



Nocturn Alley
by night

Selling some... **MOVIE MAGIC**

Muggle Tours is a successful London-based *Harry Potter* themed walking tour, which launched in the summer of 2011. FYM meets the 28-year-old 'muggle' behind the business



She goes by the moniker of Hana 'Potter'

What's in a name?

Her real name is Hana Umezawa but her nickname is Hana Potter. "The idea came from a 'muggle' who came on a tour and wrote it in an email. I thought it was great so I adopted it. Our guides also have *Harry Potter* monikers - Steph Black, John Lupin..."

Magic may be the main ingredient in a *Harry Potter* inspired walking tour, but it hasn't always been plain sailing for the chief 'muggle', Hana Potter.

After graduating from Manchester University in international relations, in the depths of the recession, Hana simply couldn't get a job doing the work she was passionate about. This was disappointing and demoralising, and certainly not what she'd expected. Lots of young people today are in a similar position. "I really feel for you guys. It's tough out there right now," she empathises.

With recent unemployment figures reaching nearly 2.6 million, after another 20,000 under-25s added their names to the register, Hana has a point.

But that doesn't mean we should give up. Although it was tough, Hana decided to improvise, a skill that would later prove indispensable when delivering her carefully crafted script to a diverse, sometimes demanding, range of customers.

Everybody has a network

Luckily Hana's Japanese dad and Spanish mum were both tour guides in the 1970s. "My dad was asked by the Japanese consulate to take a group around London because there weren't many Japanese people in London who were fluent in English," she explains. "Mum got into it because it fit well with her schedule, so she began guiding for Spanish and South American tourists."

Faced with unemployment, Hana's parents suggested she

"We all have a network, it's about who you know and who they know..."

give it a go. While having tour guide parents was certainly an advantage, she still had to come up with a new tour idea that she could deliver knowledgeably, with imagination and passion. "I grew up with *Harry Potter* and absolutely loved the magic realism of the books, and the films too," she says. Unlike many book adaptations, Hana believes the films are true to JK Rowling's

creations. With London featuring so strongly, this seemed an ideal opportunity. However, before launching on her own, and on her parents' recommendation, she worked for other tour guides to learn as much as she could; internships are something she highly recommends.

Hana also encourages anybody starting out to use their 'personal network' of people and connections. "We all have a network, it's about who you know and who they know," she stresses.

Hana explains how this has worked in her own business: one of her first guides, an actress, was close friends with Harry Melling, the actor who played Dudley Dursley in the *Harry Potter* films. "Through him we discovered a location we hadn't known about, which was en route and easy to add to the tour."

Putting the customer first

Once Hana had decided on a theme for her walking tour, her next step was to thoroughly research and develop the business idea. Business Link, a government backed helpline, recommended she get in touch with the East London Business Centre. Here she got help with practical issues like setting up a company, the necessary legal documentation and paperwork.

Six months later, in the summer of 2011, her walking tour for *Harry Potter* fans, exploring film locations and the inspiration behind the books using relevant props and trivia, was up and running. Today Muggle Tours is ranked No1 by TripAdvisor and *Time Out* London, which Hana attributes to keeping groups small and putting customer service first. "I strongly believe in treating people as I would like to

be treated and delivering an excellent, personal customer service," she says. Hana takes all reviews very seriously and aims to learn as much from customer feedback as possible. Keeping the business fresh is really important, and reviews help you to learn and improve, she says.

Looking to the future, Hana recognises that the magic may not last forever, as interest in *Harry Potter* depends very much on whether the huge popularity of the books and films continues. But she loves the business of tour guiding and is exploring lots of other possibilities. "I love what I do. The muggles I've met, and the enjoyment they get from the tours, plus the freedom to be my own boss, makes it all worthwhile."

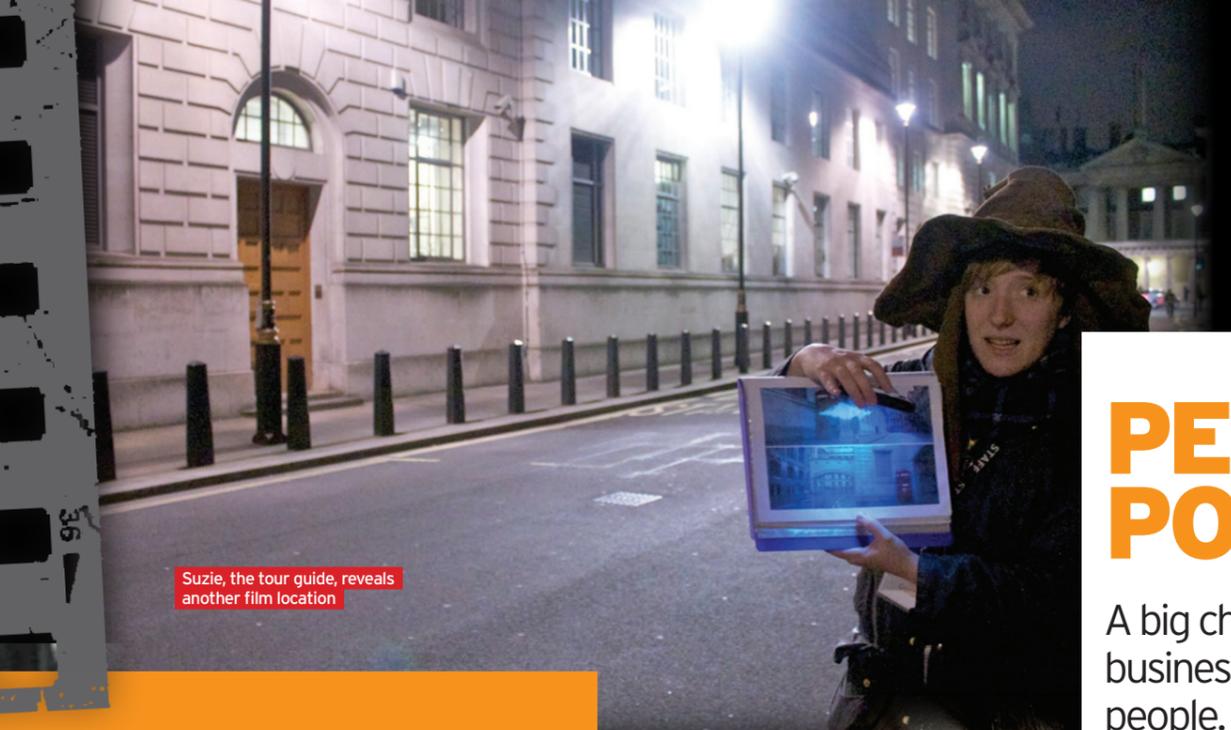
WORDS BY VITURSHAN THIYAKUMAR WITH ADDITIONAL REPORTING BY GREGORY ALLEN, ALANA O'SULLIVAN AND RACHEL GOACHER

HANA'S TOP TIPS

- Enjoy what you do. If you don't you will become dissatisfied and it will reflect on your business
- If possible do an internship and learn as much as you can
- Always consider the human side of a business, and put a lot of effort into customer service
- Respect your employees. If you truly value them they'll do their job well not only for their sake but also for yours
- Learn from mistakes. Take negative feedback, improve and grow



Muggle Tours takes in many of London's iconic landmarks



Suzie, the tour guide, reveals another film location

TOUR REVIEW

Spellbound

Uni students Alana O'Sullivan and Rachel Goacher are two dedicated *Harry Potter* fans; Rachel is able to recite the 'sorting hat's' song and Alana regularly quotes Dumbledore. They put Muggle Tours to the test one chilly March evening

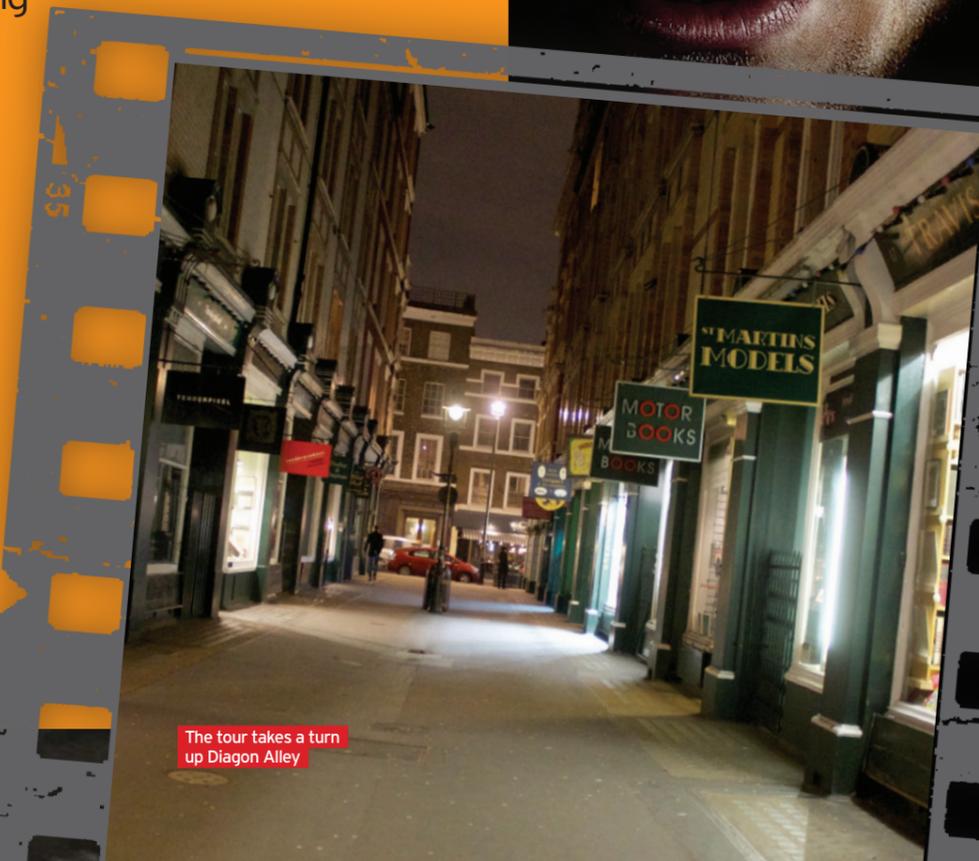
The tour began close to London Bridge and after a brief attempt to join a group of eastern European tourists attempting to hail a nearby taxi we spotted it. Patched, frayed and extremely dirty, just as we'd always imagined it, there was the sorting hat perched on a woman's head just 20 feet away. At that moment we knew we were in for no ordinary tour.

Our guide Suzie was the epitome of enthusiasm and expertly kept both adults and children entertained. At each site Suzie would test our Potter knowledge as well as revealing secrets and entertaining facts. Even on the underground where the tour threatened to be dull, the children (and ourselves) were sorted into Hogwarts' houses.

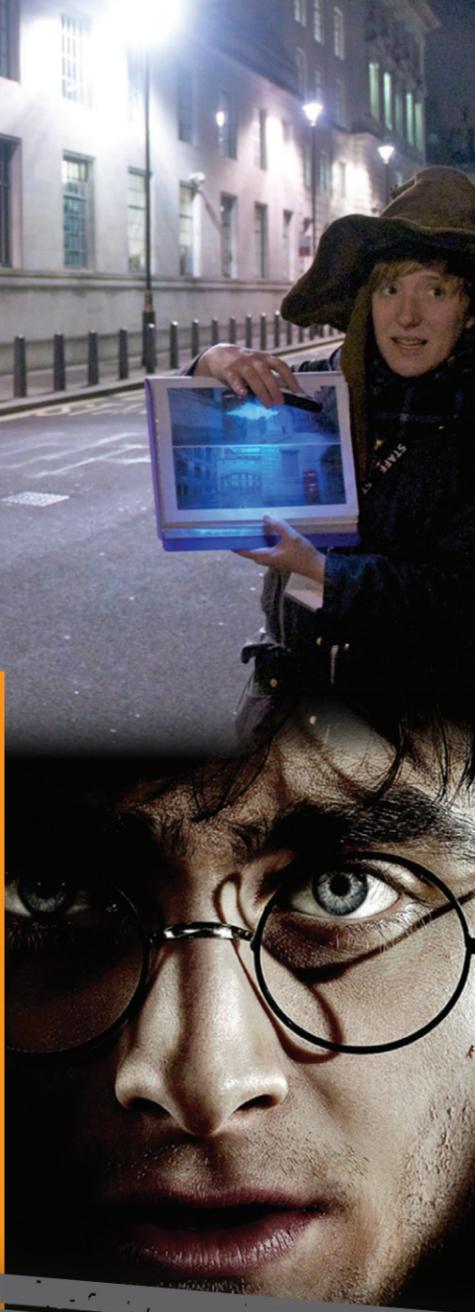
Although the tour isn't specifically a tour of London, you do encounter

several iconic landmarks such as the Millennium Bridge and the Houses of Parliament, allowing tourists and locals to see London within the context of the 'wizarding' world. With the use of visual aids and Suzie's colourful dialogue we were always able to recognise the locations and get a taste of the magic that had been created there.

Suzie's interaction with her audience was only one of the aspects that made the tour a success. Customer service is so often neglected, but Muggle Tours seems to have nailed it. Beginning with the confirmation emails listing unusual Potter facts to get us 'into the spirit' and ending with a personal 'thank-you' email, complete with a recipe for butter beer, the whole experience was consistent in its fun, enthusiasm and friendly attitude.



The tour takes a turn up Diagon Alley



PEOPLE POWER

A big challenge for any business is hiring the right people. Alana and Rachel quiz Hana Potter on how she chooses, trains and treats her guides

FYM: What qualities do you look for when hiring guides for Muggle Tours? They have to be fans - that's a priority. They also definitely need to have read all the books. Actors in particular suit this role really well; they're a personal preference of mine probably because of their confidence. After seeing a candidate's CV I give them a call. If I think they have potential I'll get them in for an interview. I'll give them an extract from the script and they present it to me, to give me an indication of what they would be like as a guide.

FYM: How do you train new guides? We're hoping you use some sort of intense grueling Potter camp Sadly not! I begin by giving new guides a set script. They learn it and present the entire tour to me, so I can make sure they are ready for members of the public.

FYM: Harry Potter appeals to such a wide age group. How do you entertain both adults and children? Once guides become familiar with the script they can embellish and expand on different parts, depending on who is on the tour. For example, if the tour contains mostly children it becomes tailored more to that age group. Children always love to get involved. Lots of them dress up - I love that! But that's not to say we haven't had adults who

have got equally enthusiastic! On one of my tours a 30-something man turned up in a full wizard costume given to him by his wife, who didn't dress up at all! I do love it when people dress up, although the kids do look a lot cuter than the adults.

FYM: Clearly Muggle Tours appeals to hardcore fans, but how do your guides engage those who come along who aren't? In the past it wasn't as well tailored to people who weren't massive *Harry Potter* fans. But after a few reviews on TripAdvisor, saying that the tour was too Potter-focused, we now also include information about interesting sites in London which are en route.

FYM: So you altered your tours based on just a few reviews on Tripadvisor? Yes, I read all the reviews and I pay special attention to negative reviews as I can learn from them. However, I have to accept that with a customer service-based business you aren't going to be able to please everyone. It's hard not to take it personally when you get negative feedback but it's a learning curve and all you can do is adjust as you go along.

FYM: With new types of Harry Potter tours emerging all the time how do you manage to stay ahead of the competition? Personally I don't think it's healthy to worry about competition too much. I've just always tried to do what I'm doing as well as I possibly can. ■



From left: Hana, Alana, Rachel, Greg, Vithurshan

WORDS BY ALANA O'SULLIVAN AND RACHEL GOACHER