



Madain Saleh in Saudi Arabia

Meet the new kids on the travel block

There's an exciting new player in the Australian travel industry, offering "never seen before" itineraries and experiences.

In this exclusive interview with *Traveltalk*, co-founder David Mannix explains why he's launched Arcadia Expeditions during a global pandemic and the vital role travel agents will play in the company's future.

Q: What led you to set up Arcadia Expeditions?

A: I've been in the adventure travel industry for more than 15 years now (Travel Indochina, Aurora Expeditions, Intrepid) and I felt it was time to use what I have learned to create something that has never been seen before.

Shortly after I returned to Australia from nine years living overseas running DMC's, I was lucky enough to meet and become friends with the renowned documentary filmmaker David Adams.

Every time we would catch up we kept talking about how our vastly different skill sets could be combined to create a totally new travel concept. This is where the documentary-style

storytelling idea for our expeditions was born.

We felt there was a gap at the high end of the market for people who wanted to immerse themselves in a destination and at the same time have an intellectual component to their holiday in the company of world-leading experts.

Q: What is your point of difference to other tour businesses?

A: Our expeditions are different because they are based on immersive storytelling. We want our clients to feel that when they are travelling with Arcadia, it's like they are joining the making of a documentary, but without the film crew.

We decided from the outset that, unlike other travel companies, who



David Mannix, co-founder, Arcadia Expeditions

choose a destination first and then create the itinerary, we would instead start and lead with the story.

Everything else would follow from that. Above all, we were determined to tell stories that had never been told in this type of travel format before – stories that fascinated us and that we felt needed and deserved to be told.

For example, our expedition to Turkey tells the story of the ancient poet Rumi and the mystical world of Sufism – a trip that has never been crafted before and one that offers a fresh perspective on a country that suffers from a staggering lack of imagination in most itineraries I have seen there.

Our expedition to Sudan explores the story of the Three Niles. While most people have heard of the White and Blue Niles, there was in fact a



The Omo tribes of Ethiopia

Yellow Nile that gave life to some extraordinary history and civilisations.

The site of this lost river is where we begin our expedition and along the way we have exclusive access to archaeological dig sites and local historians.

Q: You've also spent a lot of time getting the right personnel in place.

A: Of course, we need a narrator on the ground to tell that story, which is why we have taken the time to interview dozens of subject-matter experts and have eventually chosen a team of academics, authors and historians that I believe is unmatched in the industry.

We want the expedition to feel like it's a travelling dinner party, with our expert storytellers being the host, so we've kept the maximum group size down to 12 for some expeditions and 16 for others.

Importantly, our storytellers aren't passing on their wealth of knowledge through formal lectures. Rather, they will enlighten and expand the understanding of our travellers in a more informal way – through fireside chats, leading a discussion over a meal, or one-on-one over a cocktail.

Q: How important will travel agents be in getting your message out there?

A: Travel agents will be a key part of our sales strategy. Because our entire concept is new to the market, in a funny way, travellers aren't looking for us because they are unaware this type of small group travel exists.

Agents are in a far better position than us to identify and educate their clients about the Arcadia style - once agents learn more about our program they are going to know straight away which of their clients would suit an Arcadia expedition.

Furthermore, given that our expeditions are in some of the world's most far-flung places, agent assistance in helping with the complex logistics of getting to and from our start and finishing points will be vital for our clients.

We have consciously chosen not to organise client flights so that we can focus solely on our expeditions.

Q: You've launched Arcadia during a period of great uncertainty for the travel industry. Does this mean you are confident it will make a full recovery?



A historian at work in the Sudan

A: While there is no doubt this is the worst crisis the travel industry has faced in living memory, we at Arcadia do not believe this is the end of travel.

Certainly it will be a good few years until a full recovery eventuates, but that urge to discover and the innate wanderlust that Australians have will not suddenly disappear.

Perhaps we are bit idealistic, but we genuinely believe that travel plays a central role in life's journey and that once this crisis passes, travellers will be more eager than ever to get back on the road to continue this journey.

Some of the early feedback we have received from travel agents is that our type of traveller will be among those boarding the first planes once the floodgates open. We hope that is true!

Q: What are your hopes for the future of the new company?

A: Above all, I want Arcadia Expeditions to remain true to our twin founding principles of innovation and acting responsibly as a business.

There's a great quote from Rudyard Kipling I found that I put on our website: "If history were taught in the form of stories, it would never be forgotten."

We want to keep telling stories, bring history and culture to life through these stories and to do so by continuing to create ground-breaking itineraries that no one else offers.

I'm a big believer that travel can serve as a force for good in the lives of travellers and in the lives of the people we meet on our expeditions.

That's why my other great hope for Arcadia is that we can make a tangible difference to the places we visit by reducing our negative environmental impacts while increasing our positive social and economic impacts.

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