

Adventure Travel: An Agent of Change

By Kate Rice

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Selling adventure can make you an agent of change. Just look at Jeff Dossett, now CEO of AdventureLink, an adventure travel aggregator that works closely with travel agents (it powers VAX VacationAccess Adventure and other travel agent sites). Dossett has climbed the Seven Summits, the highest mountain on each of the seven continents. "I didn't climb a mountain until I was 40 years old," he said in a speech at the Adventure Travel Trade Association's Adventure Travel World Summit last month in Quebec.

After college Dossett rode the dot.com wave and subsequent bust, but then found himself stressed, a little overweight and somewhat disenchanted. He walked into an REI store and saw the poster that changed his life. It promoted the "Climb for Clean Air," a benefit for the American Lung Association in Washington state. The expedition included education about the gear, fitness and mountaineering training to reach the summit of Washington's highest peak, Mount Rainier. Dossett trained for months and in the summer of 2000, in extremely bad weather, made it to the top along with 24 other climbers.

"That was my Mount Everest," he said. "For me, it was a transformational experience." He repeated the climb the following summer and again felt what he calls an "incredible sense of accomplishment, of feeling alive and in the moment." And he made radical changes in his life, stepping away from his career at Microsoft.

But he wasn't done yet with climbing. On May 24, 2004, he made the summit of Everest itself. "There is no feeling like being truly on the top of the world," he said. But then Dossett had an epiphany, which he said probably sounded obvious to the adventure travel professionals he was addressing, but is also something that applies to anyone selling travel. "It became very clear to me that it was experiences, not the stuff or material things, that defined the richness of my life," he said. What makes adventure travel so transforming is not just physical challenge, risk and stepping out of your comfort zone; it is the people and the cultures that adventure travelers are exposed to throughout the trip.

Most moving and dramatic was Dossett's encounter with a mother and child in a remote part of Mozambique following a prior trip in which he climbed Mount Kilimanjaro, Africa's tallest mountain. As he and his driver rode along remote back roads, Dossett would repeatedly see women walking. Often alone, they always bore a small child or newborn in their arms as they trudged through the middle of nowhere.

Dossett had seen no sign of civilization for hours. He began wondering where these women were walking. The driver told him they were going to so-called "local" clinics, trips that could take them days. Dossett asked the driver to take him to the nearest one. When they arrived at the medical center, about 35 or 40 women were waiting outside of a shack. Just as Dossett's driver stopped the truck, the door of the shack opened and a wailing woman emerged, cradling an infant in her arms. The clinic had run out of the medicine that could save the child's life. The staff had asked the mother to wait outside since they could do nothing for her child. In two hours, the child died.

As Dossett, a father of three, told the story to his audience, he had to stop for a moment before he could continue. He offered the mother his condolences and promised to return with help. She looked at him. "How could such a thing happen?" she asked. "That changed my life," he said.

Since then Dossett has been involved with Village Reach (www.villagereach.org), which focuses on last-mile health care, especially on distribution, so that these remote clinics get the medicine they need in time and in usable condition. Today, these clinics, once chronically out of essential medicines, now have them in stock 95 percent of the time and generally the 5 percent they are missing is non-critical.

Dossett returned to Microsoft and, at about the same time, became involved with (PRODUCT) RED, which works with iconic brands to fight HIV/AIDS in Africa. He became an expedition leader for Everest Team INSPI(RED) (www.teaminspired.com), a personal initiative to build awareness of (PRODUCT) RED. To promote that effort, he and his team used social networking to generate interest in the benefit climb. Ultimately they had 1.7 million people following the expedition online and committing to make donations and purchase RED brands.

Dossett melded his professional expertise with his passion for mountain climbing to use technology not as an end in itself but as a tool to make the world better. Adventure travel is about helping clients tell their stories, Dossett told his audience. That's what a travel agent's job is. But this type of travel gives your clients stories that don't end when they come home, but often, as in Dossett's case, actually begin new chapters in their lives.

For more information on the Adventure Travel Trade Association, visit www.adventuretravel.biz.

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