

# FORGING FRONTIERS

Extreme adventures, holiday-home rentals and Alistair Sawday's publishing empire - **Ann Wallace** uncovers success stories from the travel business



## Matthew Robertson Momentum Adventure

www.momentumadventure.com

From trekking the extremes of the Poles and climbing the great mountain ranges, to exploring the dense rainforests and crossing arid desert plains, Momentum Adventure leads those with wanderlust and a sense of adventure through some of the world's most spectacular and uncharted terrain. Their trips are created to give ordinary people an extraordinary adventure in the hands of the world's most accomplished and highly-qualified guides.

Matthew Robertson founded Momentum Adventure in 2005 to share his passion for travel, exploration and excitement.

Says Matthew: "I've climbed all over the world, from the Himalayas to the Gorges de Verdun in France. I was introduced to climbing by a friend who was involved in vetting adventure travel specialists and guides used by tour companies. I came to realise that there wasn't a company catering for me. I wanted a life experience. It wasn't about the money, or the number of stars attached to a hotel, it was the thrill of seeking a genuine adventure. It seemed to me there was a real opportunity."

And so, Momentum Adventure was born.

For Matthew, running the company isn't all about rushing off to climb mountains, forage in jungles or ride the waves beside basking whales. It's about meticulous planning, which can take as much as three months for one trip.

"The nature of momentum is that it builds slowly to an unstoppable force, and that's our mantra, the way we build from the ground up. We go to great lengths to find original destinations, or failing that, a unique angle.

"Then there's our logistics work, which I believe is second to none. We check out every single location and every facet of an itinerary – and not at a computer

screen. We have expert guides, the very best in the world, on the ground. They have been there, seen it, done it. There is helicopter support when we need it and we're pragmatic enough to have planned an exit strategy for every trip.

"That's important because we're giving ordinary individuals the chance to experience fantastic environments – but it must be in the safest possible way. We head into extreme territories that carry a limited degree of risk, but we mitigate that with care, attention and expertise.

"You may worry that you aren't fit enough, know nothing about the wilderness or are a bit apprehensive. We offer the reassurance that, whichever location you choose, you go with the best and the safest team in the world. I honestly don't know of another operator who works as we do – we aren't agents, passing clients on to a third party. We take care of every last detail, from supplying every single piece of kit to organising flights.

"Our guides are chosen with the same care as our destinations. We talk to people that have worked with them and we then interview the guides in depth."

So which is Matthew's favourite Momentum adventure? "If I had to choose then the Arctic Circle trip is fantastic. You really engage with the environment by staying with the Sami people and living in ice caves."

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## Ross Elder Holidaylettings

www.holidaylettings.co.uk

Holidaylettings, Britain's top holiday-home rental website, was formed by schoolfriends Ross Elder and Andy Firth. Back in 1999, Andy and Ross both had jobs in London; Andy was developing financial systems for BNP Paribas and Ross was working for Barclays Bank. But the pair had already dipped their toes in entrepreneurial waters.

Says Ross: "We bought a few buy-to-let properties in Oxford. The initial idea was to create a website to market student properties in Oxford, a sort of online brochure where people could view the properties in advance, both our four properties and those of other landlords.

"It was while I was looking out for domain names that I had a Eureka moment. I realized that there was a much bigger market in holiday homes. "The idea was helped by the fact that Andy's parents had a two-bed apartment in Spain that they rented out by putting postcards in shop windows and little two-line ads in local newspapers. It was just dying for someone to come along and take it all online."

They started the business in their spare time, but quit their jobs in 2003.

"That was a big moment for us. We did have a small income from the rental

business but it wasn't much. I drove a 15-year-old Rover Metro and lived in a cheap shared house in Oxford, and every penny we had was ploughed back into the business.

"During 2003 and 2004, we concentrated on coming up with a good website and focused on how we could talk to holiday-home owners."

By 2007, Holidaylettings had half a million users, making them the second busiest website in the industry, and they caught the eye of property portal Rightmove.

"They purchased 66 per cent but Andy and I continued to manage the business.

"Then, in August 2009, we were contacted by Expedia, the travel reservation website, who said, 'We don't have the market share or the ability to get the same market share or traction that you guys have so we need you to see if you can persuade Rightmove to sell', which was amazing. The deal finally went through in June 2010 and we became part of the Tripadvisor section of Expedia.

"It's turned us into a global travel brand, so now we're focusing on how we can give our advertisers exposure to the global audience that Tripadvisor has. We have 40,000 properties and over two million visitors to the site, and our traffic has gone up by 20 per cent for the last three or four years, but I still don't consider us a household brand and not everyone knows about us."

But it won't be long... ➔