

PETER ALEXANDER

There's Peter Alexander, the colourful pyjama-man brand, and then there's plain Peter, age 41, a multi-millionaire who still dresses like a teenager, dislikes growing old and is wary of love

Although I consider myself an Aussie, I have a deep connection to South Africa. I was born there, but moved to Australia when I was six months old. When I was growing up, I visited South Africa about 30 times in my school holidays. It was always a time of fun; no stress and no responsibilities. I was very close to my grandparents there and, as a first-generation Australian, always appreciated our history in South Africa. I guess it meant family to me. **I didn't enjoy school because I was dyslexic and, in those days, people didn't know what that was.** We had to spell out Australia before we left the classroom, and I would always be the last person to leave because I couldn't do it. I was sent to a psychologist, who thought I might have a mental problem. Eventually, they figured out it was dyslexia and I was sent to a school that had remedial classes.

I thought I was just dumb. And it was hard changing schools; I couldn't make friends because I was insecure about the whole thing. I also had a really bad stutter. The one teacher who didn't make me feel stupid – who told me I was just different – was my Grade Four teacher, Mr Davidson. When I made my first million [dollars], he was one of the first people I called to say, "Guess what? I'm doing well." And Davo remembered me.

My spelling and handwriting is still shocking.

I remember crying to my dad and saying, "What's going to happen to me? How

am I going to get through life?" But he just said, "Don't worry, that's what secretaries are for." He said he knew I'd be OK, and that I'd find my place in life. I proved him right, although I don't know if he's watching over me and sees what I'm achieving.

Dad died of lung cancer in 1987.

It was awful – just like one of those bad TV movies. I remember getting a phone call from my sister telling me

Dad had been rushed to hospital with pneumonia. I walked into the hospital to see Mum and Dad crying. When they told me [he was dying], it was like having the floor ripped out from underneath me. I was very close to Dad; it was such an awful time. He died three months later.

I had just started my [pyjama] business and Dad told me that I had to employ my mum and keep her busy. Perhaps it was my father's death that gave me the drive to get where I am, because a lot of fashion businesses do fail. There were lots of times I wish I could have asked his advice. Mum and I didn't really know what we were doing. It took me seven years to make any decent money and I'm sure that if Dad had been alive, it would have taken me a lot less time. **I used to say that I started Peter Alexander because I had slept around a lot when I was younger and thought everyone had really bad pyjamas.** Unfortunately, I didn't sleep around [laughs], but I did spot a gap in the nightwear market. It seemed there was stuff for virgins or tarts – and nothing in between.

There were people who ripped me off shockingly. I learnt about people that I didn't think existed; people who only go after the dollar and believe that all is fair in love and

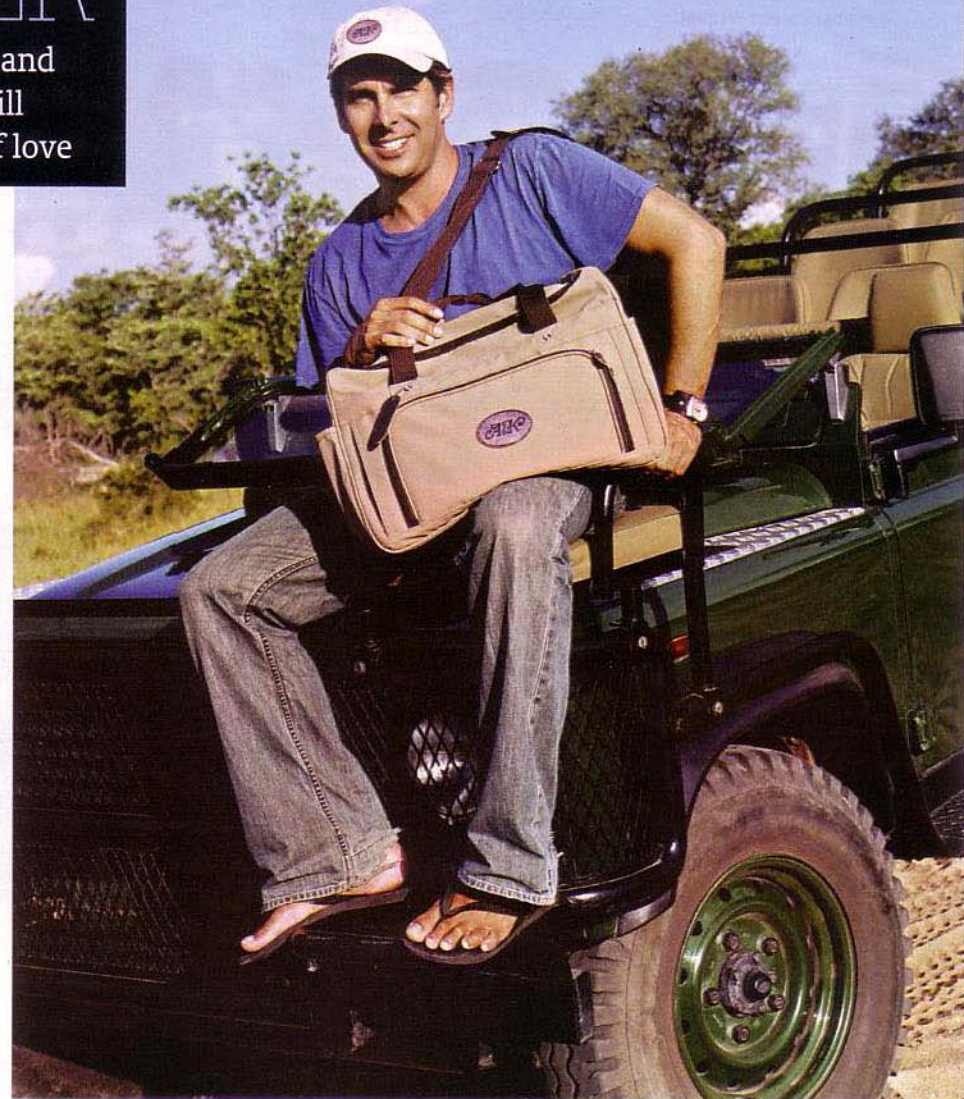
war, as far as business is concerned. It really shook my belief in human nature.

If there's a major drama, I give myself 24 hours to be a drama queen. I run around screaming that my life is finished, and then the next morning, I wake up,

deal with it and move on.

You could describe me as rich. Both financially and in terms of being proud of who I am and what I've achieved. I own my own home and don't have a mortgage, but I certainly don't drive a Rolls-Royce or fly first class. I could if I wanted to, but I don't need to.

My only extravagance is cashmere. I don't wear designer clothes, but I have this thing for cashmere. I don't



know if it is a sexual fetish or what, but it's just so beautiful.

[My dachshund] Penny passed away last November. She was a huge part of my life; almost too big. Looking back on it, I let myself get a little carried away. I stopped doing things in my life that I shouldn't have, for her. She was a dog at the end of the day. I even sold my apartment so I could move to a house with a garden for Penny. I think of her like a first child; hopefully I will be a little more relaxed with the second one.

All my friends and family were amazed at how good I was after she died. I was hysterical at first, but then a friend of mine lost a child two days later and it put it all into perspective. It was so devastating, and I thought, "How can I carry on over a dog when my friend has just lost a child to cot death?"

I realised I didn't want to do the girl thing when I was about 12. I didn't know then that I was attracted to boys; just that I didn't want to do it

with girls. I've never made a secret [of my sexuality]. I don't think that anyone I would worry about cares. **I don't actually like love; it's scary. I'm a bit of a control freak and I like being in control of my emotions.** I've had my heart broken in the past and, as you get older, it's harder to give up your heart. You tend to keep it under lock and key. **I'm dating, but I'm not good at it.** I'm shy when it comes to meeting people and socialising; I just can't go and talk to anyone. I'm confident in a business situation because I'm Peter Alexander – the brand – but when I'm not at work, I'm just Peter. **I don't like getting older.** I have total 40-phobia – it freaks me out. I work in a business that is very youth-oriented and it starts to affect you; you start feeling not so worthy if you are older. But I still dress the same as I did when I was 20. My friends call me Peter Pan because I refuse to grow up.

JOANNE HAWKINS