

Traveling salesmen

Offering tourist itineraries from ancient China to present-day Cairo, a D.C. travel planning firm aims to go places — and take you and me along for the ride

By Missy Frederick

Over more than 40 years, Academic Travel Abroad Inc. has mutated into six, eight, even 10 different businesses.

At least, that's Chairman David Parry's count as he looks back on the D.C. travel company he acquired in 1973. He explains that the company got its start in 1950 by billing itself as the "Marshall Plan in Action," morphed into a study-abroad leader, later partnered with the National Geographic Society and is now mapping out its own adventure trips for baby boomers.

Those reinventions have helped the company survive nuclear disasters, economic turmoil and international wars.

And now 2010 is shaping up to be a landmark year for ATA, which spent its maiden years carting a handful of American students to European countries, stretching from Norway to Portugal, so they could watch those countries rebuild after World War II.

This year, the company transitions from being a trip provider for organizations such as Bridgewater College and the Smithsonian Institution to a company offering its own line of excursions, called Authenticity.

Academic Travel Abroad is investing \$65,000 in the Authenticity program, a set of four two-week trips to Athens, Greece; Beijing; Cairo; and Siena, Italy. The company plans to market the trips to wealthy baby boomers who now have the time and money to travel. ATA will launch its first Authenticity departures next year.

"It's not make or break for us," said Parry, a former university professor and administrator who seemed born with a travel itch and has watched many a sunrise above the Alps. "This is an experiment for us."

In the past, some of the company's "experiments" were the result of random events.

For example, ATA began its long-standing partnership with the Smithsonian in the 1970s when Parry happened across an ad for a job running a new museum-sponsored travel program. Parry didn't send a resume — he cold-called the venerated institution and asked if it wanted a partner instead.

Another initiative also had a nice payout. The company's study-abroad program grew steadily even during the recession because ATA had earlier decided to offer more Arabic-language programs.

Nevertheless, ATA was hit hard by the

recession. The company dropped 15 employees and \$7.4 million in revenue from its books between 2008, its peak year, and 2009.

The new Authenticity series gives ATA a way to diversify its offerings. It also allows ATA to build on an existing expertise in planning immersion-style trips — students on its study-abroad trips must make a language pledge not to speak English — and apply that experience a new audience that wants a more authentic experience than they can get at sprawling five-star golf resorts in places like Greece and Italy.

This not the first time ATA has had to be flexible. Chase Poffenberger and Kate Simpson, now top executives, started off by organizing trips to China for the company. Then, in June 1989, the Tiananmen Square massacre intervened.

As trips to China waned, Poffenberger says, "we came into [Parry's] office and said to him, 'We speak French.'" Just like that, the pair picked up new job duties and the company, new destinations.

Worldwide events have constantly shaped ATA's business. It's had to keep tourists away from certain places, such as Eastern Europe after Chernobyl nuclear accident in the Ukraine or New York after the Sept. 11 attacks. It's been squeezed financially during the dot-com bubble as well as the Great Recession. It's had to adjust to technology shifts like the rise of online bookings and decline of decline of travel agents.

The company has adapted to it all by focusing on a niche audience that wants a more intense experience than a typical trans-Atlantic jaunt, Simpson says.

People on an Authenticity trip will attend lectures, get to know Egyptian women, bike through vineyards, hike the Great Wall or live in traditional neighborhoods far from your standard hotel.

ATA also says the company has been able to grow because it seeks employees with specific credentials.

Many come from liberal arts backgrounds; others speak several languages. The company needs a range of skills, including mastery of a balance sheet and an understanding of foreign currency.



Academic Travel Abroad has gone through many changes in the past 50 years and is getting ready for another one as Chase Poffenberger, left, and Kate Simpson prepare to take the reins. Photo by Joanne S. Lawton

The basics

Company: Academic Travel Abroad Inc.

What it does: Arranges leisure and educational trips for companies, school study-abroad programs and individual clients

Leadership: David Parry, owner and chairman; Kate Simpson, president; Chase Poffenberger, executive vice president

Location: D.C.

Employees: 45; 75 to 100 overseas partners

Clients: Smithsonian Institution, National Geographic Society, several universities

Revenue: \$23.3 million in 2008; \$15.9 million in 2009; \$17 million projected in 2010

Website: www.academic-travel.com

"Most have been bitten by the travel bug early in life," Parry said, adding that many employees stick around for 10, 20 years.

Even after decades in the business, ATA's executives acknowledge they still have more to learn: how to market directly to consumers rather than through third parties and how to price trips appropriately for individuals rather than as group packages (Smithsonian trips usually cost around \$600 a day; Authenticity's will average \$285).

Soon, ATA may end up repeating a familiar pattern. Just as Parry bought the company when its founder was ready to cash out in the early 1970s, Poffenberger and Simpson are in talks to purchase it as Parry eases into more of a back-seat role.

Should the two women do so, they may look forward to yet another four or six new careers ahead of them.

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