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Mark Ellingham

Founder of Rough Guides

Mark Ellingham had always dreamt of becoming a journalist, but when he graduated from university with a degree in English he could not find a job. So he went on holiday to Greece for a couple of months instead. While he was there Ellingham realised there might be a gap in the market for a guidebook that combined practical advice with a real insight into the country's culture. He wrote a couple of chapters and when he returned home managed to find a publisher who agreed to pay him an advance of £900 to finish it.

Neither he nor his publisher was prepared, however, for the scale of the book's success. Within weeks of publication, the *Rough Guide to Greece* had to be reprinted twice. Ellingham, who was brought up outside Salisbury by his mother, a social worker, says: 'There hadn't really been a new guidebook series of any note since the 1950s, so in retrospect it was a golden time to write it.'

The publisher quickly agreed to a series of Rough Guides on other destinations. So Ellingham wrote the guides to



Spain and Portugal himself and commissioned friends to write others, editing them in a makeshift office he set up in his housing association flat in Camberwell, south London. Not everyone was enamoured with the Rough Guide concept, however. Ellingham says: 'The first time the publisher tried to sell it to America it got a telex back saying that the name was off-putting. I think if I had planned it, I wouldn't have come up with a name that was quite so daft.' However the title could have been a lot worse. While he was at university Ellingham started up a student magazine called *April Makes Me Vomit*.

Ellingham was busy editing the fifteenth Rough Guide book when the publisher was unexpectedly taken over by another company. The new owners promptly decided that the Rough Guide imprint did not fit in with its plans and put it up for sale. Fortunately Ellingham had inserted a clause in his contract stating that the Rough Guide imprint could only be sold with his permission. So he and a couple of friends, John Fisher and Martin Dunford, who had been

helping him write and edit the books, decided to buy it themselves. He says: 'I wanted to have a say in what happened to us. In the end there was only one bidder that I approved of. And that was me.'

Ellingham was 26. He says: 'It was a nervy time. I remember the guy who was negotiating with me banging the desk and swearing at me and saying, "I'll give you £100,000, you just have to sign this bloody piece of paper." It was quite tempting because it was more money than I had ever imagined in my life. But I liked the idea of being independent and the group of us holding our destiny in our own hands. Overnight we moved from being writers and editors to being entrepreneurs.'

Ellingham persuaded a distributor to lend them £200,000 to buy the stock of Rough Guide books that had already been printed. And when the distributor went into receivership a few years later he asked the publisher Penguin to do the same, this time lending them £400,000. He says: 'I just winged it really. If you don't know how deals are supposed to work then you can just suggest exactly how you want them to work.' It was a sound move. Penguin started selling Rough Guides overseas and within three years sales had doubled. The series also received huge publicity, with a Rough Guides series shown on television, which ran for six years. The guides now cover 200 destinations and have sold more than 20 million copies.

Ellingham also decided to expand into non-travel subjects. He struck gold with the *Rough Guide to the Internet*, which sold 4.5 million books, making it the company's most successful ever title.

The hard work paid off. In 1998 Ellingham and his partners sold 51 per cent of the company to Penguin for £5 million, then in 2003 they sold the remaining 49 per cent to them for another £5 million. Under a share equity scheme

10 per cent of the sale was distributed to 100 staff and authors.

Ellingham stayed on at Penguin as Rough Guide publisher in an arrangement which allowed him to work three days a week – and not at all during school holidays – so that he could spend more time with his wife and young son. In the meantime he started another publishing company, Sort Of Books, with his wife, Natania Jansz. Their original aim was simply to publish a book written by a friend. Ellingham explains: ‘A good friend of ours was living on a peasant farm in southern Spain and whenever anyone went out to see him they would end up talking about how he could make it work financially. There was no hope of making much money from the farm itself. But it was the most beautiful place and he had a string of funny stories about life there so we helped him turn his experiences into a book. I thought if we published it ourselves we could prob-ably sell 20,000 copies.’

Fact File

Date of birth: 8 April 1959

Marital status: married with one child

Highest level of education achieved: university

Qualifications: BA in English, and honorary MA, from Bristol University

Interests: music (he remains co-editor of *The Rough Guide to World Music*), fiction, film, football (Manchester United obsessive)

Personal philosophy: ‘Invent the rules.’

The friend was Chris Stewart, the book was *Driving over Lemons*, and it became a best-seller, selling more than 700,000 copies.

Ellingham finally left Rough Guides in 2008 after seeing the company through its '25 Years' celebrations which included a mini-series of 25 'Ultimate Experience' books. He felt he had come to the end of the road with Rough Guides and had also become increasingly concerned with environmental issues. In 2006 Ellingham had launched an awareness campaign about the effects of flights on climate change, linking up with his old rival Tony Wheeler, the founder of the Lonely Planet guides, to maximise impact. So his next step was to set up a green and ethical imprint for independent publishers, Profile Books, a move which had the added attraction of returning to a small company environment. Again, Ellingham has negotiated a limited working week – 100 days a year – to allow time for family and for other ventures, including Sort Of, which publishes three or four books a year, and the World Music magazine *Songlines*, which he helps to run.

Ellingham, 50, says that he has never been driven by the idea of making money: 'I just like to produce things and to make ideas happen.' He thinks much of his success comes from being single-minded. He says: 'I can see an idea and run with it and not be afraid to try it and put money into it. If you believe you can do something better or different, then you shouldn't be intimidated. You have to just single-mindedly plough your own furrow.'