



VIEW*S* & VISIONS

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A Chorus of “Can Do!”

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Public Relations & Strategic Partnerships
Adventures on the Gorge

Dave Arnold is the Senior Vice President of Public Relations and Strategic Partnerships at Adventures on the Gorge, West Virginia’s preeminent outdoor adventure resort.

Originally from Ohio, Arnold began his first professional job as a river guide on the New and Gauley Rivers in 1977. It planted in him a deep-rooted love for the Mountain State. In 1978, Arnold combined his entrepreneurial heritage with his love for whitewater rafting and co-founded Class VI River Runners. That endeavor evolved into Adventures on the Gorge.

He has served on the West Virginia Tourism Commission since its inception in 1994. He chaired the West Virginia Hospitality and Travel Association for more than a decade, served on the West Virginia Economic Development Authority and was part of the team that successfully bid to bring the Summit Bechtel Reserve to Fayetteville for the Boy Scouts of America. Arnold also serves on the board of the New River Gorge Economic Development Authority and as an ex-officio member for the West Virginia Hospitality and Travel Association’s board.

Arnold has been a voice for West Virginia tourism for the past 25 years, a responsibility he takes very seriously and is eager to share with others.

A few years ago, I was talking to a reporter named Mike Ivey and he asked me a question that I still think about today. The question was, “When did rafting become an industry?” Clearly, we were not an industry in the 1970s. I remember Tom Dragan of Wildwater describing the beginning as something similar to a summer lawn business. It was just something the crew at Wildwater did to make a little cash and have some fun. There was no big bang that started it all, just a lot of passionate kids focused on the natural beauty of West Virginia and its rivers.

There was also another force at hand that made things happen that is really important and relevant for today – a wide-ranging “can do” attitude that came from all levels of the community. Most local bankers and business leaders jumped in with both feet. Political



people from the county, state and federal levels all saw a future in rafting and were excited to create an environment where this little niche business could grow.

So back to the question, “When did rafting become an industry?” By definition, industry is a group of enterprises that employs a large number of people and have high capital needs. With that definition in mind, I would say it was in 1984 that we became an industry. Several significant things happened that year. Four companies went together to build Teays Landing, a major new takeout on the New River. This was a very complicated project that took major financial and political engineering and planning to complete. Our company crossed the 50 employees mark that year with 51 at year’s end. Congressman Nick Rahall secured a Gauley River season for us by making whitewater a project purpose of Summersville Dam. Our company started a profit-sharing plan that still lives on today. New, professional management came into the game and, as some say, that’s when we became real players in the adventure industry.

All of this was the beginning of the adventure tourism industry in Fayette County, West Virginia. At about the same time, the snow skiing industry wanted to make West Virginia more than just a great place to ski. They were a little bit ahead of us in evolving to adventure tourism, Snowshoe being the obvious leader with the construction of Rimfire Lodge and the commitment to becoming a four-season resort.



At the same time, we really started to look at some other areas of the United States that were evolving into adventure tourism destinations. The town that really stood out as a prime example was Moab, Utah. Twenty years ago, Moab was a very typical, small western town that recorded a 25 percent drop in the 1990 census as mining moved out. It was a town that needed a boost. Adventure tourism gave them that boost and has been driving their growth ever since.

Moab's slogan is, "Where Adventure Begins." And adventure they have! Rafting, climbing, base jumping, slacklining, mountain biking, four-wheel drive tours and hiking are just some of their adventure drivers. Their location between the two federal parks of Arches and Canyonlands is also key to their success. In addition, Moab has easy access to many acres of other federal lands and has two state parks nearby.

This is very similar to what we have with the New River Gorge. There are two federal properties, the New River National River and the Gauley River National Recreation Area, with the Monongahela National Forest just to our north. We have two state parks, Hawks Nest and Babcock. We have a declining population due partly to a declining mining industry. So, what



is the difference between the New River Gorge and Moab, Utah? Why has their growth in adventure tourism been greater than ours?

Any question like this is complicated, with any answer being just as tricky. But one simple, clear answer harkens back to what got this industry off the ground in the first place: we need more of a "can do" attitude on all levels. In the world of adventure tourism, every time someone says we cannot do this or cannot do that, we really need to stop and ask why not? A perfect example of this attitude, and somewhere that is successfully doing adventure

tourism on a worldwide scale, would be New Zealand. Queenstown has developed the products and built the infrastructure to attract people from all over the world to come do adventure tourism.

Years ago, Governor Gaston Caperton sent a group of West Virginians to Ireland to study their very successful tourism industry and to see if we could apply what was learned to West Virginia tourism. Perhaps it is time to study and learn from places like Moab and Queensland if we are to truly excel and grow in the niche industry of adventure tourism. ▽