BUSINESS UNDER THREAT

AVI ORCHESTRATING A RADICAL LEAP TO THE LEFT
Ain’t no mountain high enough

Disney’s world reaps rewards built on passion alone

IT STARTED WITH A few hikes up and down the slopes of the Magaliesberg but it wasn’t long before Sean Disney wanted more. Today he’s MD of Adventure Dynamics International (ADI) and guides more than 14 mountain tours worldwide, including the seven summits – the highest mountain on each continent.

Although Disney (38) has a background in market research, it wasn’t long before climbing got in the way of work. “My previous employers wouldn’t give me leave to go climb mountains. Once I’d used up my 15 days, they asked me not to return. So I didn’t,” he says.

In 1996, Disney – together with business partner Alex Harris – started ADI with R7,50 and a passion for climbing. “But climbing is expensive,” says Disney. “The only way we could afford to climb was if we got a few clients and guided them. We built the business from there and it’s grown from strength to strength ever since.”

Today Disney is the sole owner of ADI, which has a turnover of R10m, guides between 300 and 500 clients/year and offers more than 17 mountain tour packages. “In short, ADI handles everything,” says Disney. “I’ll tell you when to climb, what it’s going to cost and I’ll organise all the logistics. Clients simply have to make sure they’re fit, healthy and have all the required equipment.”

The fees for packages can range from R2 000 for a weekend tour of the Drakensberg to R600 000 for a two-month expedition to Mount Everest. That fee includes flights, accommodation, food and beverages, mountain permits and additional guides. “Eventually, it all adds up,” says Disney.

At prices like this, it’s no wonder clients include top businessmen such as Lawrence Seeff, director of Seeff Properties, among others. “I generally deal with high profile business guys who are tired of sitting on a beach in Mauritius,” says Disney. “They’re adventurous, generally athletic and they want to do something that’s both achievable and satisfying. I have a
If you weren’t running ADI what would you rather be doing?
I’d open my own pizza/pasta restaurant.

What was your single biggest mistake?
I nearly died on Mount Aspiring in New Zealand. I slipped on the ice but managed to stop my fall five metres before a 2 000 ’foot drop. My mistake was slipping and the best thing I’ve ever done was stopping.

What really freaks you out?
Death and skydiving. Jumping from an aeroplane just doesn’t make sense to me.

What gets you up in the morning?
My three-year-old and two-month-old baby.

How do you motivate others?
I call a spade a spade and put things in perspective for others. It’s about keeping a clear head and imparting knowledge clearly and efficiently.

university education equivalent just by being in the hills with these guys. That’s invaluable knowledge and a lot of people don’t get that,” he says.

But would he do it all again? “This business is a mission,” says Disney. “I’d never start this business again. Ever.” Although he still enjoys his work, Disney cautions those looking to commercialise their hobbies. “You introduce a businesses side to your passion and although you may still enjoy certain parts, you’re now doing it day in, day out. It’s not necessarily a bad thing but it does change the scope of your passion.”

Some of Disney’s biggest challenges include developing a strong client base and building up the necessary knowledge. “A lot of this business depends on know-how. It’s more about learning to deal with different personalities than climbing mountains.”

Along with that, Disney says Government doesn’t promote entrepreneurship. “I think a lot of people don’t do it because of current structures and barriers. The three major hindrances are grants, tax and a lack of opportunity.”

Despite those barriers, the business continues to grow. “We’ve had roughly 20% growth year-on-year during our 13 years of operation. We’ve seen a reduction in clients because of the recession – but we’re still busy.”

Though Disney may never choose to start his own business again, he can’t see himself doing anything else. “I’m happy where I am now. I won’t necessarily be guiding for the rest of my life, but I’ll keep the business going. When my knees give out I can always take care of the logistics – I don’t have to be on top.”

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