

Venturers hit the heights to offer a helping hand

PHILANTHROPY

A tour company is bringing executives together to help local communities and budding entrepreneurs, says **Kathryn Tully**

At 12,500ft above sea level, the summit of Taylor Pass near Aspen offers a spectacular view of some of Colorado's most dramatic peaks. The bumpy ride – on a winding road with a precipitous drop to the valley below – is also memorable. “I think I just lost my kidney. Did anyone find it back there?” joked Barry Dunlop, who owns MidasCode, a website consultancy firm, after the jeep had lurched into a deep water-filled ditch and bounced out again.

The jeep excursion, part of a five-day trip to Colorado organised by Maverick Business Adventures, also included white-water rafting through the Royal Gorge on the Arkansas River, rock climbing and mountain biking.

Other trips have involved flying modified fighter aircraft over the Nevada desert. A trek next month to Lake Placid will include bobsledding, skiing and speed skating.

Maverick is not just an adventure travel company. Rather, its trips bring like-minded entrepreneurs, chief executives and small business owners together to exchange ideas and also support the next generation of entrepreneurs.

“There are companies that do adventure travel [and] business networking, and tour companies that do philanthropy, but we do all three,” says founder Yanik Silver.

Members pay an up-front fee of \$7,500 and may go on as many trips as they wish during the year. The cost of trips vary but are usually about \$7,000. Membership is by application, targeted at business owners with companies generating between \$1m and \$30m annually.

Mr Silver, a former internet publishing entrepreneur, started the company in 2007. “Whenever I’ve done something that my father-in-law would call crazy, such as running the bulls in Pamplona, bungee-jumping or skydiving from 30,000ft for charity, I’ve come back more inspired and energised,” he says. “I wanted to find other people that I could hang out and play with – but combine adventures with business building and giving back to young entrepreneurs through charity and education.”

The business sessions are more likely to take place on a river bank after rafting than in a classroom, but they cover serious issues – everything from internet marketing strategies to recruiting employees.

Although details are confidential, everyone must share information about their businesses. On the Colorado trip, the companies represented ranged from internet publishing to real estate development to dry-cleaning and seat manufacturing.

“I’ve always thought that the biggest breakthroughs come from talking to someone outside your typical industry group,” says Mr Silver.

Members say they have

generated millions of dollars of new business, either by implementing ideas gleaned on past trips or through business relationships forged after a few intense days of off-road racing or flying.

The exchange of business ideas also drives the group’s social entrepreneurship. Part of each Maverick trip is devoted to teaching entrepreneurship to local groups of disadvantaged young adults.

In Colorado, more than 80 youngsters from local community groups packed into Aspen High School one Saturday morning to talk to Maverick members.

“The thing to remember is that you don’t need a brand new idea, you can piggyback off another successful business that’s already tested the market,” Carrie Wilkerson, owner of The Barefoot Executive, a company that provides resources to women who want to run their own businesses from home, told them.

Maverick makes a donation to each community group and also presided over a business plan competition, awarding the youngsters with the three best proposals \$1,000 apiece.

Valerie Young, owner of Changing Course, a career-change company, says helping disadvantaged children through entrepreneurship persuaded her to become involved with Maverick. “The message to kids from adults is always that they’ve got to get real, to get a job, whereas I want to teach kids that you can make your own job by taking the things that you love and creating a company with it.”

The group promotes other philanthropic efforts. Five per cent of profits go to support charitable causes such as the Caring House Project Foundation, which creates housing and other amenities for Haiti’s poor; the Branson School of Entrepreneurship, set up to educate Africa’s next generation of entrepreneurs; and the Village Enterprise Fund, which supports microbusinesses in East Africa.

“A lot of companies pay lip service to their charitable efforts, but these guys actually wrote a cheque for [the University of] Fondwa,” says Brian McElroy of Double Trouble Marketing, who established the UNIF USA Foundation to develop the University of Fondwa, Haiti’s first rural university.

The group also incorporates discussions about philanthropy into its trips. In Colorado, members with family foundations advised those who are trying to establish their own.

“There are companies that do all the governance, returns and filings associated with running a foundation for you,” says Jim Spano, of the real estate developer Spano Partners, and founder of Cerebral Palsy of New Jersey, which supports adults and children with disabilities.

Mr Silver has established a niche in combining adventure travel, business networking and philanthropy.



A member of Maverick rock climbing in the Arkansas Valley, near Buena Vista, Colorado

But the concept of philanthropic travel, targeted at those with resources but little time – as opposed to volunteering, targeted at those with more time than money – is also growing elsewhere. According to the latest World Wealth Report by Merrill Lynch and Capgemini, demand for vacations that incorporate chari-

The business sessions are more likely to take place on a river bank after rafting than in a classroom

table work is up 15 per cent in two years.

Randall Manley, principal of Lodestar Private Asset Management, says that charitable giving is moving away from simply writing a blank cheque.

“The idea of donors seeing where their dollars are going to work and the impact that can have is very important and will allow significantly more money to be raised in the future,” he says, adding that it also serves as a way of educating the next generation about the value of philanthropy. “It’s also very helpful – a moral compass for kids from wealthy families.”

Mr Manley has set up a foundation called Make It Real, which will take private clients on cultural trips with a philanthropic mission.

Exquisite Safaris Philanthropic Travel, a luxury tour company that specialises in creating these bespoke trips, is working with Mr Manley to plan two trips for Lodestar and its clients – one to Appalachia in the US next year and one to Central America in 2010. Clients on the Appalachia trip will visit local music and arts events in Eastern Kentucky and work with disadvantaged children, producing documentaries through a programme run by Appalshop, a local non-profit organisation.

Exquisite Safaris works with US non-profits and non-governmental organisations in developing countries, and also donates \$250 per traveller to its humanitarian project partner wherever a trip takes place. David Chamberlain, its founder, says that while “voluntourism” – volunteering while on holiday – is well established, philanthropic travel, involving a short visit to a project, but a longer-term relationship and commitment of funds from the traveller, is not.

“What non-profits tell us they need more than anything else is funds,” he says. “They need would-be donors to come to see them, vet the

project, donate generously, tell their friends, family and professional networks, and develop a relationship. All I ask is one morning or afternoon of their week’s vacation.”

That could come, for example, in a half-day visit during a luxury safari in Zambia to an NGO assisting rural communities decimated by HIV/Aids, he says.

Mr Silver is also expanding his philanthropic programme. He met Richard Branson on a visit to Necker Island, Mr Branson’s holiday home in the British Virgin Islands, and hopes that Maverick Business Adventures – aside from mentoring youngsters on trips – will start a virtual mentorship with students at the Branson School of Entrepreneurship.

Maverick is also creating its own charitable foundation. Eventually, Mr Silver would like to expand the organisation in the US, Europe and Asia.

Meanwhile, scheduled for next year are trips to Mexico, Hawaii, Canada and Iceland, plus some one-day events in the US. Something fun closer to home, perhaps, but still capable of rattling a few internal organs.

WEALTH ONLINE

For more articles go to www.ft.com/wealth



WEALTH ONLINE

The Short View

Watch John Authers, FT investment editor, for a unique daily take on investing www.ft.com/shortview