

# Wild at heart

Anthropologist and founder of Nepalese beauty company Wild Earth, Carroll Dunham was recently in Dubai to introduce her products, where Aquarius had a chance to meet up for a chat.

TEXT: LORRAINE CHANDLER



NEPAL HAS THE lowest GDP and the highest number of missing people in the world. It has one of the world's highest maternal and infant fatality rates and is a harshly patriarchal country where women carry the burden of poverty. Not many Ivy League women graduates would choose to live there, set up a company, and foster six Nepalese children.

But then 42-year old Carroll Dunham is not an ordinary woman. A Princeton graduate in anthropology, she learned Tibetan and Nepali in a Buddhist nunnery 20 years ago. She then spent months helping women pick herbs and carry buckets of manure as she quizzed them about love, men and sexuality for an anthropology study.

She has written several books and magazine articles, and has worked with the BBC, National Geographic and others on documentary films.

A confirmed Buddhist, Carroll has been seduced by the East over the years. She has studied Tibetan and Ayurvedic herbs and treatment therapies for 14 years, and developed herbal ranges for the Body Shop.

Now she runs her own company in

Kathmandu. Wild Earth produces handcrafted Himalayan herbal products, sourcing herbs from community-owned forest groups, and indirectly employing women from over 100 homes, in addition to 30 women who work on making Wild Earth's herbal soaps, aromatic pillows, body and essential oils, amulets and sachets.

## Balancing the body

It all started when Carroll was doing a thesis on 'Women in economic development' in Nepal. "Going to Nepal for me, was like the moment in 'The Wizard of Oz' when Dorothy sees her world change from black and white to colour. There are over 36 ethnic groups there, in a place the size of Rhode Island, and their culture of storytelling is very strong. I was fascinated by traditional medicine and started studying with Amchis (traditional doctors) and Baidyas (Ayurvedic doctors).

"In Ayurveda, we believe that the body is a microcosm of the earth, and so by calling the company 'Wild Earth', I also wanted to say 'Wild Body'. There are rivers in the body; a flow of vitality that is not recognised by

Western medicine but that you can feel yourself after a vigorous walk or swim."

### Giving something back

"As an anthropologist, I felt I was always taking from the women I was interviewing," says Carroll ruefully. "But one day I turned around and asked: 'What can I do for you?' It turned out that they needed money. I had been developing an Ayurvedic range for the Body Shop, so I asked Anita Roddick to come and see what I could do. She suggested that I look at creating something fragrant."

"I spoke to Amchis and Baidyas and was elated to discover Himalayan aromatherapy. The Himalayas are the world's biggest herb garden, so I realised we could utilise the abundant herbs as a source of income, through setting up a herbal products company that would support fair trade and sustainable harvesting of Himalayan herbs."

Carroll continues: "Because we're based in Nepal, I felt people might think we would produce something cheap but I didn't want to go that route. How do you value a woman's hands? Instead, we went for quality and luxury, marketing our range as the finest handcrafted herbal products in the Himalayas. We used recipes 1500 years old, and looked at preserving old traditional recipes that had not been written down."

Wild Earth's first order was Ayurvedic pillows for the Body Shop in Switzerland.

At one stage, the company had a massive order of 126 tons of Love Pillows to Germany, something Carroll laughs heartily at, explaining that the pillows use traditional aphrodisiac recipes. She points out that recent research at Yale shows that the effect of scent on the brain while sleeping is not to be underestimated.

"I'm a storyteller," says Carroll truthfully, "and there's a story behind most of our products. We developed our Hot Springs range of herbal soaps and aromatherapy oil kits because the Nepalese believe in their medicinal values. There was a bathing festival every September in Lhasa, when a particular sacred star would make an annual appearance. People would open up water tanks and bathe in the starlit water, believing the experience would protect them throughout the year."

"We also use a special herb called Spikenard that grows 8,000 ft above sea level. It's so precious that it was used in Cleopatra's perfumes, and also in the oil used by Mary Magdalene to anoint Jesus' feet."

"The bulk of our products go to spas," she explains, "and we have managed to set up arrangements in 40 countries, mostly in five star hotels. Income generation is our main goal. The Nepalese people are only surviving on remittances from relatives, so herb collecting can really make a difference to people's incomes."

### A tough life

Nepal is not an easy country to be a woman in. Carroll once wrote a book about polyandry, where women marry not just one man, but his brothers too, and they all live together in one house.

Says Carroll: "Women in Nepal live a very constrained life, despite the fact they have strong feisty personalities. Although I'm the founder of the company, when I go to the government offices, I have to bring my accountant, as they will not talk directly to me. I'm blessed because I've never been personally harassed."

But it is not just women who are at risk. Over the past two years during a conflict with the Maoists, the Nepalese army has been responsible for the largest number of reported forced disappearances in the world. "There was the recent heartbreaking story of Devi Sunuwar, who has become a symbol of the country's suffering," she says in an uncharacteristically subdued voice. "Her 18-year old niece was gang raped and killed. When Devi gave evidence of this, her own daughter was abducted and never seen again. We've had to harbour refugees from the conflict, but I have to play a very delicate role because I could be kicked out of the country any time."

Despite all this, Carroll is very much rooted in Nepal. Apart from her two children, Liam (9) and Galen (5) she and her





husband have brought up six foster Nepalese children, now aged between 19 and 28. As she leaves me, she is very excited to return home because her first 'grandchild' has just been born.

"Nepal is truly my spiritual home," says Carroll. "My prayers are that it returns to peace and that I will spend my old age in a rocking chair looking out at our 700 peach trees in Kathmandu."

### Trying out the treatments

"When was your last massage?" is almost on par with "When was your last hair cut?" as a question that you do not want to answer. Especially when your beauty therapist is 200 per cent more groomed than you are, and your last massage was before you got married.

As I lie on the massage table, I question why I haven't paid a bit more attention to my toenails and my hair-removing routines. I try to remember the last time I shaved, while listening to Heidi tell me about Wild Earth treatments.

She tells me that the Mountain Tsampa rub is a powerfully detoxifying and cleansing treatment using Tsampa barley after a refreshing oil massage. It sounds potentially embarrassing as it might be the first time I'd ever exfoliated properly.

The Himalayan healing stone massage is an ancient treatment described in Tibet's medical bible, the *Gui Shi*, and promises to enable the smooth flow of *chi* (life force energy) in the

body. It sounds interesting but in the end, I simply can't resist the Yab-Yum massage, especially when I hear that the Yab and Yum oils are aphrodisiacs. I wonder if I will leap up from the massage table to dash home and test out its efficacy.

Yab and Yum are like the Chinese Yin and Yang. Yab is the male energy force while Yum is the female energy. The Yab-Yum massage harmonises and balances the flow of *chi* on the body, or so she tells me. Ideally, couples should do it (the massage) together, but as this doesn't happen in Dubai, I have to be content with a solo massage.

That's fine by me as I soon drift into a pleasant torpor under Heidi's healing hands. Yet I soon notice that even in my limited experience, this massage is a bit out of the ordinary. Instead of simply running along my body, her hands are performing graceful sweeping movements. I feel tremendously relaxed, but at the same time have an energy flowing through me.

When questioned, she tells me that the massage resembles *t'ai chi* movements, and focuses on awakening your inner vitalities. I certainly feel the benefits as I hover between deep relaxation and refreshed alertness.

Men and women's massages differ as the Yab-Yum treatment aims to restore your balance. My Yum oil is rather yummy, and smells woody and relaxing, whereas when I take a sniff of the Yab oil for men, it seems more uplifting. There

might be some truth in the idea that we women could do with a calming treatment.

Every time I think the massage must be nearly over – surely it's not natural to enjoy yourself this much – Heidi finds another spot that needs some massage. She tells me that she's working on my *shiatsu* points near my ears, to balance my gall bladder, and on my inner thighs to balance my spleen and liver. All I know is that I feel terrific.

She finishes up by cradling my head in her hands and moving it gently from side to side, removing all that stress in my neck. It is such a nurturing movement that I feel sad when she finishes.

And yet I can't complain. I've had nearly two hours of what should have been a 1 hour 30 minute massage, and I feel completely revitalised. After exiting in a pleasant haze, I enter the lift and smile vaguely at a fellow passenger. A few minutes later he is asking me out, despite the fact that he looks 10 years younger than I do.

My mind casts back to all those body spray ads on TV, and I can imagine a posse of men chasing me around town, desperate to get at my Yum oil. I say no, smile and speed home to my husband to test the effects of my treatment.

Wild Earth products and treatments are available at Jebel Ali Golf Resort and Spa. Tel: 04-8836000. For more information on upcoming outlets, contact Spa Resources International on 04-3367100.

