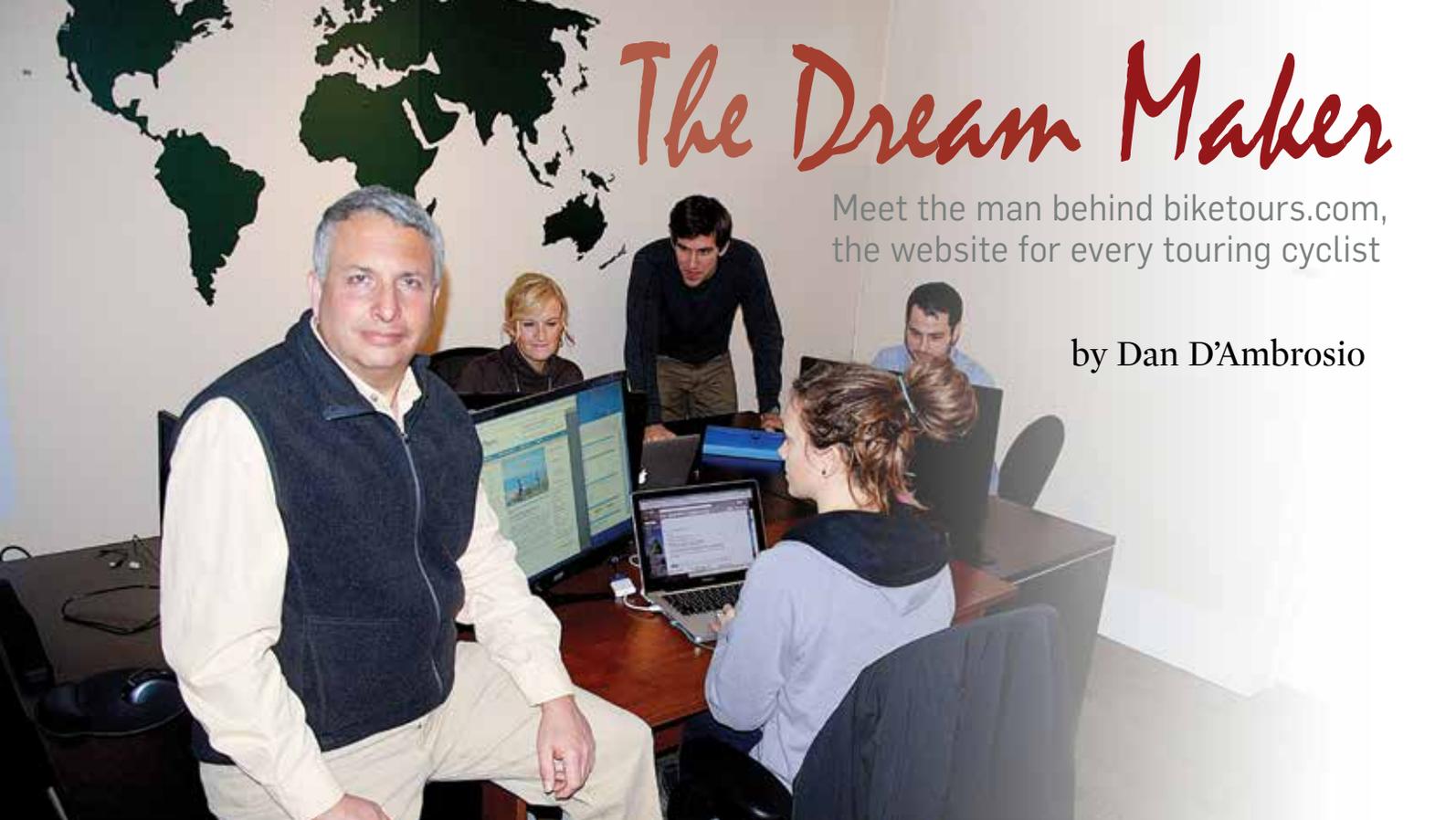


The Dream Maker

Meet the man behind biketours.com, the website for every touring cyclist

by Dan D'Ambrosio



Jim Johnson credits his former Fortune 100 employer for two of the best things that ever happened in his life — moving him to Chattanooga and, in 2002, firing him.

“We can call it a disagreement in management style,” Johnson says of his firing. “The first thing I did after I wiped my tears was take an inventory of my skills. I asked myself, what do I like to do? What am I good at? What I realized was I love to travel, I love cycling, and I love to plan trips. I was planning family trips when I was eight or nine years old.”

In addition to working his former corporate job as a communications director, Johnson was also freelancing, writing travel stories. Typically, he did his research on a bike, primarily in Germany, Austria, and Switzerland, even though he wasn't writing for cycling magazines.

“As anyone reading *Adventure Cyclist* knows, the best way to meet people, and feel the undulation of the roads and of the terrain, is not in a car or on a train,” Johnson said.

Johnson is reminded of a description, written by another travel writer, of the difference between riding a bike around Europe and riding a train or bus, or driving a car. Paraphrasing, it's

the difference between watching an incredibly beautiful movie unfold in front of you or being in the movie.

“Writing for travel magazines, I didn't always mention I was traveling by bike, but it made more sense to do it that way, and in the process I got to know a lot of the local bike-tour companies in Austria and Germany,” Johnson said.

A friend Johnson had recently taken with him on a “research” trip suggested he organize bicycle tours for a living. But if Johnson knew what he was good at — logistics. Getting luggage from one place to another, prepping bikes, and booking hotels.

“It hit me over the head, I know companies that already do that,” Johnson said. “So I contacted them and asked, ‘How would you like to be represented by me in the North American market?’”

In 2003, Johnson launched Bike Tours Direct (BTD: biketoursdirect.com), posting 40 or 45 tours from five or six different tour companies based in Germany and Austria. He sold 160 trips. His tour companies in Europe were ecstatic because those were 160 customers they never would have gotten without Johnson.

“I was still skeptical if I could make a

go of it, but at the same time I was having a ball,” he said. “So I stuck with it.”

The following year, he sold more than 600 trips. There was no looking back.

The business model Johnson set up in 2003 is the one he still follows today. The tour companies pay him a commission on every customer he brings them. The customer pays the same price for the tour as if they had signed up directly, without Johnson's help. It works out for everyone.

Johnson is still working with several of the companies he started with in the beginning. One of them told him before he started working with them, they had five or six riders from North America. Last year Johnson sent them about 350.

“That's a dramatic example, but even the ones that are less dramatic, these little companies didn't have the marketing savvy to reach the North American market,” Johnson said. “They didn't have the budget, or the staff, to do it. These were little mom-and-pop operations that were just getting by season to season. Now a lot of them have become firmly established and are growing, in part because we've been able to send them a constant stream of clients.”

10 years after starting his company, Johnson, 59, has 10 employees. BTD is

now in 72 countries on six continents with about 500 different tours, working with 110 different bike-tour companies, all of them with invaluable local knowledge. This year, BTD booked 3,140 clients, helping most of them find and choose the tours they wanted.

"It is a lot of people," Johnson says.

One of those people is former *Los Angeles Times* foreign correspondent, and *Adventure Cyclist* contributor, David Lamb, who has used Johnson's services for the past five years.

"I know I have been Jim Johnson's top client every year," Lamb said. "Every year I give him 10 to 20 people. I run a bike tour in a different country every year for a group of friends."

Lamb has been riding with his friends every year for the past 15 years, and before he found BTD, he did all the work himself, finding tour guides, teasing out routes, and booking rooms.

"Now I just arrange our tours through Jim," Lamb said. "I don't have to do any heavy lifting. I just tell Jim the details of what I want. Lining up 20 people to take a bike tour is not easy. It used to be a big hassle. What used to take months now takes a matter of days. It has made my life much easier and we've never had a trip that was a bummer."

This year, Lamb and company, including Lamb's wife, will take a bike-and-berge-tour in Croatia, beginning and ending in Pula, going from island to island. Lamb, 73, has been bike touring since 1995, when he was in Wisdom, Montana, on assignment for the *Times* doing a story about the modern cowboy.

"I was in a little saloon in Wisdom," Lamb remembered. "A couple of bikes were sitting there, spiffy with saddle-

bags. It looked so exciting. A man and his wife were sitting at the bar, having coffee. They were riding from Minnesota to Seattle. Wow, I didn't know anybody could do that on a bike."

Lamb went home and told his wife he was going to ride across the U.S. The *Times* gave him nine months to do it, serializing his stories from the road, which were also excerpted in *Adventure Cyclist*.

"I hadn't been riding a bike at all. I hadn't even owned one in 40 or 50 years," Lamb said.

Ann and Fred Abeles came to bicycle touring in a similarly serendipitous fashion. After retiring in 1998, the couple – Ann is 71 and Fred is 78 – decided they needed to do something to stay active.

"We started out walking, but he got bored with that," Ann Abeles said of her husband. "People were passing us on bikes – so we bought bikes."

Ann and Fred starting riding on the C&O Canal Towpath, not far from their home in Frederick, Maryland.

"The first day nearly killed him," Ann said. "We went 10 miles, and he was not sure he would ever walk again. We went back the next day and did 10 miles again."

Today, the couple rides about 7,000 miles annually, and they try to ride every day for at least an hour and a half. They've done five tours with Johnson, and "every one of them has been exactly what was promised."

"This September, we booked two tours back to back – the first in the Transylvania region of Romania, the second in the Rhodope Mountains in Bulgaria," Ann Abeles said. "We like to go different places."

Different places, and a long way from the C&O Canal. Fred Abeles still marvels

at the way the whole thing worked out.

"It's amazing, the people associated with this activity are nice," he said. "We got into it because we retired and needed an activity, something that didn't involve a lot of expense. Deep sea fishing was out. Cycling is really a very low-impact sport. We have no issues with any body parts."

By March, after more than 10 years as BikeToursDirect, Johnson will have changed the domain and identity of his company to Biketours.com. It sharpened his sense of destiny even more.

"When you have that company name, you feel a great sense of responsibility not just to sell bike tours but to promote the concept of bicycle touring," Johnson said.

To that end, the new website includes "significant changes" intended to educate as well as sell. Johnson spent several days at Adventure Cycling headquarters in Missoula, forming a partnership that will include putting Adventure Cycling tours on the BTD website. Johnson says he's not concerned about market share, but market size. He wants to see more folks bike touring.

"It sounds a little trite, but I really feel that we're in the business of helping people's dreams come true," Johnson said. "There's nothing more gratifying than when a client returns from a trip and says, 'This was the trip of a lifetime. This is what we'll be talking about 30 years from now at the family reunion.'" **AC**

Dan D'Ambrosio is a staff writer covering business for the Burlington Free Press in Burlington, Vermont.

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