

Experience truly special places sustainably with Pura Aventura

As part of our quick fire questions series - or QFQs - we spoke to Thomas Power cofounder and CEO of Pura Aventura about visiting special places, being a certified B Corp and making travel a force for good.

Temps de lecture : minute

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Back in 1995 I washed up in Torres del Paine National Park in the far south of Chile. It was so beautiful that I didn't leave for six weeks, by which time I was so skint that I had to hitchhike 3,000km back to the capital. Along the way I was shown kindness by people who had no reason, often no real means, to look after me. By the time I got to Santiago I had a head full of Patagonia's incredible nature, and a heart full of gratitude to its people. Pura Aventura came from a desire to share truly special places and to repay a debt of gratitude.

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

At Pura Aventura, we discover incredible places that we know our network of customers, who share our passion for sustainable travel, would love. Once we've found a new place we establish a network of partners on the ground, from guides to hotels and restaurants. Our trips are created from scratch working with local people directly, so they get the full benefit of the tourism.

By cutting out the intermediaries, we gain greater control of our supply chain. This means better quality control, unique products and we can actively avoid overtourism. With money from our kind of tourism going directly to small and micro-businesses in remote areas, more money stays within those communities which in turn helps protect the surrounding nature.

The direct way we contract services for our holidays leaves us well placed to build in sustainability at the heart of every trip. For Pura Aventura, community, conservation and carbon are all measurables applied to the development phase of our holidays.

We are striving to become leaders in extraordinary, sustainable holidays by uncovering and sharing places we love.

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

Pura Aventura began in 1999, as a hobby business. Because we were experiencing each holiday ourselves, we could always find something unique to offer our customers.

The business evolved when we started to professionalise things, creating a profitable enterprise. I was then accepted onto the Goldman Sachs 10,000 Small Businesses programme, which is like a highly-compressed, practical MBA, and by the end of 2017 I had a head full of ideas. This led to amazing results in 2018 and 2019. Then Covid.

Although Covid was an existential challenge, it did allow us to clarify our purpose and find a new way to balance our three Ps: people, planet and profit.

Tell us about the working culture at Pura Aventura

We were one of the first travel companies in the UK to be a certified B Corp. Our B Corp status pushes us to be better at what we do but also how we do it, and this is often the reason people want to work with us. The team we have are smart, motivated, loyal and dedicated. We follow a Good to Great concept - when you have the right people on board, you don't have to motivate them, you just have to not demotivate them.

How are you funded?

The company was started with investment from friends and family and that's it really. The benefit of this is that it allowed us to be the type of business we wanted to be. I believe that businesses, like individuals, have a responsibility to fully pay the cost of sale - be that physical, social or environmental. Any funding pathway which blocked that option probably wouldn't have worked for us.

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

Covid. There was zero sector specific help. Airlines were given large hand-outs, but the wider travel industry was given nothing. As an outbound tour operator based in the UK we were not permitted to trade for 18 months. At the same time, we were legally required to cancel trips and refund customer money, or defer their holidays. We were prevented from generating revenue while having to return the cost of already-booked holidays. It was brutal.

However, we knew we couldn't stand still and had to keep moving forward. We did this in two ways.

First was to try to create some clarity for our decision making so we created a detailed tool whereby we could model the business based on probabilities. As it became clear that certain trips could not run, we'd move the probability to zero and that would flow through to the bottom line, and cash. Taking the time to create a very specific and powerful tool allowed us to make sound decisions very quickly.

Secondly, we realised that the challenges the industry was facing would change it for the better, and we would be perfectly placed to make the most of the opportunity. We predicted people would have a greater appreciation of nature, want to take fewer, but longer holiday, be environmentally conscious and not want to be in crowded places. Therefore, we focused on making our business a better business. In late 2020 we became one of the *first UK travel companies to certify as B Corp* and since then our profile as leaders in the space of sustainable travel has grown immeasurably.

How does Pura Aventura answer an unmet need?

There's a whole community of considered travellers out there. People who have resources and time to travel but are not label snobs or tick listers. They want to go somewhere and feel they are getting to know it as opposed to simply seeing it. Our 'working directly' model means we are brokering introductions between our clients and our partners/destinations rather than pushing our customers along a supply chain - and that's a rare thing. We want our clients to become fans, which speaks to the loyalty generated when people feel they have found a product or service which is truly special.

What's in store for the future?

These are very exciting times for us. We have very ambitious growth plans which are being coupled with industry leading sustainability metrics. We want to prove that travel can be a force for good at the same time as being a great business. Not just leading by example, we are also part of a rapidly growing community of B Corp certified travel companies here in the UK. I'm proud to be co-founder of Travel by B Corp. - a collective effort to promote B Corp as the trust mark in sustainable travel that it deserves to be.

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

Resilience. You are going to need it in spades. To keep it, you need to have an unshakable belief that what you are doing matters. Without this you won't have the resilience to weather the inevitable storms.

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

I'm tempted to give a guru-esque answer here about 4am wake up calls and macrobiotic smoothies... but the truth is that I run a travel company in the aftermath of a global pandemic, and I've got two stroppy teenage sons. My main rule is to survive each day.

And that's not entirely facetious. As I sit here, precisely a year ago today a good friend of mine died very suddenly. Beyond a few habits like regular swimming, I don't set much store by routine. To me they are a way of creating an illusion of control but they risk taking us away from the fullness of life which is messy and sad but also delightful, surprising and

precious.

Thomas Power is cofounder and CEO of *Pura Aventura*.

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