

# 5

Minutes With

# Darrell Wade



**RLR recently spent 5 minutes with Darrell Wade, co-founder and CEO of the hugely successful small group adventure travel company, Intrepid Travel.**

**RLR:** Intrepid turned twenty this year: a fantastic achievement. Back in 1989, what vision did you have in mind for Intrepid and how has that vision evolved?

**DW:** Vision is a big word, and I don't think we had a whole lot of it twenty years ago. Just a crazy idea to take people travelling in the way that we loved to ourselves. We thought there must have been a compromise between the inefficiency of independent travel and the mind-sapping routine of organised tours. So we developed this idea of twelve people travelling together in a very 'grass roots' kind of way, with a leader who knew the ropes. It would be a flexible, fun, affordable and respectful way to travel. The company has grown out of sight, but the philosophy on travel is utterly unchanged.

**RLR:** Intrepid has extremely strong brand recognition. Who came up with the name and the logo and what was the inspiration behind those things?

**DW:** To tell you the truth, we wanted to call the company Lonely Planet Adventures to capture the strength of another brand. So we went and had a chat to Tony Wheeler (co-founder of Lonely Planet) but he felt it might compromise

the 'independent traveller' brand of Lonely Planet. So we had to get a new name! We tossed around a few ideas and came up with Intrepid. We weren't sure of the name at first, but it's worked pretty well for us.

Our logo was designed by a friend who is a conservation architect. She thought that given our first two destinations were Thailand and Turkey, a building representing both cultures would be appropriate hence the Buddhist chedi and the Islamic mosque featuring. Once again, it's served us well.

**RLR:** Which of the following events have you found to be the most challenging for Intrepid's business and why: SARS, 9-11, swine flu or the global financial crisis (GFC)?

**DW:** Traditionally I've said SARS, but the recent GFC had us extremely worried there for a while. In retrospect we may have overreacted as we pulled through well, but from October to January bookings all but dried up. It was pretty scary!

**RLR:** If Intrepid didn't exist, what other company would you like to have founded and why?

**DW:** I used to ask myself this in the early days of Intrepid when it was anything but certain we would make a success of it! But I haven't asked the question for fifteen years or so and I'm not going to answer you now!

One day I'll move on and I think it will be to spend about six months a year travelling, three months a year down in Lorne where



we have a holiday house and a few months in Melbourne. But my wife Anna reckons this will never happen...

**RLR:** According to your website, [www.intrepidtravel.com](http://www.intrepidtravel.com), you wanted to develop a style of travel that was “altogether different, where, as travellers, we became a part of the country - and not just tourists looking in”. How have you kept true to that goal with ‘Comfort’ trips, Intrepid’s most ‘luxurious’ style of travel?

**DW:** I think we are still pretty true to brand with those trips. Whilst the pillow might be softer at night, we still immerse ourselves in the destination during the day. Just because a traveller likes some of the finer things in life, it doesn’t mean that they want to be ‘removed’ from the destination they are travelling in.

**RLR:** Which three traits typify an Intrepid tour leader?

**DW:** Before anything else they are curious: they want to know what’s around the next corner and how to get under the skin of the destination and then share that knowledge with the equally curious travellers we have.

Secondly, they don’t sleep much! Seriously, the days leading are long - they start before clients get up preparing for the day - and then after clients have gone to bed, the trip accounts need to be done!

Thirdly, they almost always have a great sense of humour. I think they probably have to: our travellers come from all corners of the

world and a sense of humour is a common denominator. Plus, so many things go wrong as a leader that it doesn’t pay to take yourself too seriously.

**RLR:** To what do you attribute the unusually low staff turnover rate at Intrepid?

**DW:** We’re passionate about what we do and I think that helps. And we have a set of values that we are very open and upfront about: they won’t fit everyone and so I think we don’t attract people to Intrepid in the first place that shouldn’t be here.

**RLR:** Darrell, for a man who is almost 7 foot tall in hiking boots, is your decision to drive a MINI Cooper based on:

- (a) A wish to minimise your carbon footprint;
- (b) The need to appease your inner contortionist; or
- (c) None of the above? (please provide details)

**DW:** I think the word “denial” comes to mind. In fact the leg room is fantastic. Plus it brings back my memories of seat-of-the-pants billy cart riding as a kid.

**RLR:** The travel industry has experienced a number of trends over the years, including voluntourism, gay-friendly travel, eco-travel and medical travel/tourism. What do you anticipate will be the next travel trend?

**DW:** I gave up predicting trends many a years ago. Ironically, we were part of one but never realised it: that is, a huge trend towards more adventurous, experiential travel.

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As the general population became more experienced travellers, they sought more from their travels and so wanted to venture away from the resorts and get off the tour busses.

It turns out we have benefited hugely from being a part of the second fastest growing tourism sector of the last twenty years. Of course, we'd like to say this was because of our great insight, but actually it was pure fluke!

**RLR:** Intrepid has a very hardworking and innovative marketing department. Can you describe Intrepid's most memorable marketing campaign?

DW: Must I? This could be embarrassing. We had a campaign that featured a photo of a Buddhist monk sitting serenely on a hammock. We photo-shopped a computer onto his lap to promote our new email newsletter. It was deemed offensive to monks and *"a company with Intrepid's values should know better."* Then, when we were launching into Latin America, we had a campaign which featured a guinea pig: *"Happier than a pig in s\*\*t"* was the caption. Well, we were!

**RLR:** What, in your opinion, are the three key elements that have led to Intrepid's success and/or its ability to survive the "tough times"?

DW: I think we are reasonably innovative thinkers. Because we started as nothing - and knew nothing - we keep trying new things. Some of them even work! Another key element is the passion of our staff. They keep having great ideas, remain committed to learning and work their butts off.

Finally, at the end of the day, it is the product we create. Our travellers love our trips: 98% say they intend to travel again with us. They tell their friends and travel agents that they've had a great time and so we just keep growing. Our marketing department hates me quoting this, but 65% of clients who book with us, do so on the recommendation of a friend. Not because of any snappy marketing campaign or nifty ad.

**RLR:** What is the most valuable lesson that you have learnt from travel?

DW: Humility. As a traveller you are always somewhere new, always exploring, always lacking knowledge and never 'knowing'. It's humbling. I find business a very similar experience.

**RLR:** Thank you very much for your time Darrell. We wish you and Intrepid all the very best for the next twenty years and beyond!

