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Photos by Jeff Giknis

Tour Entrepreneur

Vermont's VBT Bicycling and Walking Vacations leads the way in traveling, eating, and cycling—locally.



GREGG MARSTON graduated from UVM in 1977. With a degree in finance, he knew he would soon work in the world of investments. While still in college and 21 years old, however, he took a trip. “I went to New Zealand,” he says. “I liked some pictures I saw in a *National Geographic*.” Hitchhiking in New Zealand, Gregg encountered tourists who raved about Australia: “You *have* to go,” they said. Down under, he met still other travelers who went on and on about Indonesia. “Pretty soon I found myself on the Khyber Pass in Afghanistan,” he says. Gregg had sailed across the Bay of Bengal from Malaysia to Sri Lanka and India, and he had gone overland through Pakistan, Afghanistan, Iran, and Turkey. Always on a shoestring, he was gone for 18 months.

In short, Gregg Marston loves to travel. “I love getting with the locals,” he enthuses. “Experiencing cultures

through their eyes. Tasting their food and meeting their families.”

As president of VBT Bicycling and Walking Vacations, Gregg is still passionate about travel. He and 40 employees occupy a converted yellow farmhouse and dairy barn outside of Bristol to plan logistics, sell tours, tune bikes, maintain equipment, and tend to all of the details that go into running 48 tours in 28 countries—including two Vermont tours, one that originates and one that ends in the Bristol farmhouse parking lot. “We provide people with an experiential activity that stimulates the senses,” says Gregg. “Those ingredients combine to make a positive impact on their lives. And that feels good.”

WHAT'S IN A NAME?

Gregg did not go immediately into the travel business after completing his world tour; rather, he worked for a Boston investment firm for 23 years. “It

Greg Marston is president of VBT Bicycling and Walking Vacations, a company whose Bristol headquarters commands a fabulous view of Winona Lake and the Green Mountains in northwestern Vermont. The headquarters is the point of origin for the company's ever-popular Champlain Valley & Islands tour, just one of many that VBT offers.



The VBT home office (above) is not only in tune with cycling and walking tours, but the Vermont countryside as well. In the Monkton area, just a few miles north of Bristol are great views of open farmland and of Camel's Hump in the distance (top), while in the Lake Champlain Islands (left) open vistas of the Adirondacks can be seen by cyclists touring South Hero, Grand Isle, North Hero, and Isle La Motte. The area is virtually a cyclist's paradise.

was a good life," he says. "But something didn't feel right for my family and me."

Meanwhile, John Freidin, a college professor at Middlebury, founded Vermont Bicycle Touring in 1971 after putting together some bicycling itineraries for himself and friends. When he realized the kinds of life experiences that can be had traveling on two wheels and meeting locals (*and eating locally*), he also recognized an opportunity.

By the time Gregg entered the picture, John had already sold the company. In the mid-1990s, Gregg, who had heard of VBT during his UVM years, engaged then-owner Bill Perry in dialogues about a possible purchase, but Bill sold to Grand Circle Travel of Boston instead. Eventually, Grand Circle hired Gregg. He and his wife Caroline purchased VBT in 2005 (and recently sold their stock, but to a company that is not involved in VBT operations).

"My UVM experience was great," Gregg says. "And Vermont has been a

great place for our family." Leaving a secure employment situation wasn't a decision he and Caroline took lightly, but in the end matching vocation with evocation became something Gregg wanted to model. "I wanted to splice together my passion with a career," he says. "And Caroline and I wanted to show our kids that it's okay to take a risk."

It bears mentioning that the company no longer has the word "Vermont" in its name. When John Freidin started his "Vermont Bicycle Touring," the trips were primarily based in the Green Mountain State. As the company's scope broadened, the name evolved to the current VBT Bicycling and Walking Vacations.

The initials VBT pay homage to the history of the company and its founder. Meanwhile, the "V" in VBT still refers to the company's roots and home. "The word *Vermont* evokes a number of images," Gregg says. "Integrity, commitment, quality, pride, and frugality." These are all characteristics, he says,

that clients can look for on a tour—be it in Belgium, Asia, or the "Classic Vermont" trip that VBT offers during the summer.

RECIPE FOR A GOOD TOUR

VBT travelers eat fresh, local food—whether they are cycling to a Mekong village in Vietnam, exploring the Dalmatian Islands in Croatia, or ferrying between Cape Cod and Martha's Vineyard. Good food, however, is only one ingredient for good tours.

Christy Schlafly, of St. Louis, is a veteran of no fewer than seven VBT tours. Although she admits that she is not an avid cyclist ("Far from it," she chuckles), she believes it is all about the bikes. "There's only one way to explore an area," she says. According to Christy, the beauty of bicycles is that you can still cover significant miles without missing an area's local flavor. "You see what the real people are doing—where they work, where they go to church," she says. "Things you'd never notice



Tour leaders Bill Rusch (back row, in yellow shirt) and Chip Martin (in red shirt, right) pose with guests while on a tour (and a friendly visit with Mr. Stowe, center, a local farmer). The UVM Morgan Horse Farm (left) is one of the stops on VBT's Classic Vermont tour in Addison County.



from a moving car.”

Not all VBT trips involve bikes, however; VBT also offers walking trips and, new in 2012, cross-country skiing vacations. All trips are leader and van supported. Which is why, for Gregg and Caroline, a key ingredient is having the right trip leaders. The average age of VBT's clientele is 53. “So we don't hire college kids,” Gregg explains. “Our leaders, though, are real people—in it for the experience, just like our clients.”

Exactly what sort of experience is a leader looking for? “I like riding along with people,” says Chip Martin of Waterbury and VBT leader on the two Vermont tours. “I enjoy taking pictures and emailing them to people later when they don't expect it. And I like discovering new things on a ride I've done over and over.”

Two leaders accompany each VBT tour—one on a bicycle and the other in the van. “They take you where you don't have to worry about traffic,” says Christy. “And they know the secret places and backdoor entries.”

VERMONT BY BIKE

Dew clings to blades of grass on a cool July morning in the Champlain Islands. Behind the North Hero House, the inn where guests on VBT's “Champlain Valleys and Islands” tour stay for two nights, VBT leaders Chip Martin and Bill Rusch tinker with bikes, deliver clinics on bicycle maintenance and how to change a flat, and brief guests on what to expect on the morning's ride. Starting at the North Hero House, the ride loops around Isle LaMotte, taking in the historic Fisk farm and quarry

sites, the Vermont Clock Company, and St. Anne's Shrine.

Bill and Chip's talk includes directions (“Most important is the first turn out of the parking lot!” says Bill), history (the first European to step foot on Isle LaMotte was Samuel de Champlain, who named the lake after—who else?—himself), and, for more ambitious riders, how to tack on extra miles. On the Isle LaMotte ride, this add-on also includes the ride's biggest hill (“I'll be handing out medals at the top,” jokes Chip). The entire briefing takes place over a North Hero House buffet of eggs, bacon, sausages, quiches, waffles, French toast, and gigantic sticky buns. “Not sure how I'm losing weight on this biking vacation,” notes one guest.

The relationship between VBT and local vendors like the North Hero



Happiness isn't necessarily found at the end of the proverbial road; on a cycling or walking tour, happiness can easily be found along the way!

House is one important aspect of the business for Gregg. “Our goal is to put people in their beds,” he says. “A lot of people.” Part of VBT’s mission is to uphold a commitment to guests, but Gregg feels the same toward vendors. His goal: to create win-win situations for his company, his vendors, and his customers. The vacation business can be difficult during hard economic times. “During the height of the recession, rather than tighten our belts, we continued advertising,” he says. “We feel it demonstrated a commitment to our employees and our vendors.”

For Gregg and Caroline, many of the attributes that make Vermont a good place to raise their family also make good tours. “It’s the right pace

here,” he says. “There’s great local food and wine and beautiful lakes and mountains. And no billboards!” The people also help. As with VBT tours around the world, vendors become the local contact for which guests are looking. “We ask vendors to introduce themselves to guests,” Gregg comments. On the two Vermont tours, guests find them to be innovative and hardworking. “They’re Vermonters,” Gregg quips. “They make it happen.”

Gregg says that he and his family have learned a lot since moving to Vermont. “We try to under-promise and over-deliver,” he says. But he isn’t afraid to promise world-class trips and cultural experiences. “It’s not spin,” he says. “We work hard and we love what

Just the facts

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we do. That’s who we are—a company from Vermont. And that permeates around the world.”

Mark Aiken is a freelance writer from Richmond, VT. When he is not busy at his writing desk, you can find him teaching skiing at Stowe or making lines in Vermont’s backcountry. When there is no snow, he trains for marathons with his wife, Alison.