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Nothing Adventured, Nothing Gained

Whether biking through Europe or hiking through the Rockies, Dan Austin of **Austin-Lehman Adventures** goes to great lengths—literally—to please his customers

By Matt Alderton

Dan Austin was mountain biking through northwest Wyoming when he had a revelation. It was 1994, and for the first time in a long time, he was relaxed.

"My wife signed us up for this adventure-package-tour thing with 12 people I didn't know," recalls Austin, who had previously owned a commercial construction company in Alaska. "We were going biking and hiking in the Grand Tetons, and I was sure I

wasn't going to like it. But after the first day, I remember thinking, 'This is pretty cool.' Somebody else had decided what restaurants to eat at and what trails to hike. When my bike had a flat, they fixed it. And when we got to our hotel, they took my luggage up and down the stairs to my room. They took care of every single detail, which allowed me to really enjoy one of the first true vacations of my life."

Austin wasn't new to adventure travel. In fact, he'd previously owned his own rafting business in the 1970s. What was new, however, was the experience of a "curated" vacation: someone else did all of the planning for him—all he had to do was show up.

"Many of us take vacations, but never really go on vacation," Austin says. "This type of travel allows you to enjoy every detail and every minute of the precious time you have."

Austin was so enamored with his trip to Grand Teton National Park that he and four other partners decided to purchase the company that organized it: Backcountry Tours of Bozeman, Montana. He sold Backcountry to his partners three years later, in 1997, at which point he started his own adventure-travel company, Adventures Plus. In 2000, that company caught the attention of Paul Lehman, a passionate adventure traveler who'd sold his family business and wanted to partner with Austin on a new venture. Together, the pair formed Austin-Lehman Adventures.



"In 2000, we became Austin-Lehman Adventures, and for more than 10 years we've really worked hard at developing the Austin-Lehman brand," says Austin, who bought back Backcountry Tours from his former partners in 2000, enveloping the company into the new Austin-Lehman brand. "The name was a testimony to our desire to put our names on something that we really believed in."

Today, Austin-Lehman has more than 100 employees and partners, including 12 full-time staff at its home office in Billings, Montana, and as many as 60 seasonal tour guides in destinations around the world. Like Backcountry did when Austin was a customer, Austin-Lehman plans and hosts active group vacations, specializing in multisport trips that include activities such as hiking, biking, and rafting, as well as immersive experiences that incorporate history, wildlife, culture, and geography. On average, trip costs amount to approximately \$500-600 per day.

"Back in the day, Backcountry was a North America-based company that [did tours] in Yellowstone and the Rockies," says Austin, who has had sole ownership of the company since 2010, when Lehman retired. "Over the last 10 years, we've strategically grown the footprint of the business to the point where we now have an office in Europe (in Holland) and trips on five continents, with 70 or 80 different programs. They're all that same formula, however: small groups and active travel. We have safaris in Africa, bike rides in Tuscany, hiking in Machu Picchu, and boat tours in the Galapagos. We have something for everyone."



Although its trips are nothing short of spectacular, what truly differentiates Austin-Lehman from other adventure-travel companies is its size and service. "We don't aspire to be the biggest company; we want to be the best company," Austin says. "We're a smaller company, and we really try to focus on that boutique mentality, which allows us to provide exceptional customer service and treat every guest as if they're really special."

Austin-Lehman's customer-centric credo is omnipresent before, during, and after every trip:

- Customer-service reps work with customers before their trip to customize their itinerary and follow up afterwards to make sure they had a good time.
- Customers can reach Austin directly—24 hours a day, 7 days a week, by phone or

email—with questions or concerns, whether it's about a lost passport, how much to tip their guide, or where they're supposed to meet their tour group.

- Groups typically have 10-12 adults, and every trip has a six-to-one guide-to-traveler ratio to ensure personalized service and interaction. Each guide acts as a travel companion, naturalist, concierge, medic, chef, porter, coach, counselor, and destination expert.

Austin-Lehman's focus on customer service extends to its destination partners, which are handpicked based on extensive field research. In Alaska, for instance, the Ciri Alaskan Tourism Company provides lodging and boats for its trips to Kenai Fjords National Park. "They're a 12-year partner, and they're just as committed to customer service as we are," Austin says. "For example, when you go on the fjords cruise, you're going to meet the captain; he'll be standing at the gangplank to welcome you aboard."

To market itself, Austin-Lehman relies a lot on the Internet. The firm's website has become a resource library for travelers; it has also launched a new blog where customers can share stories from their trips, and it established a Facebook page that currently has 4,000 "friends."

Ultimately, though, its trips are its best advertisement: when people have fun, they tell their family and friends. "About 70 percent of our business is repeats or referrals," Austin says. "We have some alumni who have been on 50 trips, and some who have been on 20 trips. Those are our best advocates. We make sure we give special attention to those alumni and give them extra 'wow' moments. [For example], they may get a fleece vest in their room at night. Little spontaneous surprises like that throughout the trip really speak to our brand."

Austin-Lehman's Top Tours



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