

Into the wild: backpacking business takes a hike

by Jen Bondeson

Redefining the meaning of a "working vacation," Ray and Debbie Hendricks of Ocotillo set up a permanent campground outside of the corporate world last year, setting up their family-owned business, Just Roughin' It Adventure Company, as a full-time job.

Established in 2006, Just Roughin' It is a hiking tour specialist company with a mission of giving people, from first-timers to experienced hikers, a memorable outdoor experience, whether it be an active vacation or a day hike.

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After Just Roughin' It was named the go-to company for backpacking the Grand Canyon last year by U.S. News & World Report, calls started coming in from around the world. Soon after, Ray left his part-time job as a training manager for Progressive Auto Insurance. He says they never imagined the business to take off like it did, growing "like a wildfire."

When the business opened, both Ray and Debbie were already experienced hikers and guides: Debbie gave tours with Arizona State University and Ray lead hikes in the northeast, mostly in the Catskill Mountains. Both were Wilderness First Responders and avid weekend adventurers. Ray says the business started off as just "something to do to make a little cash." Now, their hobby is their career, and Ray says this is something they still haven't gotten used to.

"Sometimes, I have to pinch myself," Ray says. "I am doing something that I really enjoy. At first we were like, 'Wow. This is cool. We can actually hike for a living.'"

After hiring several tour guides, Debbie and Ray are rarely the ones out in the mountains anymore. Now, they are focusing on running and growing the company. Ray says after 15 years of business experience and obtaining an MBA last year, he is most valuable behind a desk.

But this multifaceted couple isn't strictly business. Ray was once a guitarist in a band, and Debbie has played drums for two years. Before the business picked up, they both ran competitively in marathons and half-marathons, placing in their age group during local and



out-of-state runs. Debbie is a certified personal trainer and is finishing her doctorate in history from ASU.

The couple's passion, though, is the outdoors.

"It is nice to get somewhere where you can sit and there isn't a sound around you except for the sound of nature," Ray says. "Sitting in the middle of the canyon, you feel really small. Problems back at home tend not to feel so big. That is one thing we dig about it."

Ray's most memorable trip was in March, when he and his group were in Hermit Canyon, below Glen Canyon Dam near Lake Powell outside Page, AZ, the same day that a manmade flood was started from the dam, filling the canyon before their eyes.

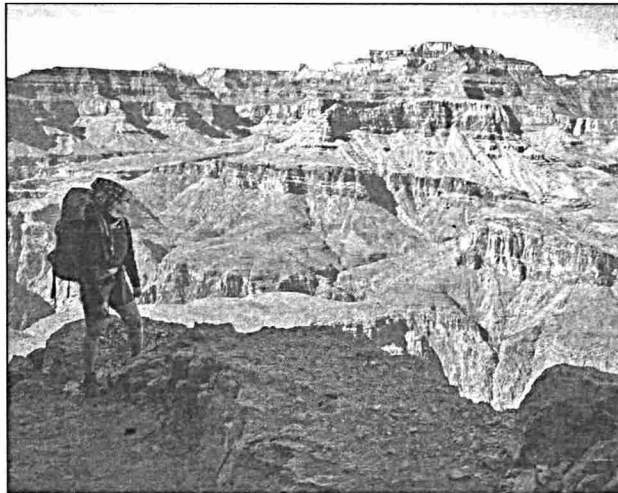
"The water washed through and raised the shoreline about 20 feet overnight," Ray says. "We were able to see the river runners shoot the rapids. We were just really lucky."

He and Debbie say they love experiencing nature with their guests. Their tours are full-service, meaning they include full hiking and camping gear, food, transportation to and from the site, a post-hike lunch, and, most importantly, hiking and camping permits.

Just Roughin' It offers tours of the Grand Canyon, Havasu Falls, the Superstition Mountains and Sedona, as well as many other locations. For local hikers, they offer guide-only packages, where trained guides lead hikers to destinations "they may not even know about."

For information, visit www.justroughinit.com.

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Submitted photo

MUST BE ROUGH: A customer of Just Roughin' It Adventure Company takes in the view from an overlook of the South Kaibab Trail in the Grand Canyon. The company provides everything needed to experience outdoor hikes in the state.



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ROUGHIN' IT & LOVIN' IT: Just Roughin' It Adventure Company co-owner Debbie Hendricks, second from right, leads a group of hikers on a recent Rim to Rim Grand Canyon Tour. She and husband Ray left the corporate world to start their own hiking tour business.