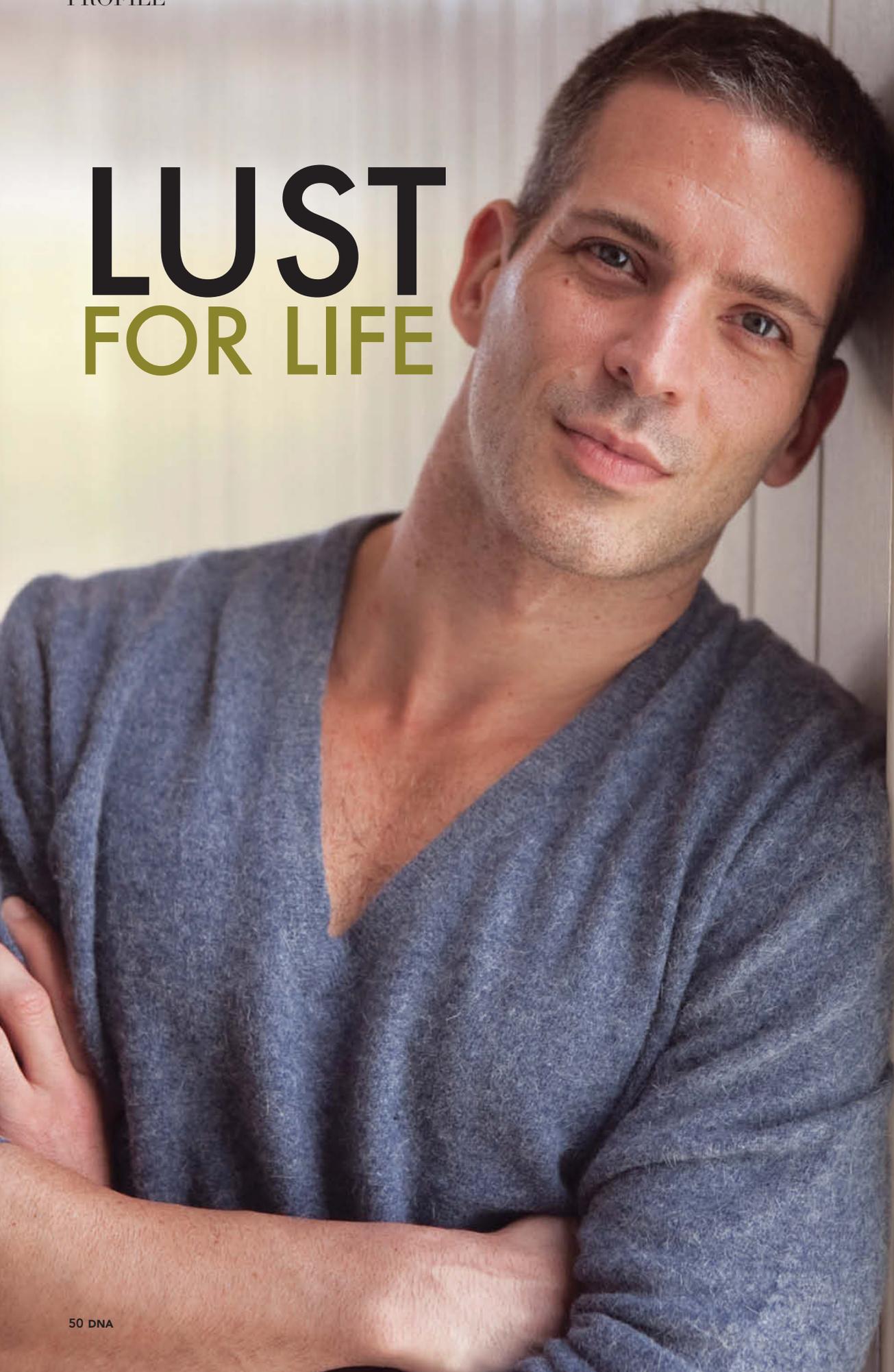


PROFILE

LUST FOR LIFE



PORTRAIT PHOTOGRAPHY NICOLAS SMITH

A world traveller, bon vivant and former Mr Gay World, Carlos Melia has been everywhere, tasted everything and met everybody... and shows no signs of slowing down.

DNA: What was it like to be named Mr Gay International (now Mr Gay World) in 2008?

Carlos Melia: The experience was rewarding in many ways but it also took a lot out of me. On the positive side was travelling around the world supporting LGBT-related causes. On the negative side, my personal life became public in a way I wasn't prepared for. I wasn't trained to cope with the exposure and occasional media harassment, but in the end I learned how to handle that. It has helped me in my personal and professional life.

So, having the title change you?

Absolutely. I grew as a person, as a public figure and as a professional. When I decided to enter the contest, representing Argentina, I was representing much more than that. I've always been outspoken, both within the gay world and outside. In some ways, along with a few others, I pioneered gay travel to South America. I took part in Mr Gay International to create awareness, talking aloud about the misconceptions about being gay.

You became a member of the Mr Gay World board were the producer for the delegates from all the Americas for three years. What was that like?

Wonderful years, though a very difficult task in many ways. You will not believe how difficult it is to find the right candidate willing to publicly come out in their local community

“I am not born for one corner. The whole world is my native land...”

and represent their country. Then there were the language barriers and funding restrictions. Countries like Brazil have a very well-run Mr Gay competition, but others are still a long way from that. That said, South America always has a very strong presence and my candidates always ranked among the top five.

What's your fondest memory of your time with the Mr Gay World organisation?

There are so many... in Oslo we were officially hosted by the Nobel Prize Foundation and welcomed with joy and respect. The following year in Manila we went to one of the poorest communities and helped them rebuild one of their schools, bringing furniture, books, school materials and food. The faces of the children and their parents are a memory I still have in my mind. They could not have cared less whether we were gay or straight.

One very personal moment was in 2010 when I escorted the Chinese contestant to the airport, to a flight back to uncertainty. His situation had become public and there was

fears he was going to be imprisoned upon arrival back in China. To stand at Oslo Airport and hug him and say goodbye, seeing the strength and conviction in his eyes, made me sure what we are doing is worthwhile. I knew we were more than just a beauty pageant, as some people call us. These moments are moving and groundbreaking.

Mr Gay World, China made a lasting impression on you?

Yes, indeed! Xindai Muye taught me you have to fight for what you think is right, to be loud and proud of who you are as a human being.

What was your early life in Argentina like?

I was born in Buenos Aires, but I was raised all over the world. My father was a commercial pilot and I've spent more time on planes than you can imagine. I've lived almost all over the world from Iran to Panama and United States to Australia, among many others. I call myself a true citizen of the world. I live by this phrase from Seneca: "I am not born for one corner. The whole world is my native land..."

What are some of your favourite destinations?

My top five, in no particular order, are Hong Kong, South Africa, Argentina, Italy and New Zealand. But this keeps changing as I travel and discover new destinations. Right now I am in Thailand for a month. It has been an amazing experience with so many highlights like Phuket, Krabi, Chaing Mai, Chaing Rai,

the Golden Triangle and amazing Bangkok, which has changed and grown so much since my last visit more than 10 years ago.

How was coming out? Were your family accepting?

My coming out was very natural and seamless. Many people laugh, but I always say that I knew I was gay since I was three years old and never hid that feeling or tried to fight it. My family and friends were all accepting.

You have been based in New York for several years. Is that now home?

Home is Buenos Aires and it always will be. New York is my playground and where I do business. It's still the centre of the world if you want to make a name for yourself and your business. I feel very comfortable in New York, but I cannot say I am settled there, since I am always on the road exploring new destinations.

I am now spending a season in London, but it won't be my permanent base. London is the chic, boutique and cosmopolitan version of New York. For a globetrotter like me, London

is the perfect hub to connect to the world.

Madrid is considered the gay hot spot of Europe at the moment. Do you love Spain?

I lived in Spain for four years. I don't do very well with "hot spots". By the time they become hot spots, I've already moved on. That's what I do for a living. But, yes, I enjoy my times in Spain. My favourite areas are Santiago, Bilbao, Barcelona and Palma de Mallorca

What's most important to the gay traveller?

Gay travellers nowadays are looking to travel mainstream, being respected and valued. They do not want to seclude themselves to gay districts, gay suppliers or gay destinations. Destinations that welcome LGBT tourists are the ones leading. There's a big difference between promoting to the gay community and welcoming the gay community. As a gay traveller I want to support those destinations where I feel respected, welcomed and appreciated – and I cannot say that about many of the so-called gay destinations.

You've built a career as a travel consultant. That sounds glamorous but is it hard work?

Yes and a big yes! I create experiences for my clients and every single service and supplier I recommend has been tested by me personally. This takes me to all corners of the world.

That's the main reason my clients are so loyal – because they trust me. They know I'm very knowledgeable.

You also review restaurants and hotels... surely that's a lot of fun, too?

Yes, I have been doing this for over 10 years. My editorial line is that, although I remain fully independent, I don't do bad reviews. If I don't like it, I don't even talk about it. But if you ask me in private about my bad experiences, I might warn you.

Do you eat out every night?

[Laughs] Yes. I think I have been out every night for the last five months. I have a complete fetish with hotels and waking up in the morning for breakfast is heaven to me. I try all sorts of restaurants, from the top-rated Michelin Star restaurants to street stands. I love food, from the fancy and luxurious to the basic and very local. But I must admit that at night I get very spoiled and I truly enjoy my glass of wine in a nice venue and atmosphere.

Is it hard to be completely objective when reviewing a restaurant or a hotel?

Yes and no. It's difficult to dissociate who you are and what you like, and put it in perspective for the rest of the world. What I like, you might hate. But after more than 20 years sending people all over the world and listening to their feedback, I think I've managed to understand what my clients look for.

What makes one hotel or restaurant stand out from another?

Experience, experience and experience. Then attitude, location, service, crowd and attention to details. >>

PROFILE

>> When you're at home, what do you cook?

I'm very basic. During the week I have chicken breast with spinach and cherry tomatoes. Sunday is always pasta.

How important is social media to your work?

Highly important. I've been using it now, with several different platforms, for more than 10 years. At first I was called crazy and told I was wasting my time – and I still am. Most people are still afraid of social media and most companies underestimate the value of online networking. This goes way beyond Facebook or Twitter – those are the basics. I am known and classified by peers as a new-age travel agent. I work remotely and can give you advice based on experience.

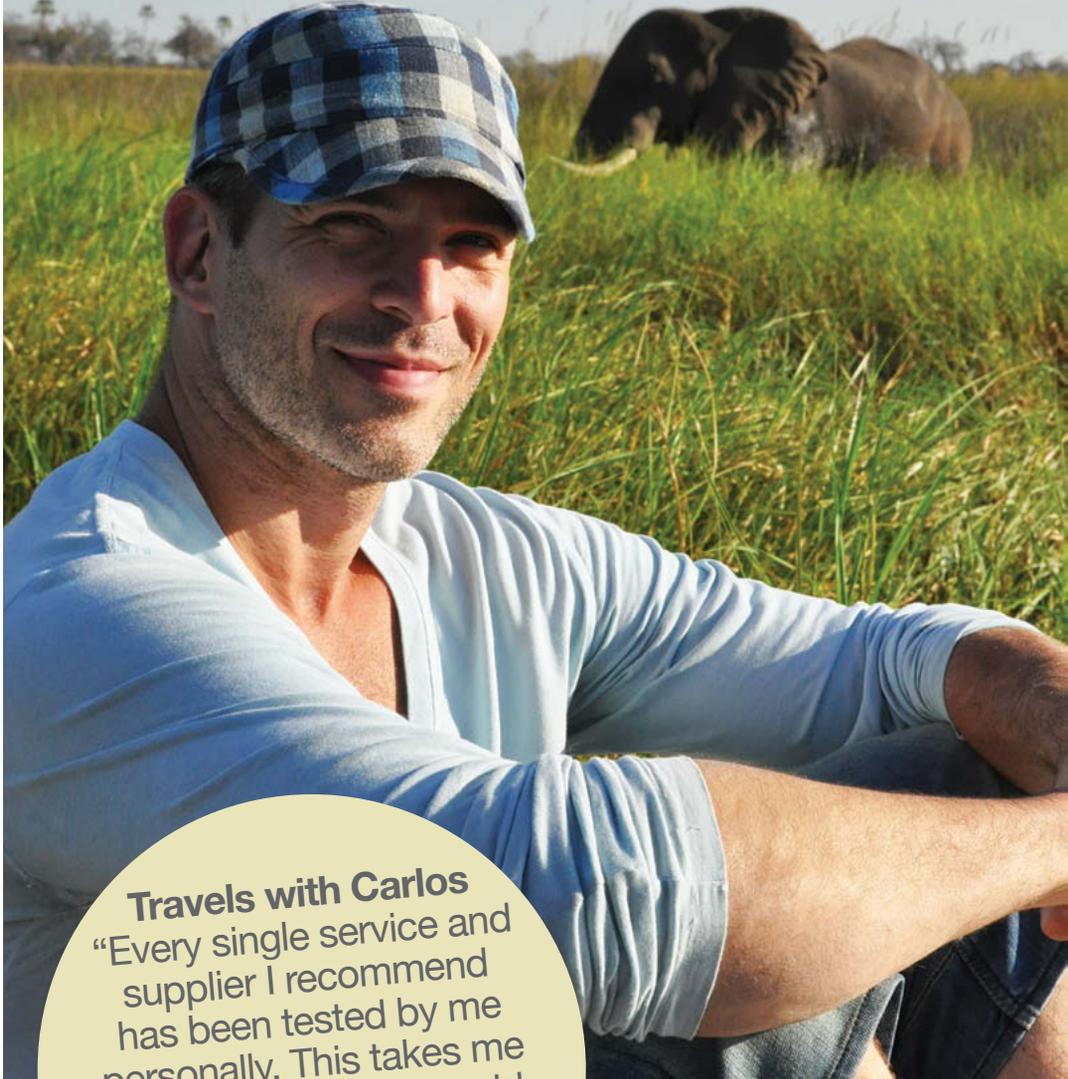
You've added gay wedding planner to your services. Have you had any gay Bridezillas?

Not yet, unfortunately. I think it would be, at least once, a fun and memorable experience to live that. I can be a bit of a Bridezilla myself and I work well under pressure. At the moment I'm working on several gay weddings, which, so far, have been great. Seeing them on this special day, surrounded by family and friends to celebrate their love and union, is a day I am proud of being part of.

Do you have any interest in being a father?

I would love to but not at the moment. My life of travelling is too unstable for a child. Maybe in the near future. ★

For more on Carlos Melia, travel, tourism, hospitality and niche marketing consultant visit carlosmeliablog.com



Travels with Carlos
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