

THE HARD-WORKING TOURIST

Matthias Hammer's Biosphere Expeditions is a leader in 'voluntourism', a trend that sees holidaymakers mix relaxation with working for a good cause.

STORY BY **NICOLA CARD**

Image © Biosphere Expeditions



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Fancy a holiday with a purpose? Dr Matthias Hammer has plenty of ideas for you — such as observing lions, leopards and cheetahs in Namibia, Botswana and Zambia.

If you like to snorkel, Hammer can help you drop in on the coral reefs of the Honduras. Or perhaps you would prefer Slovakia’s wolves and bears or Arabian leopards in Oman’s desert mountains. If a lush holiday appeals, jaguars and pumas in the Brazilian rainforest is another option. Closer to home, Hammer can get you up close with Flat Back Turtles in West Australia.

Wherever you go, expect to work and play, because Hammer’s business, Biosphere Expeditions, isn’t only interested in popping you onto a banana chair. Instead, the decade-old business offers you the chance to experience the natural world while also helping to improve it by volunteering to work on conservation projects. To make you feel even better about yourself, two-thirds of volunteers’ holiday contributions go into the conservation project in which they participate. Each trip is accompanied by an expedition leader, who is an expert in local wildlife.

In 2001, Hammer explained his German army background, passion for science, environmental sustainability and adventuring to a UK-based philanthropist, who provided a \$48,000 loan to kickstart Biosphere Expeditions in the small city of Norwich.

Things got off to a slow start. However, the self-assured Hammer had no doubts about his business venture.

“I knew this was such a good idea that it would have to work; there would be lots of people interested in it. I just underestimated how long it would take to reach people,” he said. “Because you are so fired up about it yourself, you think others will think the same way, so you do not doubt yourself.”

For the first 16 months, business trickled in and Hammer was naturally anxious.

“Whenever you are starting a business, the first three to four months are full-on with anxiety with you asking yourself if this will work. But while it was quiet, we continued to develop the product and add more expeditions while marketing the business as much as we — or I — could. It was just a one or one-and-a-half-man band at that time.”

Head office in Norwich has exposed some cultural differences. In Hammer’s words,

“Germans communicate differently to Anglo-Saxons, there is no word in German for ‘small talk’; we come straight to the point. Talking about the weather or asking about your family is perceived by Germans to be slightly deceitful, as people are not seen as really interested. For us, it’s a case of ‘let’s just get down to business’.

“Whether it is praise or other, I do not mince my words. The Anglo-Saxons in particular find that hard to deal with and that causes some friction, but with my military background, I have a style that is firm but fair. It may be unusual, but it works. I expect a lot and I make that clear.”

PR, PR and more PR

The company’s key marketing tactic is public relations — it uses no other form of marketing — and Hammer is content to operate this way, because he feels the best way to communicate Biosphere Expeditions’ products is through a detailed explanation of the experience.

“It is such a unique concept that the press and the media like the concept, and that is good for our business,” Hammer says. The company greases the media’s wheels with a Website that offers a library of easily downloadable high-resolution images, a handy headstart for a travel story (*or for anyone seeking media coverage — Ed*).

“We could not operate without the Internet,” he adds. “It is absolutely essential to the business model and central to what we do. It is our window to the world. We put lots of effort into putting exhaustive information on the internet, and although we have offices, no-one ever comes to them and our phones do not ring often — people contact us by email.

“That is the way we want it, the business is efficient and streamlined. Low staff numbers helps contain costs.”

In other cost-saving measures, expedition leaders who are scientists or game wardens are freelancers, drafted in for particular expeditions on an ‘as needed’ basis.

“For us, the three biggest recruiters [of voluntourists] are word of mouth and repeat customers, the Internet and our PR work,” Hammer says. “We do not advertise at all, we just work with publicists, and we have our own in-house contacts, so we get as many journalists or film teams as possible on our expeditions.”

Some of the costs associated with funding junkets are offset through sponsors in the form of airlines, tourist bodies or hotels, but on occasion, Biosphere forks out for airfares for journalists. On balance, a small price to pay for the subsequent media coverage.

Adding to the appeal for voluntourists is the not-for-profit status of Biosphere Expeditions, with two-thirds of their expedition contribution channelled back into the project in which they participate; and a hallmark of the business is that it gives back as much as it can to local communities.

Joint ventures

This approach creates assets for the communities that Biosphere Expeditions visits.

“We do not own property, that is not what we are about, but we give our local partners a sum and that enables development and we are not talking much — say \$20,000 in Peru for a research station,” Hammer says. “And \$50,000 for the Namibia facility that enables them to develop the facility and with it jobs, and they repay us over the years by free board and lodging.”

“Once that is paid off, interest free, we just become a customer, but at least in Peru we did this seven years ago and the research station is in place. We can use the premises, but they can also host other university groups or researchers and it generates capacity and local jobs.

Moral high ground

The company can also point to real benefits for the environment.

“There are several levels of benefits to the environment: the species worked on directly. For

example, we have had a protected area declared for snow leopards, so that is a positive outcome for the species, and management plans are in place,” Hammer says.

“And on a local level, we train local people so the next generation of conservationists is coming through. The research centres are in place and we run scholarship programs that enable local people, students or school leavers keen on conservation, to come and join expeditions. Also, we produce material for schools; we want to get them young, as you can get the messages across more easily.”

The conservation-friendly nature of the business has won it supporters the world over. Sarah Lowe, who runs the Australian arm from South Melbourne, provides her services — and office space — free of charge. “I’m happy to devote up to a fifth of my working week in my travel office to Biosphere, because I really support the concept,” she told *My Business*. “A similar setup operates in France, so that also helps contain Biosphere costs.”

All sounds too rosy a picture? There are some thorns in the side, says Hammer: “Ten years ago, voluntourism was completely new, but now it is such a growth market within tourism that you have a lot of cowboys jumping on the bandwagon ... Internet reviews expose how badly organised some tours are, people say ‘they got me there just for my money’ and they do not see what contribution they have made other than lining the operator’s pockets. That is not what Biosphere is about.”

Then there’s the occasional instance of the “really, really annoying wildlife journalist” who expects red carpet treatment on some icy mountain slope. (We suspect the otherwise bulletproof Hammer is yet to recover from the attitude of one prima donna.)

The third and final bugbear is “the popular misconception that voluntourism is just for 20-year-olds who want to have a good time and party every night and expect to sleep in a hammock in the jungle. In reality, we are in a completely different market; our portfolio is so diverse — for example, the turtle expedition in West Australia is based at a five star resort. You can have a great time and be comfortable; we are geared up for the 30-plus professionals who are cash-rich and time-poor,



Image © Biosphere Expeditions

What is voluntourism?

The rise in popularity of voluntourism, the holiday that combines work for a worthwhile cause, is attributed in part to the December 2004 tsunami, a disaster of massive proportions that triggered social conscience. With people reviewing the value of their leisure time and wanting to make a contribution, travel companies started to offer holidays in areas and communities requiring support.



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also retirees, baby boomers,” said Hammer.

Given his need to travel frequently on long-haul flights being at odds with his commitment to sustainability, *My Business* asked Hammer what’s the most significant personal measure he’s taken to reduce his carbon footprint?

“Being a vegetarian. The UN has identified vegetarians and vegans as one of the most important ways to reduce our impact on the planet and there is a view that mankind needs to

move to a vegetarian diet if we want to combat the worst impact of climate change. It takes as much as 7000 litres of water to produce just one kilogram of beef,” he said. “The impact though our obsession with meat on the planet is enormous — apart from all the animal welfare issues associated with it.”

For more information, visit www.biosphere-expeditions.org or www.facebook.com/biosphere-expeditions1 