

TRAVEL

Adventure

NORTHWEST TRAVELERS

This is the first in occasional “Northwest travelers” profiles on Seattle-area travel companies and travelers by Times writer/editor Kristin Jackson.

A kind of travel where green means giving back

BY KRISTIN JACKSON
Seattle Times travel staff

“Greenwashing” makes Kurt Kutay, president of Seattle’s Wildland Adventures, see red.

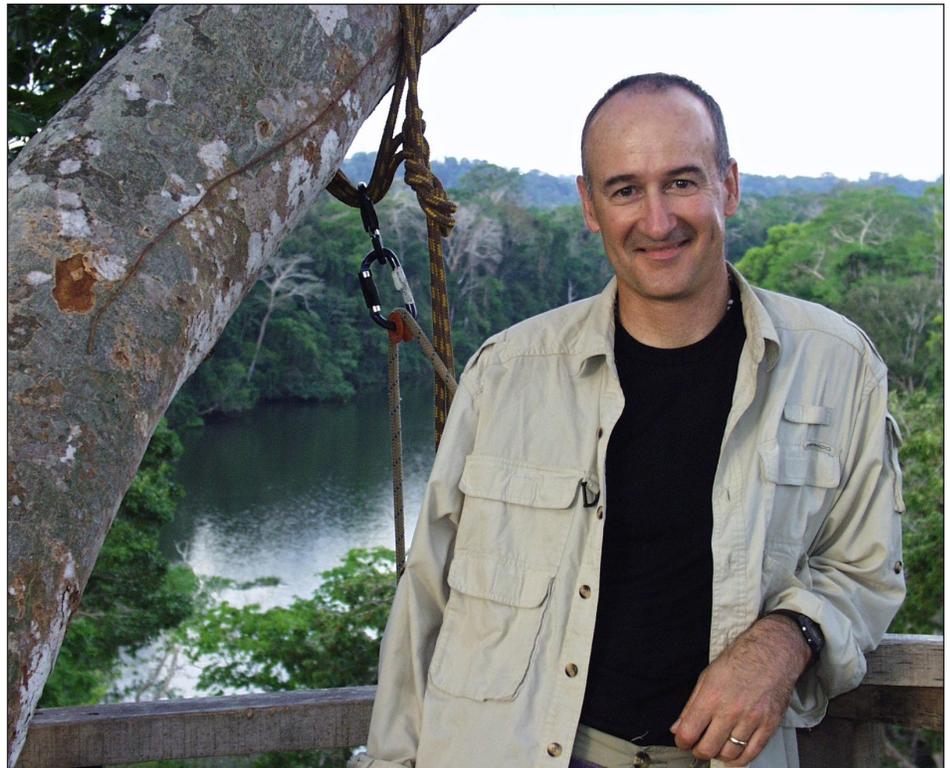
To cash in on increasingly popular nature/adventure tours, many travel businesses are promoting themselves as ecotourism companies.

Often it’s just marketing hype – “greenwashing” – says Kutay, by companies that don’t give anything substantial back to the places their clients visit.

True ecotourism or “green” travel means helping local communities economically and learning about the natural and cultural heritage, says the 54-year-old Kutay. And it means helping travelers to connect with local people and conservation efforts – as well as enjoy the scenery and wildlife.

Kutay’s small company, which he founded 20 years ago, certainly aims to give travelers a good time on trips to far-away places, from Central America to East Africa and beyond. But along with the fun, Wildland Adventures employs mostly local guides; steers travelers off the beaten track to get to know the people and environmental/cultural issues; and fosters the donation of money and goods to communities and conservation groups.

“Over the years we have launched clean-up treks on the Inca Trail in Peru



COURTESY OF KURT KUTAY

Kurt Kutay, president of Seattle’s Wildland Adventures, takes a break in Peru.

and delivered clothes to cold regions of the high Andes in Peru and Bolivia,” said Kutay. “We’ve donated curriculum (materials) from American schools to community schools in Belize and Africa.”

Wildland Adventures and its travelers

also have donated tens of thousands of dollars to conservation groups in the countries they visit through the nonprofit Travelers Conservation Trust which Kutay set up.

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And Kutay, who's well known in ecotourism circles, is on the advisory board of the Seattle-based Adventure Travel Trade Association and has served on the board of The International Ecotourism Society, headquartered in Washington, D.C.

A Costa Rica start

For Kutay, it all began in Costa Rica where he worked for the country's national park service, using his pre-travel background in natural resource management, and backpacked for six months in Latin America.

After moving to Seattle in 1986, Kutay found people wanted to see the ecologically rich Costa Rican rain forests he talked about. He began taking a few people to Costa Rica on casual, occasional tours, to meet the park rangers and locals he knew – and to enjoy the country's beaches and forest trails.

Since then, Costa Rica's tourism has boomed. For Wildland, which now has a staff of eight in Seattle and 60 to 80 local guides scattered around the world, Costa Rica remains the most popular destination for its customers.

"Our travelers have cut their teeth on adventure there. People have been to Hawaii, Mexico, so they're looking for something different. Costa Rica is an entry point for adventurous travel because there are well-educated people, good infrastructure, good health and well-trained guides," said Kutay.

Wildland Adventures isn't big-time, mass tourism. While it does offer 100 different trips, it sends just 1,500 travelers a year, including many from the Seattle area, to Belize, Costa Rica, Kenya, Peru, the Middle East and other far-flung destinations.

About half go on small-group scheduled tours, of anywhere from four to a dozen people; the rest go on private, custom trips with the logistics – including hotels, transport and guides – organized for them by Wildland.

It's isn't budget, backpacker travel. A Costa Rica private trip costs about \$220 and up per person per day, including meals, lodging and excursions (but not international airfare). East Africa tours are around \$4,000 per person for a 12- to 13-day trip (not including international air travel).

Close encounters

Lately, Wildland has been focusing on family trips, including tours that would appeal to teens. That's grown out of Kutay's family life. He and wife Anne Kutay, a Wildland vice president, and their now 16-year-son Tarek, would head abroad during their son's school breaks, often to Central America, and began taking families from Tarek's school along with them.

Kutay also is focusing on ecotourism in Kenya and Tanzania where he's set up tours with the Nairobi-based Maasai Environmental Resource Coalition, which tries to safeguard traditional tribal land rights as well as East Africa's wildlife. Maasai guides take travelers through the wildlife-rich parks and into Maasai homes and schools.

Some of Kutay's hopes of fostering cross-cultural connections between travelers and locals have come true in East Africa. Wildland has operated trips for the Bellevue-based Beads and Beyond store, taking bead artists to Kenya/Tanzania where the Maasai are renowned for their intricate beaded jewelry. Along with touring the wildlife parks, the Maasai and Americans shared their beadwork skills, traditions and technology.

That's the kind of grass-roots encounter that makes Kutay a happy traveler.