

CLEVELAND ENTREPRENEUR taps into the experiential travel market with a competition that lets people choose their own adventures

STORY AND PHOTO BY LAURA WATILO BLAKE

Have you ever imagined being a contestant on the reality-TV show “Amazing Race” but weren’t interested in having cameras following your every move? Steve Belkin believes he has found the perfect solution with Competitours — a travel contest he’ll launch this summer in which two-person teams visit secret destinations across Europe to vie for a grand prize.

Best of all, anyone who pays the entry fee can go along for the ride.

“This is not a cookie-cutter package trip,” Belkin, the president of Competitours, says. “This is a chance for you to get off your duff, get into the game, and create a lot of unique memories.”

In each location, participants select from a series of challenges, documenting them with a portable digital video camera in an effort to earn points. Judges then score each day’s videos based on the amount of effort, creativity, resourcefulness, and daring used to create them.

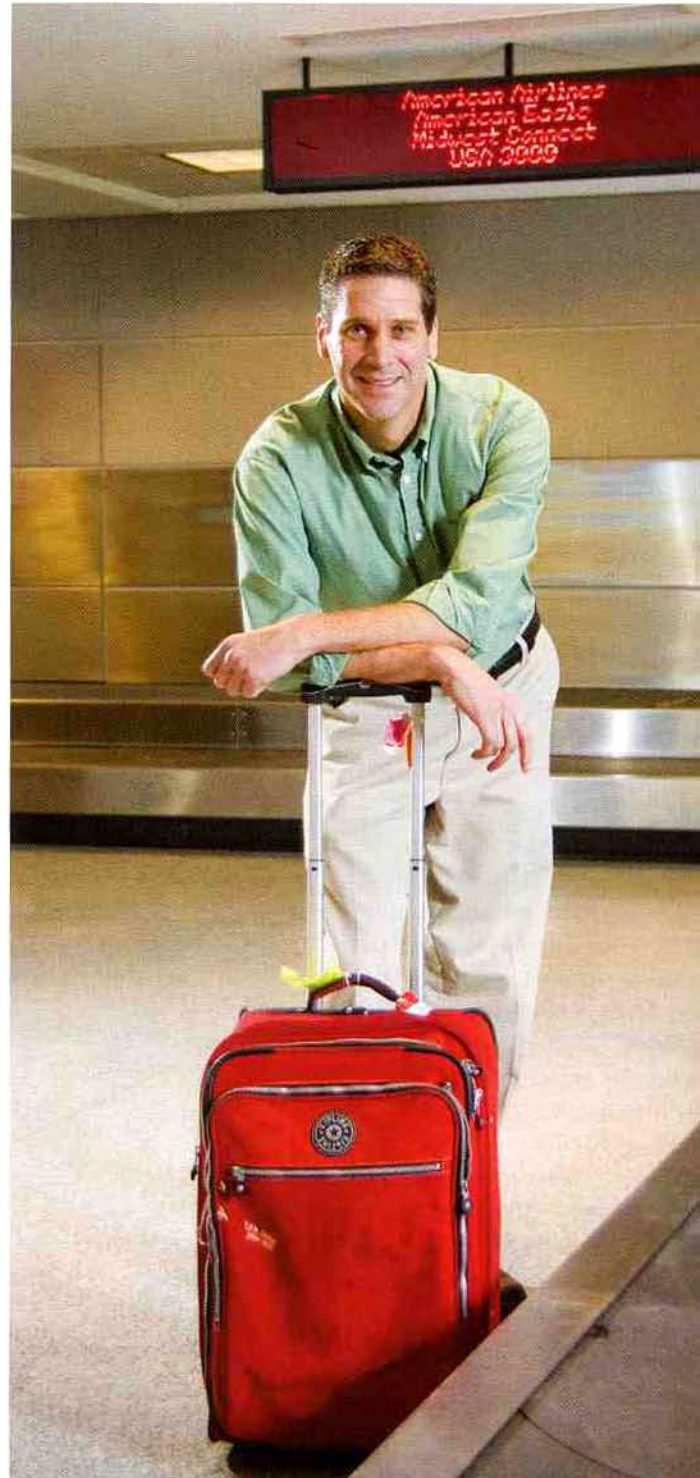
“Instead of sight-seeing,” Belkin says, “participants are ‘sight-doing.’ Anyone can get off a bus, go to the top of the Eiffel Tower and say, ‘I’ve been there.’ How many people can say they’ve gone to the top of the Eiffel Tower and recruited 15 total strangers to do the can-can?”

When all the points are tallied at the end of the trip, one team wins a worldwide travel spree, including airfare, up to 40 nights in any Starwood hotel, and up to \$6,500 in prize money.

The idea for Competitours started to percolate after Belkin, a Cleveland native, participated in the Global Scavenger Hunt, which he calls the “mothership of all travel competitions.” During that race in 2004, he and his partner zoomed through 10 countries on four continents in three weeks.

“The trip was a blur,” he says. “There was no chance to immerse ourselves; we were just chasing points. I felt like there was room for improvement.”

Competitours participants can choose how much or how little they want to do, giving them the opportunity to savor their trip abroad.



Cleveland native Steve Belkin wants Competitours participants to break from the cookie-cutter mold of traveling.

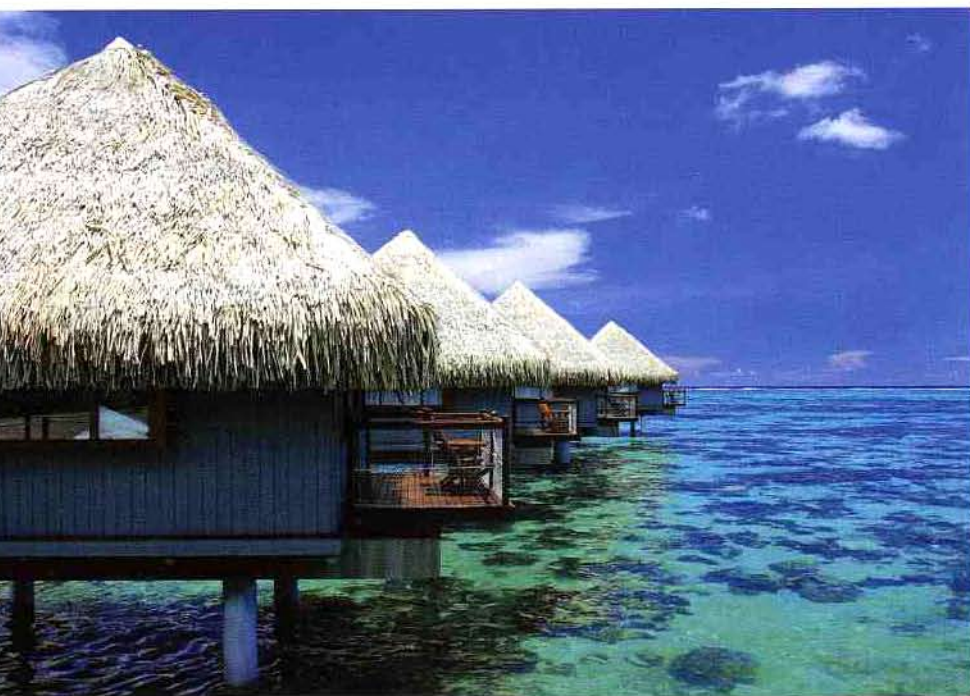


Photo provided by Starwood Hotels and Resorts

The winning Competitours team can choose to stay at any Starwood resort property, including the Le Meridien Tahiti, where these over-water bungalows provide stunning views of Moorea.

"They are their own travel guides," Belkin says. "If they decide to wake up one day and not do anything — perhaps they are in last place and know they can't catch up — that's their choice."

A National Tour Association survey shows that traditional packaged tours are overwhelmingly viewed as boring and ordinary. Trends in recent years have shown a dramatic increase in travelers' desires for one-of-a-kind, specialized trips such as Competitours.

"I definitely thought there was a niche between backpacking and the structured package tours," Belkin says. "We spare you the structure and dictatorship of being on a trip where everything is spoon-fed to you, but it's also unlike a backpacker trip with no goal or purpose. It's definitely the best of both worlds."

According to an American Express poll of its travel agents, demand for this type of "experiential travel" will continue to rise in 2009 despite it being a tumultuous year for the U.S. economy. There remains a strong core of travelers ready and willing to go places. In fact, interest in Competitours has already exceeded Belkin's expectations.

"We're out of the box with sign-ups," he says. "I expected things to sprout more slowly."

Competitours trips range in price from \$1,995 per person for an eight-day jaunt to \$2,950 for a two-week journey in June, July or August. The cost includes international airfare, accommodations, and a Eurail pass for train travel between game locales. Food and admission to sites are extra. □

For more information:
www.competitours.com

“We spare you the structure and dictatorship of being on a trip where everything is spoon-fed to you, but it's also unlike a backpacker trip with no goal or purpose. It's definitely the best of both worlds.”

JK



HEAD SHOTS



CORPORATE PORTRAITURE



ON LOCATION



IN STUDIO



CALL OR E-MAIL TODAY FOR CURRENT RATES



JESSE KRAMER
 PHOTOGRAPHER
 216-226-9500

JESSEKRAMERPHOTO.COM JESSEKRAMERPHOTO@YAHOO.COM