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## Chris Burch, Billionaire Investor Extraordinaire

Chris Burch shares his approach to investing and talks about his favourite investment - Nihiwatu, an eco-luxury resort he built on the Indonesian island of Sumba

By Tara Loader Wilkinson

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Like most billionaires, Chris Burch, co-founder of Tory Burch and CEO of private equity group Burch Creative Capital, is wired differently from mere mortals.

His is a classic story amongst the world's top 0.001%. Growing up in Pennsylvania, he was an F-Grade student. His father, a successful mining supplies distributor, employed him in odd jobs from the age of 13. By the time he reached high school he was well attuned to the nuances of commerce, first flogging hotdogs and later sweatshirts to his peers. Over the next decade, his sweatshirt brand Eagle's Eye soared to a valuation of US\$140 million, and Burch never looked back.

Today at the age of 62, Burch has not lost his stamina for doing deals. He spends around two thirds of his time in his pyjamas on a private jet, flying from Sumba to Silicon Valley meeting promising entrepreneurs in need of capital. If their project excites him, he will invest.



Chris Burch

"For me, the main thing is exercising my creativity and emotionality to do really cool s-t all around the world with interesting people," said Burch.

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Some of his recent successful investments include online office retailer Poppin, online jeweller BaubleBar and bottled water company Voss. Last year, he partnered with Ellen DeGeneres to launch her lifestyle collection, E.D. Some of his ventures have not come off, like his self-branded clothing retailer, C. Wonder, which closed this year after three years in business. But like any seasoned investor, he moves on.

"Nothing in the world depresses me; I don't give a s-t about anything," he explains. "I will do any kind of deal, whether it's technology, apparel, pre-fab housing. I'll go into anything that excites me. It's bringing to light a consumer product which people need but don't realise they need. It has to be very disruptive, it has to have a high upside financially, and it has to have incredible people to work with."

Burch says his favourite investment to date has been the acquisition of the beautiful island of Sumba in Indonesia, where he has spent the last two years building Nihiwatu, a "disruptive" eco-luxury resort where rates start at US\$900 a night. The resort has become a big hit with the celebrity crowd, and high-profile guests include fashion's Hermes family, the D'Omano family of Sisley Cosmetics, Lorenz Bäumer, the chief jewellery designer for Louis Vuitton, pop star Pink and William Van Cutsem, the godfather of Prince George.



Mendaka Villa, Nihiwatu

The island is home to the last remaining Christian Animist tribes, an ancient indigenous people who believe in the spirits of animals and plants. Sumba is simultaneously one of the culturally richest and financially poorest islands in the Indonesian Archipelego, and when Burch visited for the first time he had a vision.

"It's about the size of Massachusetts and very wild, with only one small surf shack at the time. It gave us a beautiful freedom to do what we wanted," he explained.

It was South African-born hotelier James McBride, the driving force behind the project, who introduced him to the island. Nihiwatu at the time was a small surf resort with cult status founded in the eighties by Claude and Petra Graves, a die-hard surfing couple from New Jersey. They established a charitable foundation in tandem with the resort to aid the local tribes.



Burch bought the island and turned the surf resort into a luxury hotel with 24 thatched-roof Sumbanese-style eco villas, run 90 percent by local people. Today, all of the profits from the hotel go back to the local tribes, says Burch, as they are the element that makes the island totally unique.

"The feeling when you leave the resort and hike for ten miles through waterfalls and beautiful forests, you see these wonderful smiling people in ancient villages (and) it makes your heart soar. For my children and other kids it's an exciting place to be. When you see the kids in the schools and provide books for them, or contribute to the Malaria clinic, that's what makes this place special."

Nihiwatu is only the beginning. Burch has plans to develop eco-luxury hotels with a "giving spirit" all over the world, starting in Flores, Indonesia, and the Dominican Republic. "We'll consider a hotel anywhere we find somewhere remote and beautiful."



Lulu Villa, Nihiwatu

Burch spends eight weeks of the year at Nihiwatu in total – a long time for him to be in one place, he admits. He has six children who love surfing, and he takes them and their friends on holiday with him. He has just had a huge owners' villa built; overlooking the beautiful 2.5-kilometre white beach, Raja Mendaka has five individual one-bedroom villas, its own waterfall and a hidden massage cave.

"I'm happiest when I'm in love, or having a deep conversation with my kids. If I could change my life it would be to find more balance and spend more time relaxing with my kids on holiday," said Burch.

But even while he's on holiday he works 24/7, and Burch says he is "pretty exhausted."

"I travel so much, sometimes I can't even find my apartment because I don't know where I am. I'm like a little boy being guided by people wherever I go. But I know I am very lucky; I have six kids, great friends and am emotionally satisfied."



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