



The Community Builder

Kent Thiry, the architect behind DaVita's 20-year growth, now brings his village mindset to initiatives across Colorado.

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TRAVEL & TOURISM

Senior reporter
Ed Sealover

ESEALOVER@BIZJOURNALS.COM

303-803-9229

@ESEALOVERDENBIZ

ESCAPE ROUTE

Colorado's outdoor-exploration businesses see boom even during summer of travel-industry bust

Shortly after the onset of coronavirus, it appeared that 2020 would be the year from hell for travel-industry companies – and for many, from hotels to group travel guides, it is proving to be just that.

But for a particular segment – namely, those companies that facilitate individuals getting out into uncrowded natural areas – this summer has instead proved to be an unexpected gold mine. Companies that sell RVs, rent multi-day camping vehicles and even plot hiking and biking courses off the beaten path are seeing booming interest and increased sales.

Escape Campervans – a national, Denver-based rental company with 12 locations in the U.S. and Canada – for example, shut down completely in April, had to furlough some staff and decided to delay by a year the opening of its 13th location that was scheduled to debut in March. But since reopening in May, bookings at its Colorado site are up 800% year-over-year, and it's offered three times as many web sessions to potential future customers, president Katie Key said.

"When coronavirus hit, we were like 'This is going to be a disaster of a year.' But then we realized we were positioned pretty well for basically the one type of trip people will take this year," said Key, noting she's been able



PROVIDED BY ESCAPE CAMPERVANS

Escape Campervans have become popular with first-time campers.



PROVIDED BY TITUS ADVENTURE CO.

A Titus Adventure Toyota 4Runner drives through an open back road.

to hire back most of the staffers. "Those people might not have discovered us if there hadn't been a pandemic, so there is a silver lining."

As people have canceled flights and nixed planned trips to amusement parks or events that no longer are happening, they have become attracted to the idea of hitting the road to more nearby and more remote locations. This can offer social distancing with adventure – and for many of the folks switching up their plans, they want some way to travel efficiently and safely.

Recreational-vehicle sales were up 11% year over year in June and jumped 45% just from May to June, noted Monika Geraci, spokeswoman for the RV Industry Association. And while Geraci's group represents manufacturers of the vehicles who ship them to dealers, she said she's heard of some RV rental or sharing companies reporting 1,000% increases in business so far this summer.

Travis Titus was concerned at the

start of 2020 because Titus Adventure Co., which he launched out of Broomfield in July 2019, had a hard time grabbing the attention of potential renters of its three Toyota off-road vehicles, which come loaded with coolers, tents and other necessities. But after he largely suspended business in March and April, he found a new flood of interest from people who'd canceled trips to Europe or Disneyland, and he's at 70% capacity now for the rest of the summer.

Derrick Nehrenberg also has found increased interest in his Crested Butte company, TerraQuest, which creates mountain-biking trails and guides users down them with turn-by-turn directions made possible through artificial intelligence. After generating directions for Gunnison and Crested Butte that allowed bikers who were going to run in competitive races to instead run the courses individually, TerraQuest has seen a surge in interest from potential investors who envision, for example, that bike shops

could purchase and use the technology to send equipment buyers and renters on notable local trails.

Everyone agrees these surges in interest are a direct result of the coronavirus's effect on rearranging travel plans this summer, but most executives believe the business boost is one that can outlast the pandemic, as people discover a new way to travel. Geraci noted, for example, that some RV manufacturers are beginning to reconfigure models to build in movable workstations, feeling that people who have gotten used to working out of the office will now seek to travel more and work in more remote confines.

Nehrenberg was working on the TerraQuest technology well before the pandemic, but its urgency has been heightened by the masses of people now seeking to get outside. Tourism associations, for example, have spoken with him about plotting courses that get people off of the most well-known trails, which have become overcrowded in some instances.

Certainly, many of the customers for these outdoor-facing businesses are new. Key has always provided trip advice but said this summer she's being asked by some novice journeyers how they make campground reservations or what they pack for a distant vacation.

Still, Titus said he believes the windows these opportunities are opening aren't going to go away. First-time customers are expressing awe and satisfaction, and he believes business will only grow as people who are dipping their toes into outdoor travel dive in more each year.

"I'm not seeing this as an 'Oh, let's make hay while the sun shines' trend. I think this is what we will be seeing going forward," he said of the increased business. "I think it's a little bit of a wake-up call to say 'You don't have to travel and go on this elaborate vacation. You can do these great things here.'"

BRIEFLY NOTED

8 COLORADO HOTELS, 3 SAFARI OUTFITTERS HONORED

Eight Colorado hotels and three safari outfitters were honored in this year's World's Best Awards from Travel + Leisure magazine:

- ▶ **C Lazy U Ranch** near Granby: No. 48 hotel in the world, No. 5 resort hotel in the continental U.S., No. 3 resort hotel in the West and No. 2 among resorts in U.S. that are perfect for family;
- ▶ **Sonnenalp Hotel** in Vail: No. 57 (tie) hotel in the world, No. 6 among continental U.S. resort hotels and No. 4 among resort hotels in the West;

- ▶ **Kimpton Hotel Born** in Denver: No. 9 city hotel in the continental U.S.;
- ▶ **The Art, a Hotel** in Denver: No. 13 city hotel in the continental U.S.;
- ▶ **The Little Nell** in Aspen: No. 8 resort hotel in the West;
- ▶ **Hotel Jerome**, Auberge Resorts Collection, in Aspen: No. 11 resort hotel in the West;
- ▶ **Dunton Hot Springs** in Dolores: No. 12 resort hotel in the West;
- ▶ **Devil's Thumb Ranch Resort & Spa** in Tabernash: No. 19 U.S. resort perfect for family;
- ▶ **Rothschild Safaris** of Denver: No. 1 safari outfitter in the world;
- ▶ **Deeper Africa** of Boulder: No. 3 safari outfitter in the world;
- ▶ **Africa Adventure Consultants** of Denver: No. 6 safari outfitter in the world.



PROVIDED BY C LAZY U RANCH

The patio house at C Lazy U Ranch near Granby in Grand County.