

An Operator's View: OneNineFive's Greg Norris

12 Jul 2019 By Contributor



Greg Norris

OneNineFive director Greg Norris on developing a niche business offering customised incentives, events and group travel experiences for corporates, his new inbound brand, 34°South, and running NZ's first Pure Pursuits event, which hosts senior travel and event visionaries and influencers from around the world.

OneNineFive is a small, niche business focused on creating and delivering sales growth incentive and reward programmes for New Zealand corporates. We also design and manage executive retreats and SLT off-sites and other customised group travel experiences.

There are three of us that own the business: myself, co-director Carlene Staines – who has an extensive travel background and was the owner of Adventure Travel for many years, and finance manager, Brendon Fyfe-Gits.

The three of us bring a wonderful mix of skills and expertise. We are based just north of Wellington in a fun office near the beach that we share with Malia Brock, who works for us, along with a graphic designer, videographer and a few more entrepreneurs. It's an excellent place to work from.

Over the last five years as OneNineFive has developed we have built strong relationships with corporates and through this receive requests to host more leisure-related and special interest travel such as a culinary New York experience, a group to Byron Bay Bluesfest and a customised luxury New Zealand vacation for a Norwegian family.

By picking up increasing leisure and inbound work it became clear that the OneNineFive brand and messaging was not clearly aligned to the international inbound audience. We decided to create a new brand, alongside OneNineFive, that offers New Zealand travel experiences to inbound luxury travellers. That brand is 34°South and it is less than a year old.

With 34°South, our clients are international leisure visitors to New Zealand. The majority of our clients to date are from North America, China and Australia and we have had success from Norway. Scandinavia is an area we're interested in with the future growth and evolution of 34°South.

In 2018, I was invited to take part in a Pure Pursuits event in Norway. Pure Pursuits is an exclusive thought leadership experience, taking senior visionaries and influencers from around the globe who work in travel and events industry on a once-in-a-lifetime unique transformational journey, with the aim of pushing the experiential travel and events industry forward.

The philosophy and feel of the event in Norway resonated with me. So, when Beyond Luxury Media – the organisers of Pure Pursuits – selected us to design and host the initiative in New Zealand, myself, Carlene and Brendon all agreed.

In March this year, we hosted the 6-day Pure Pursuit here – and also used it as a chance to launch 34°South to some of the world's leading travel and event professionals, coming to New Zealand from 17 different countries. It allowed us to demonstrate our capability and our hand-picked supplier network who we were super excited to be collaborating with.

When you have a group of experienced, well-travelled people, it takes time to architect and craft those peak experiences that are so important. Alongside simplicity and authenticity, we focus on what we refer to as 'people and place' – that feeling you get when you really feel you are with the right people, in the right place, at the right time. Nothing really beats that.

That approach was shown with our opening night dinner – a home-cooked family-style dinner at a house overlooking Lake Wakatipu. Generosity, free-flowing wine, food and service, shoes off at the door and good music playing. 'Start strong' is familiar to many people in events, and we did just that.

We're now focusing on building on the success of the Pure Pursuits event. After Pure Pursuit 100% of all participants said they would use 34°South for future trips to New Zealand. That's a pass mark and with our 20 'new friends' and a growing network, we are looking to collaborate and create further opportunities.

We invested a lot of time and money in 34°South, to deliver the Pure Pursuits product, which has meant a levelling out of our turnover this year. But that was a calculated strategy that we're already seeing a reward from. We anticipate some good growth in the coming years.

For us as a small niche business creating experiences, one of our challenges is the perception (by some leisure and corporate clients) that they need a large-scale travel

company to take care of all of their needs. We go up against those large travel management companies, who may offer an incentive and events division.

We're not massive fans of the 'get a DMC' model. We deal with suppliers directly and hand-pick them to craft the right itinerary and experiences. This is time-intensive, but if you really want to put something special together, you've got to hand-pick. Otherwise, you risk serving up a commoditised product that the last group got, and that does not sit well with us.

Another challenge we face is finding multi-skilled staff with lots of initiative, no ego, and who can easily slot into a small, agile business where you need to be able to turn your hand to whatever needs doing, whilst maintaining a high level of customer service and hospitality. We've recently employed a new team member, Malia, who ticks all of those boxes and is going to be a great asset to the team.

One thing I'd like to see change within the industry would be a means to create opportunities for small, niche operators who may be light on cashflow but strong on industry commitment and experience. I'd like to see a way to support them. The industry needs them. For example, a small mountain biking tour operator or a graphic designer who has been working in the industry for say five years and has a wealth of tourism experience but can't afford to spend \$6k-10k to attend a trade show.

I would love to see a way to acknowledge those hard-grafting people that need a chance to fly their flag at an industry event. Whether it's a centralised fund or programme that can assist or subsidise smaller operators that have proven expertise and meet certain criteria like turnover, staff numbers and length in business. It would be great to be able to open the door to small, innovative, committed operators that aren't necessarily associated with the big players and need a break.

It's an incredible industry to be part of, with inspiration from people and places every day. We're excited to be on our own journey with OneNineFive, working on our own purpose and goals and at the same time sharing that journey with our business clients and leisure clients.
