

Why this travel ceo wants his customers to take giant risks

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As told to Ashlea Halpern by Tom Morgan of The Adventurists.

I was studying abroad in the Czech Republic in 2001, majoring in art, which is a degree in how to be unemployed. I had a lot of free time. My buddy Jewels and I bought an old car and tried to think of the stupidest place we could drive to, which was Mongolia. We set off without spare clothes or preparation, kind of deliberately. I think we had a packet of cheese, some smokes, and a hunting knife. We never reached Mongolia; the Iranians thought we were smelly and wouldn't let us in. But we had a lot of fun, and the trip inspired my idea for the Mongol Rally.

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It's a 10, 000-kilometer race from England to Mongolia that you can do only in a small, shit car (or motorcycle under 125cc). I set up a website in 2003 and pretended everything was more organized than it was. Sixteen people showed up for the first rally in 2004. The following year saw 40 teams, and then 200, and I had to start hiring. In 2005, I set up an events company—now called —and made the decision to make it work. Now we have 15 full-time employees, 200 seasonal workers, and seven “ adventures” on offer, including The Ice Run [a Ural motorcycle trek across Siberia in winter] and The Icarus Trophy [considered the world's toughest powered paragliding event, held in the Western U. S.]. And we insist that every participant commits to raising money for charity. If you go to any other travel agent, they'll say, “ Come on an adventure with us; we'll look after you and keep you safe.” They're setting themselves up to be responsible for that person, to guide them. Our pitch is: We want participants to be responsible for their

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own decisions—where their choices have a real, genuine impact on their adventure and even their health. We work hard to stage everything but usually stay as far away from the event as we can.

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At the start, our biggest financial challenge was massive incompetence. The first time we did the [a 3, 500-kilometer tuk-tuk dash across India], in December 2005, I think we charged £97 a rickshaw, 30 teams entered, I collected money from only about half of them, and the whole event cost us £30, 000. I had to get a loan to cover our debt, which is when it hit me: What we were doing was high-risk. So as I worked to pay off the debt, I also started talking to lawyers. We've spent a lot of money on law firms, but not on defending ourselves; it's all preemptive. We've never been taken to court. People taking part in our events have to sign a 30-page agreement. Breaks, cuts, and bruises are common. [Two participants have died, in 2010 and 2012.] It's awful when anything like that happens. But then I see people's faces at the end of an adventure or meet with the charities that received some of the £7 million our events have raised, and I believe we should carry on. Today, we're actually quite cash-rich, because event participants pay in advance. That enables us to expand. In 2008, we launched our own visa agency, which now operates in Australia, New Zealand, Europe, and the U. S. We also do production for companies. For example, a gin brand wanted a new flavor, so we went deep into the Venezuelan rainforest and stayed with a tribe of Indians, built a distillery, and went around with a shaman to find

bark and plants to make nice jungle-based gin. We filmed it and produced the brand's content.

Our own marketing philosophy is simple: Letting the teams tell their story is way more powerful than advertising. You can see the enthusiasm vibrating out of people when they reach the finish line. We see massive growth in regions where we'd had a team participate the previous year. And I still personally test every adventure before we launch it; it's the main reason I love this job. Our culture is so risk-averse. People get nervous if their children leave the house without their phone, and you've got to take a course just to use a ladder. It's a bit farcical. We just say, "Start here, we hope you don't make it, it'll be awful, probably you'll get lost, and hopefully you'll break an arm." It's that experience—setting out without knowing where you're going and planning everything to the end—that I like. It's what humans need.