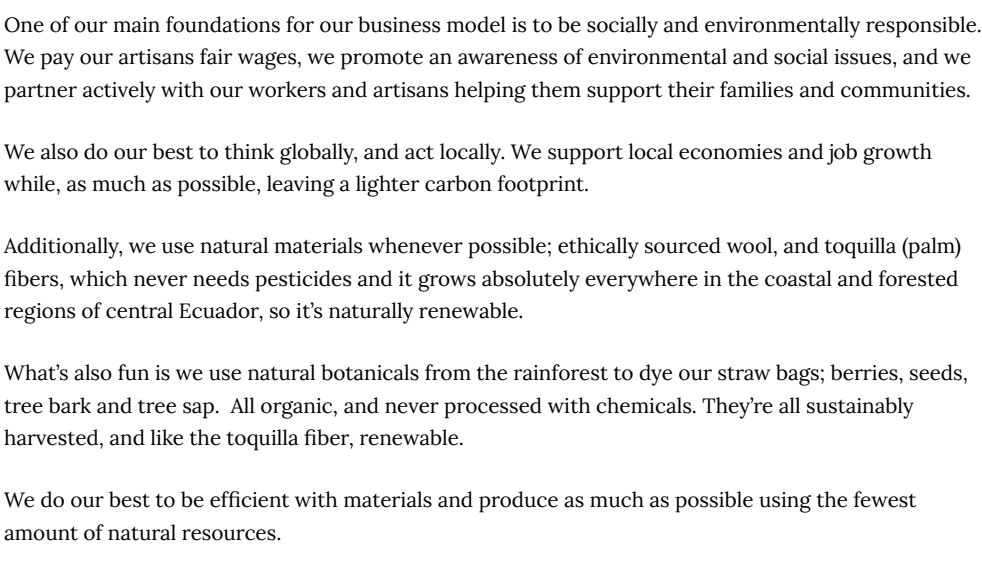
What does NINAKURU mean to you?

Translated from Quechua, the language of the Incan people, NINAKURU means "fiery", which I feel is a wonderfully fitting name for the company, representing that true beauty radiates from within, and each of us have an inner glow worthy of being noticed.

Don't miss: [Read about how Ninakuru is leading the fashion revolution.](#)

What's your top destination on your bucket list?

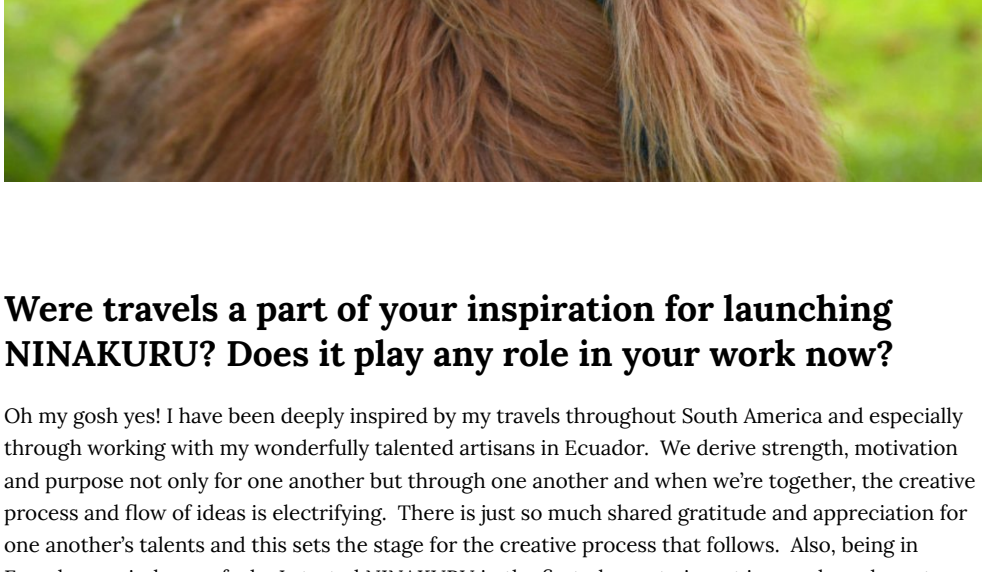
There are so many beautiful and inspiring places in the world! One destination of which I have always been fascinated is Egypt; it's history, culture, food, and people. Seeing the majesty of the Pyramids at Giza is of course on my bucket list, but there are other lesser known but equally as awe-inspiring sights I'd like to visit, such as the Abu Simbel Temple, which was built during the reign of King Rameses II. There are actually two temples there, one of which was dedicated to his wife, Queen Nefertari. I'm so looking forward to taking a Nile River cruise to see, photograph and explore these stunning and historically significant temples.



What are your thoughts on the growth of conscious consumerism?

Sustainable. Ethically made. Conscious consumer. Fair trade. These words have become synonymous with the evolution of how more people choose what products and services we buy. I feel it's a positive move forward, especially in the fashion industry, as the growing numbers of mindful consumers positively affect how products are made and what they buy.

Not too long ago, a company such as NINAKURU, or any company for that matter, which identified with sustainable, ethical, fair trade and conscious business practices would have been seen by many as an outlier. Now, companies which adhere to these practices are not only well on their way to becoming understood, they are becoming part of the establishment. This bodes really well for the advancement of mindful and conscious consumerism.



If you could describe NINAKURU in three words, what would they be?

Ethical. Handmade. Imaginative. I include "imaginative" because I derive my inspiration not from other designers but rather from what I like and see around me. Colors in the sky and oceans and mountains, patterns in nature, textures of fabric. I absorb as much of it as I can and use what I love to create my designs.

How does sustainability play a role in NINAKURU sourcing and production? How is NINAKURU fighting fast fashion?

One of our main foundations for our business model is to be socially and environmentally responsible. We pay our artisans fair wages, we promote an awareness of environmental and social issues, and we partner actively with our workers and artisans helping them support their families and communities.

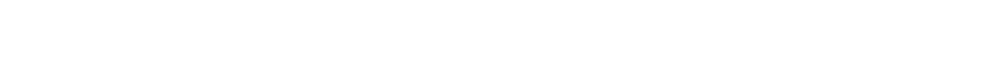
We also do our best to think globally, and act locally. We support local economies and job growth while, as much as possible, leaving a lighter carbon footprint.

Additionally, we use natural materials whenever possible; ethically sourced wool, and toquilla (palm) fibers, which never needs pesticides and it grows absolutely everywhere in the coastal and forested regions of central Ecuador, so it's naturally renewable.

What's also fun is we use natural botanicals from the rainforest to dye our straw bags; berries, seeds, tree bark and tree sap. All organic, and never processed with chemicals. They're all sustainably harvested, and like the toquilla fiber, renewable.

We do our best to be efficient with materials and produce as much as possible using the fewest amount of natural resources.

All of these aspects of NINAKURU by their very nature promote slow fashion and put pressure on fast-fashion to evolve to a more sustainable and ethical business model.



Were travels a part of your inspiration for launching NINAKURU? Does it play a role in your work now?

Oh my gosh yes! I have been deeply inspired by my travels throughout South America and especially through working with my wonderfully talented artisans in Ecuador. We derive strength, motivation and purpose not only for one another but through one another and when we're together, the creative process and flow of ideas is electrifying. There is just so much shared gratitude and appreciation for one another's talents and this sets the stage for the creative process that follows. Also, being in Ecuador reminds me of why I started NINAKURU in the first place...to invest in people and create value through relationships.

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 Sarah
Hey there! I – Sarah – am a 26-year-old marketing manager who loves to travel the world (if you haven't gathered that already). I'm also a proud cat mom, coffee-addict, and Harry Potter fanatic with an over reliance on list-making I want to see as much of the world as I can but I know that can leave a huge footprint on Mother Earth so I'm on a mission to wander a little lighter. I created Suitcase Six as a resource to help busy people like you travel and live more sustainably too, whether at home or on the road. Let's add a little more "eco" to our adventure.

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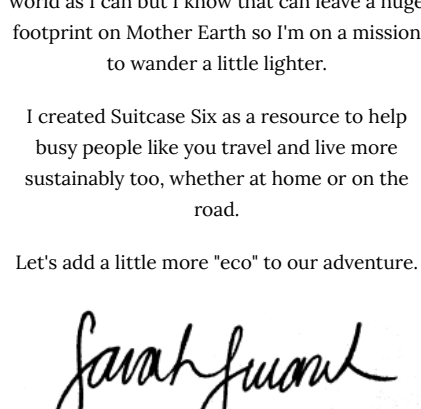
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About the Author



Hey! I'm Sarah.

I'm a travel fanatic trying to see as much of the world as I can but I know that can leave a huge footprint on Mother Earth so I'm on a mission to wander a little lighter.

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