

Globally renowned company offices in Fresno -- by choice

by Adrian Rodriguez

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For Timothy Gordon, who has spent a lifetime in the adventure travel industry, rooting down in Fresno was the best decision he could have made. The city is 50 miles from the gates of Yosemite National Park and Shaver Lake, it's only a few hours from the Pacific Ocean and even less time from the famed wine tasting trails of Paso Robles, near where he grew up.



But it isn't just the location of Fresno that attracted Gordon, who founded the globally recognized Web site GordonsGuide.com. Gordon said he is one of the staunchest defenders of Fresno itself -- something he has to do often when he's out of the area on business trips.

Gordon launched Gordon's Guide at the end of October 1998, but a ten-year celebration of sorts took place this week. The parent company, Tagmar Inc., was founded a year earlier on Oct. 30, 1997, before Internet giants such as eBay and Google had become as well-known. Gordon's Guide, today the most comprehensive Web site for active and adventure travel destinations with more than 10,000 trips across 79 categories, started out as a 512-page guide that was the culmination of Gordon's 22 years in the industry.

But there was one problem. As soon as the guide was published, the United States began a program of updating area codes, giving only a few months' notice to anyone as to what the new area codes would be. Gordon, who had established contacts throughout the industry for the first (and only paper edition) of his guide, started eyeing the Internet, where he could update the area codes -- and a host of other things -- in minutes.

"I was going to publish the adventure travel book every year, while I continued to work in Colorado in a dude ranch," he said. "Well, what happened was I saw the Internet start to raise its head, and I said, you know, I should just do it... I saw it as a great publishing opportunity.

"I decided that non-print was the way to go."

But it was tough going in those days, when the Internet was a relatively untested marketplace for a business. In 1998, a boom of dot coms was taking place, and only a few years later many of them would die out after investors had already bankrolled wild ideas with millions of dollars.

But even then, investors thought Gordon's Guide -- at least the way that Gordon wanted to do it -- was too wild an idea. Gordon didn't want to attempt to automate the booking

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and reservation functions of these travel destinations; he believed that the smarter move would be to stick to connecting Web surfers to the destinations in the fastest and most effective way he could.

"In the early years, I had a bit of a tussle, because people were saying that my business model and idea wasn't going to work," he said, referring to a group of Wall Street investors who learned of his plan. "They said the business model is not working. But because I had worked every job, it seems, I understood the industry. I knew there was no way I'm going to book a trip without asking a boatload of questions. People said, 'You're going to fail, and your business plan is not going to work.'"



Timothy Gordon launched GordonsGuide.com in 1998. /Maurice Ndole

But it did work. Last year, Fresno-based Gordon's Guide is a multi-million dollar company that earns revenue from annual membership fees of the travel destinations. This October, the company had a 47-percent increase in revenues over the month of October 2006. It has been awarded "Best of the Web" by Forbes Magazine for the past eight years, and recently won the Silver Award for outstanding Web site in the travel category at the W3 Awards, which received more than 2,700 entries from companies such as Gucci, BBC, Maserati, Reebok, Nike and Royal Caribbean. Gordon's Guide beat almost all of them for its design.

Jason Tang, senior vice president of Gordon's Guide and the company's director of technology, said the site has gone through seven revisions in the nine years its been online. With each revision, the philosophy has remained the same: Keep it simple.

"The focus is on the categories and the individual vacation providers," he said. "Our job is to bring traffic to the vacation provider... we try to get them to what they are looking for in three clicks or less."

Other design philosophies also help the site stay trim and user-friendly. There are no dead searches, Gordon said, which means that search results don't include categories of travel if there are no results within that category, so that a search never returns "Item not found."

The site is very photo-rich as well, Tang said. Every photo can be clicked and converted into an e-Card, which can be emailed -- and sends recipients to that particular travel destination page on the site.

The site also works hard to keep every page consistent. Clicking on a category reveals a page formatted exactly as any other category page, and clicking on a destination produces a description, contact information and a form for requesting reservation information from that destination. Gordon said they work with each destination provider to ensure that their form e-mails the information to the decision-maker of the destination.

Gordon's Guide is experiencing another spurt of growth because the adventure travel market, pegged at \$55 billion in 2006, is the fastest growing industry for travel, said Hilda Martinez, director of communications for the company.

"We're seeing more people now, such as families, women and mainstream America looking at it for vacation ideas. They are moving away from the Disneyland vacations," she said.

The company's press release describes the company's service:

"Gordon's Guide takes the hassle out of researching and booking the perfect adventure and active vacation. The website [sic] is photo-rich, easy to navigate and offers direct access to vacation providers with just one click. Millions of members and 10,000 trips make GordonsGuide.com the premier online destination to research and book adventure and active travel.

While on the website [sic], travelers can easily research adventure vacations, comparison shop, communicate directly with vacation providers to ask questions and make electronic requests to check trip availability.

A variety of search options, including searching site-wide or at the travel sub-category level, help travelers find exactly what they want. And after finding the ideal vacation, travelers simply click on direct links to vacation providers to book their trips.

The site added three new categories in August for those adventurous enough to want to have shark encounters in Hawaii and other places and for swimming with the dolphins as well.

But aside from the listings, the site continues to enter new territories of its own. The site started displaying ads in September. It has also introduced AdventureAgents, a system for travel agents to connect their clients directly to a Gordon's Guide-style page listing the destinations they offer, with most of the site's branding replaced by the agency's. They recently signed their 500th travel agency to the system.

They also launched AdventureBargains.com, which provides bargains on destinations for at least 10 percent, Gordon said.

And the company is coming full circle, in a way. The Web site that started out as a printed guide and turned into a Web site is now publishing a magazine version of its guides. Its second one, Gordon's Guide to Dude Ranch Vacations, was published earlier this year.


With all the site's success, there was one thing that nearly destroyed the company, Gordon said.

"Bin Laden. I can tell you right now, that in August and September, prior to 9/11, we were receiving about 350 reservation requests per day. The day after 9/11, it went to 0," he said.

"I stopped taking a salary. My goal was not to lay anybody off. We blew through \$475,000 in operating reserves... It set us back two and a half years."

It affected his personal life.

"There were points where I would wake up and my pillow would be soaked, because I didn't know how I was going to make payroll... but if you ask [the employees], they will tell you they never saw it or knew we were in trouble."



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Tang said that events such as the wildfires in California oftentimes translate into less activity on the site, but global events such as that on Sept. 11 will affect global travel and the company.

Everything on GordonsGuide.com is developed and designed in-house, in the TagMar offices in northern Fresno, where the company has been for nine years.

Fresno has always been the best place for Gordon and his staff, he said, and he grows impatient quickly when people doubt the decision to be in Fresno -- a decision he said he made because he loves things such as Fresno's summer nights.

"I put on the boxing gloves when people attack Fresno, and I grew up in San Luis Obispo," he said. "I say, 'Obviously, you don't know very much about Fresno.'"

Gordon said he thinks that the bad impression of Fresno probably comes from the route that Freeway 41 used to take through Jensen Avenue, even passing through G Street, which in earlier years was not a good place to be. For travelers headed to the Yosemite National Park, for instance, this was how they saw Fresno.

"Those millions of people were seeing the absolute worst sights of Fresno," he said.

Tang said that he gets strange looks when he says he's from Fresno, too.

"Even after I inform them we are based in Fresno, they are shocked," he said. "They still ask, 'Are a bunch of people telecommuting or being subcontracted [from the Bay Area]?'"

But Fresno is not a bad place at all, Gordon said. For the complaint that it's hot, he counters: Paso Robles, on a daily average, is 3 to 4 degrees hotter than Fresno.

But Tang admits it is difficult to find talented programmers in Fresno. It might be because there is a eight-hour test in a real-world, hands-on environment that would be difficult for anyone to pass, though.

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— *Timothy Gordon, CEO,*
GordonsGuide.com