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F5 Escapes: A Purpose-Driven Organization

F5 Escapes (F5) was an experiential travel organization that aimed to redefine traveling for women by organizing unique and off-beat travel experiences for them. It was founded in June 2013 by Malini Gowrishankar and since 2017 was jointly run with Akanksha Bumb. F5 was a for-profit social impact venture that focused on the female traveler by encouraging them to challenge existing notions that traveling in India was unsafe for women. It typically organized group tours for women, both Indian and foreign, to explore India, although some tours were arranged to destinations outside the country. The organization also arranged customized group and solo tours. F5, therefore, was an organization working hard not only to redefine traveling in India for women, but also to redefine socially-conditioned notions about travel. F5 was successful in communicating its mission, based on the overall positive responses it received from its customers. It did, however, face some challenges. For instance, the organization was almost entirely bootstrapped by Gowrishankar, which meant she had to find innovative ways of hiring and retaining employees while also publicizing the organization to attract more customers. F5 had to find creative ways to market itself, given the competition it faced from bigger, more well-established travel companies.

In November 2016, Gowrishankar was traveling from India to London to attend the World Travel Market trade fair. She was excited and looked forward to this journey because it was the first time she was representing her organization at an international event. The motto she communicated about her company was to 'Think beyond the Taj Mahal', because India was a diverse country with a lot of value to offer to travelers beyond just visiting the Taj Mahal or learning yoga. She emphasized travel as more than just visiting popular sights but also participating in meaningful, holistic experiences.

While waiting at the airport, Gowrishankar received a phone call from a customer, Nandani, who had just returned from Kutch, Gujarat. "Thank you! Thank you! Thank you!" exclaimed Nandani, "I am just back from Kutch this evening, and what an experience it was. I still can't believe that I could go on this trip." Gowrishankar smiled as Nandani remembered attending the 'Just Go' travel series organized by F5 Escapes in Mumbai the previous month. Nandani was inspired by the various travel stories she heard from the men and women at the series, which reinforced the urge she had to travel. However, her desire to travel alone was accompanied by fears for her safety and the need to convince her parents it was safe. Gowrishankar spoke

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