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## Alexandre Mars: High-tech philanthropist looks to tap the wealth of entrepreneurs

Sarah Murray

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Paris-born Alexandre Mars may live in New York, but he is never far from French pastry. He rents the basement offices of his philanthropic start-up from the owner of the Soho branch of Ladurée, whose tea salon on the ground floor of the building is where the former technology entrepreneur often finds himself at the end of the day.

Mr Mars, who founded the Epic Foundation in 2014 to support children and youth around the world, has spent much of his career crossing the Atlantic after having been raised in France and the US by French parents. Like his father, Mr Mars is an entrepreneur.

His ventures have led him to set up shop in France and the US,

something that has left its mark on his accent — it still sounds strongly French to me, but also has a distinctly American in flavour.

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Speaking with an energy that suggests he is a man keen to get things done, Mr Mars began his career in Paris, launching a concert promotion company when he was 17 before founding one of France's first web agencies while still studying at HEC Paris, the business school.

He sold his businesses and moved back to the US, only to return to Europe again to start Phonevalley, the mobile agency he would sell to the French advertising company Publicis Groupe in 2007, and ScrOOn, a social media management system he sold to BlackBerry in 2013.

Throughout this time, however, he had one ultimate goal — to become a philanthropist. “When I started my first venture, I knew I wanted to change the world,” he says. “And I realised that the best way to change the world was to have skills, resources or networks.”

But first, he took time out to think, travelling around the world with his wife and children. Back in New York, Mr Mars put to use the money he had earned from his success as an entrepreneur and implemented the lessons learnt. The first was how to build a brand: “After the inception of my web agency, I had business cards printed and I sat waiting in my office for someone to call — but of course no one called . . . I realised that I needed to do something to get people to trust me”.

His second lesson was the need to adapt: “An entrepreneur is a doer — we act, we do, we move and afterwards we know we have to adapt,” he says. “So, with every single start-up I had to change something.”

It seems fitting then that the office of his foundation — in a basement with minimal furniture — has the temporary feel of a growing start-up.

Mr Mars wants to break the mould of traditional philanthropy and has amassed a range of partners, from corporations, venture capitalists and private banks to media companies and talent agencies, to help him.

He is developing tools, such as mobile apps and webcams, to give donors a new way of choosing which organisations to support and to allow them to track the impact of their investments.

“I have this disruptive mindset,” says Mr Mars. “And from finding the first employee and building the team to creating the logo, what I'm doing is similar to building my other four start-ups.”

Unlike many philanthropists, Mr Mars's approach is not simply to give away his own money. He is using it to unleash the generosity of a new generation of wealthy entrepreneurs, many of whom he knows have money to donate but are unsure how to do it effectively.

“I’ve met many people who made money in the past 10 years,” he says. “When you start having conversations with them about giving, you learn that even if they want to give, it’s difficult because there’s a lack of time, trust or knowledge.”

If Mr Mars wants to inspire wealthy young donors to give away their money, these talks will be vital. And, given the proximity of his office to the café upstairs, it seems likely many of them will take place over a French pastry.

## On the desk

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There is much about Mr Mars’s office that reflects his global outlook and the time he spent travelling with his family before setting up the Epic Foundation.

But it is the object he bought back from Mongolia that bears particularly fond memories. During their time travelling in this vast nation, Mr Mars and his family stayed in a *ger*, one of the circular tents in which Mongolian nomads live.



On a shelf in his office is a miniature *ger*, which reminds him of the time he spent travelling across the Gobi desert.

Of course, the accommodation was not always comfortable. And the cuisine offered by the nomads with whom he stayed included fermented mare’s milk and traditional hard cheese, neither of which are easy on western palates.

The experience left Mr Mars with cultural and business insights.

Dealing with the unusual culinary tastes was similar to creating business plans, he says. “You need to adapt”.

Roughing it during the trip helped him as a parent, too, opening his children’s eyes to the ways in which other people live.

“We went from sleeping in the Four Seasons to staying in a *ger*,” he says.

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