

Extract from an article in the Saturday Telegraph Magazine  
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When, at the age of 32, Charlotte di Vita received a letter telling her that she was to be awarded the MBE, she almost passed it unopened to her accountant. 'The doorbell rang at 7.30am,' she remembers, 'and there was a black van with On Her Majesty's Service written on the side of it, and I thought, "Oh my God, have I paid my tax?"' Two days later, she finally looked inside the envelope, and was so astonished that she rang Buckingham Palace three times to check that they had got the right person.

Charlotte's award was in recognition of her extraordinary work as an entrepreneur/philanthropist. Since it was founded in 1992, her company, Trade plus Aid, has set up projects in 12 countries, helping deprived communities to become self-sufficient by finding new markets for their traditional crafts. Its profits have put famine-hit farmers back on their feet, built schools where there were none, and created refuges for the homeless.

Charlotte's biggest success has been a factory in rural China which produces miniature teapots

using an almost forgotten enamelling technique. In a desperately poor village she was able to provide jobs for 94 people, whose work astonished buyers from Harrods and Fortnum & Mason. Within a year, the factory's turnover had increased tenfold: it now employs 336 villagers.

Setting it up was far from easy. Charlotte had to contend with not only Chinese bureaucracy, but also with Chinese horoscopes. 'They asked me what animal I was,' she explains, 'so I gave them my date of birth and they went off, and one of them came back just *white*. It turned out that there is one sign, the fire horse, which rotates only every 60 years – and fire horse women were traditionally killed, because they are totally unconventional and can't live with any form of authority. These men had an argument that went on for hours about whether they could allow a fire horse to come in and start a factory.'

The term makes her sound unfeasibly scary: in reality, 'enthusiastic thoroughbred' would be nearer the mark. Now 36, with her wavy blonde

hair, blue-grey eyes and wide grin, she has the kind of glamour and charisma which, in the charity world, is more often found at Leicester Square film premieres than among the world's poorest people. But 'totally unconventional' is accurate enough – her two attempts to do normal jobs, at Jaeger and Salomon Brothers, were failures. 'I cannot do something if I don't find inspiration in it. Within a week, I felt like I was drowning.'

Even as a child she felt compelled to help the less fortunate: at the age of nine, she persuaded her classmates to be silent for three days to raise money for charity. By the time she left Edinburgh University (with a degree in PPE), ecology was top of her agenda, so she persuaded the Overseas Development Administration to let her organise a conference in Brazil on rainforest conservation. When the Prince of Wales agreed to attend, Charlotte discovered the power of royal patronage: 'I got straight in to see President Collor; his wife made me her new best friend, and when I said I couldn't find a venue with enough security, he said,

"We'll close the Central Bank for three days". The conference raised £825,000 to develop a conservation park which, Charlotte notes proudly, has since grown to cover an area slightly larger than Britain.

Charlotte next badgered De Beers to let her assess their environmental programme in southern Africa. From there she travelled to Ghana, where the idea of Trade plus Aid was born. Falling ill with dysentery, Charlotte was cared for by a farming community which, she discovered, was on the verge of being driven from the land by drought. She had £800 with her, but felt that she could do more than simply give it to the villagers to buy seed; so she asked a group of local carvers to make her 800 pendants in exchange, in the shape of traditional Ashanti statues. Back in England, she set about selling the pendants at street markets and fairs, and soon had orders for thousands more.

Not content with donating the profits to the Ghanaian community, Charlotte set out to find a sustainable market for the carvers, which she did by signing a deal with one of Japan's biggest mail-

order companies. Within two years, enough money had been made to ensure the survival of more than 6,000 farms supporting 25,000 people; Charlotte also expanded her products and suppliers to take in 18 communities in Africa and South America.

The problem with the Trade plus Aid equation is that the business side can be all-consuming. Last summer, however, she entered into a partnership with a German company, Goebel, which gives her the freedom to concentrate for the next five years on finding projects to spend T+A's money on. 'I'm looking forward to spending *all* of it,' she says: 'I just don't know what on, or where, or how.'

This may sound vague, but in the unconventional world of Charlotte di Vita, serendipity has a way of providing solutions. 'Because you're not absorbed in a home and office,' she explains, 'you meet extraordinary people all the time: you're following a path, although it may not look like it, and somewhere all these things come together.' She mentions a monk in Burma who wants to revive a colonial tea plantation to support a persecuted

ethnic minority; 'And it happens that I have a friend who's a tea expert and is doing similar things in Bhutan – and so the process goes on.'

There have been historical coincidences, too. After her first visit to Ghana, Charlotte discovered that her great-great-grandfather – a Bristol merchant – had followed the same route to trade for palm oil. When she presented one of her teapots to the Queen, an enamelling tradition taught to the Chinese by British royal craftsmen three centuries earlier came home to Buckingham Palace from a village in the middle of nowhere.

Her latest projects include providing medical care for street children living in the sewers in Mongolia, and for lepers in China, where the disease is officially deemed not to exist and sufferers are confined by local Chinese custom in a gravel pit. 'They're highly motivated people, but they can't plant crops because they can't use their limbs. We're going to see if we can bring in simple things like pig-rearing, rabbit-rearing, or whatever.'

For more information, visit [www.tradeplusaid.com](http://www.tradeplusaid.com)

# Fair player

From Chinese teapot enamellers to Mongolian street children living in sewers, thousands in the developing world are benefiting from Charlotte di Vita's Trade plus Aid initiative. By Anthony Gardner. Photograph by Eva Vermandel