

Meet WeRoad, bringing strangers together for unique global adventures

As part of our quick fire questions series - or QFQs - we spoke to Erika De Santi, cofounder and International Expansion Director at WeRoad about creating community with unique travel experiences that engage and inspire millennials.

Temps de lecture : minute

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The catalyst was our own experience with travel in our thirties. Together with my co-founders we realised that, as millennials, travel had become difficult if not impossible to organise with friends. We also saw how the issue compounded when it came to travelling to far away destinations or for longer than just a few days.

We had all tried different group tours organised for solo travellers but were equally disappointed by the experience they provided. It felt like an element of authenticity was missing. There are interesting places and stories, but usually tours felt like simply being presented to.

They also definitely lacked a social component. When you travel with a number of people for days in a faraway place, it enhances the experience to get to know those people, especially for solo travellers. But that opportunity was not taken. We believed that getting to know people should be a core component of any such trip.

So we decided to start WeRoad, and build it with community as a value at its foundations. As part of our market research we also tested out

alternative tours from smaller companies, but none of them had what we were looking for. We saw a huge opportunity to bring a change, something fresh to the travel market. The idea was, and still is, to offer and deliver unique, life-changing and off-the-beaten-track experiences that appeal, engage and inspire millennials.

Tell me about the business - what it is, what it aims to achieve, who you work with, how you reach customers and so on?

WeRoad is a social and adventure travel brand that is reinventing group travel for millennials. We organise group tours for like-minded people of similar ages eager to discover the world through the eyes of locals, while making new friends along the way.

Our ambition is to become the leading adventure travel brand in Europe by 2025. We already have operations in Italy, Spain and the UK. Our next step to achieve European leadership is the imminent launch of our operations in France and Germany, thus achieving a presence in each of the top five European travel markets.

We work primarily with millennial professionals. Typically in their thirties and single, they are solo travellers but would love travelling in groups with like-minded people. They tend to struggle to get their friends organised because they might be married, focusing on work, or living in different countries. It's that age when spending any time with old friends is difficult, let alone synchronising for a trip together.

The social aspect of travel, and the community we are building, both sit at the heart of what WeRoad is all about. These elements are not only critical to our growth and expansion, but they make travelling with us a unique experience that differentiates us from other travel players.

To reach customers, we maximise the utility of our digital platforms. The idea is to never just create awareness, but always strive to engage with our target audience.

I would say that WeRoad has an original spin on social media in which humour also plays a big role. We market directly to consumers and so social media is definitely one of our most important engines of global growth, having created a community of 1.5 million followers. We're the world's number one adventure travel social brand.

How has the business evolved since its launch? When was this?

Things have moved very fast, and although the pandemic slowed us down for some time, we never stopped coming up with ideas and activities to bounce back stronger.

Since the day we launched in 2018, WeRoad has provided trips for more than 30,000 customers. This year we are on track to hit €30 million in revenue with 100 employees and experiencing 3.5x growth vs 2019 levels, the last year of normal travel before the pandemic.

Despite the growth, we work hard to maintain a high standard. We achieve an average customer satisfaction rating of 9.1/10 and more than 40% of our customers rebook year on year. For us it is important to continue creating relationships, between travellers but also with locals.

After a WeRoad trip, people are left with long lasting friendships, but for some it has been also a life changing experience.

How are you funded?

Our funding to date has been a mix of equity and debt. We had two initial

funding rounds of equity before our seed round of €15.5 million, which was a mix of equity and debt. Our first million came from the OneDay Business Builder, and the subsequent rounds from family offices and angels.

What has been your biggest challenge so far and how have you overcome this?

The pandemic was a challenge that brought a nuclear winter to many in the travel industry, and that could have broken down our company. As a young company, we spent over 2 out of our 5 years struggling to survive and deal with Covid and its consequences. However, it led us into a survival mode that triggered creativity and lateral thinking that made us stronger for the future and that is now ingrained in our DNA.

During the pandemic we used the power of gift cards to generate revenue at a time when it was simply not possible to travel. It gave us a real sense of how strong our community and our brand was, and the importance of taking care of them. Within three days we raised around €750,000 worth of gift cards. That actually surprised us, considering it was at a time when people didn't even know when they would be able to use them.

We never stopped looking for opportunities to restart. We kept track of the different countries' regulations, each with their different systems allowing people to move to certain countries but not others. It was a mess, but when we finally learnt that it was possible to travel to the Canary Islands, we were the first Italian travel company to offer tours there.

How does WeRoad answer an unmet need?

The millennial audience is motivated by the love of long-haul travel, the desire for adventure, the chance to create life-long friendships, and to

have life-changing experiences. Conventional vacations in this sector are not resonating with millennials anymore. They do not want to be treated as consumers of a product, but rather as participants in a community of like-minded people. And they prefer a totally new way of marketing that is authentic, spontaneous, playful, and social media-driven.

Our business model reflects that. It is drastically different to the rest of the industry. Tours are led by our 1,000-plus - and growing - "travel coordinators". Like WeRoaders, they're passionate travellers eager to discover faraway lands, make friends and have life-changing experiences. They're not full-time tour guides, nor local experts, but fellow travellers that have additional organisational responsibilities (and perks!). It's a coveted post for which we receive more than 4,000 applications each year.

The WeRoad experience is enhanced by our digital channels and community groups, where travellers can meet and greet before seeing each other in real life and also by our engaging use of social media.

What's in store for the future?

We are aiming to become the European leader in group adventure travel by 2025. There are also a few new innovations we have in store.

The first is to enhance the role of our coordinators, allowing them to create and arrange travel itineraries themselves. They will be able to shape the product, meaning the tours, and sell them through our platform. This will enhance the uniqueness of the experience but it also means coordinators will have the possibility to work with WeRoad on a full-time basis. Currently, most of our coordinators have normal jobs and do the coordinator role in their time off work. For the company, it also means added potential for scalability.

The second opportunity relates to a new product for slightly older age groups of 50 years or older. This is something we're looking to explore further, and which most likely will look like a more luxury version of our current tours.

As for expanding our geographical footprint - we're aiming to open offices in Germany and France to launch operations there soon, followed by Benelux and the Nordics by next year. If all goes to plan, we will look at the Americas and APAC next.

What one piece of advice would you give other founders or future founders?

First and foremost - "Get s** done". When starting a business from scratch, the biggest risk is getting stuck in the "what if I do this, what if I do that, what would happen if", etc. There's no better way to find out if something works than doing it and plan future actions accordingly.

Moreover, trying to reach perfection at an early stage is counterproductive. So, to any perfectionist out there (including me), learn to adopt a "done is better than perfect" approach, it's going to help you get from 0 to 1.

And finally, a more personal question! What's your daily routine and the rules you're living by at the moment?

When launching a new market or business, your day can often be extremely hectic and non-regular. This is especially true if you're overseeing multiple markets at the same time and need to visit them frequently. There's no secret recipe on how to work through it all, but my suggestion is to take time on a quarterly basis to plan ahead, both professional and personal events/tasks, so that you make sure not to

neglect anything and anybody along the road.

Erika De Santi is cofounder and International Expansion Director at *WeRoad*.

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