

The WAI Travel Model

A Look Behind the Scenes



***EUROPE:** 1992 Alpine Europe: My first tour with dad.
L-R Big George, Gene (mom) with me behind.
Seppi, our legendary Austrian driver, with his mom in front*

HOW WE GOT STARTED

1989 - 2009: 20 years to get to 7

My father, George Friesen, started Walking Adventures International (called Walking Tours, Inc. back then) in the summer of 1989 with 3 tours in **Europe**. "Walking Alpine Europe" was the flagship tour of his little 1-man operation.

NORTH AMERICA

I joined dad in 1992 and we offered our first trips in **North America** that year featuring “Fall Foliage of New England” and “Blue Hawaii”.



Yours truly on Hawaii's Big Island with a deadly flow of lava directly behind me!

AUSTRALIA

Dad started to ease out of travel in the mid-90s. 1995 was the year I headed down under to plan **Australia** & New Zealand, offering the 3rd continent to our walking friends in 1996. This was my first exposure to extensive tour planning abroad and building our own walks rather than relying on local walking clubs. I fell in love with the laid-back vibe and unique flora and fauna of these two countries kitty-corner across the globe.



Me and my roo... We discovered how to find them in the wild a few tours later!

SOUTH AMERICA

Central and **South America** was continent #4 with Costa Rica in 2002 followed by Chile, Bolivia, & Peru in 2003. This was our first taste of the tropics and equatorial travel.



Hiking the Valley of the Moon in Chile's Atacama region - 2003

ASIA

Asia was #5, also in 2002, with another wide-ranging solo planning trip in 2001 exploring vast expanses of Korea, Japan, and China. There were times when I went several days without seeing another Caucasian face. It was mesmerizing!



Hiking the Great Wall of China... Spectacular

AFRICA

South Africa in 2006 was continent #6—**Africa**—with one of my last truly solo planning trips the year before in 2005. Driving through the blessed but troubled land of South Africa, then into Swaziland, with a flight up to Victoria Falls and Zambia, Zimbabwe, and Botswana was a life-changing challenge (a story for another Saturday).



*A lesson in intimidation tactics from a Zulu warrior in South Africa.
(Might come in handy if I ever get audited)*

ANTARCTICA

Finally, we landed in **Antarctica** in December 2009 for lucky #7. Fittingly, we finalized our 7-continent journey after 20 years in the most unique corner of planet earth.



ANTARCTICA: *I shot my favorite Antarctica photo from a zodiac boat. Only a few seconds before this shot, a school of penguins porpoised over the waters in front of the berg. Seconds make the difference in nature photography.*

NORTH AMERICA

Our travel objectives shifted over the years. Initially, we were all about bagging destinations, chalking up bucket list passport stamps, and walking in as many countries as possible. Somewhere in the mid 90s I began to see travel differently. Travel started to become a vehicle for gaining a more nuanced awareness of our world and our place in it.

As I surveyed each new country or region, I realized that what I had been pursuing was its essence, that I was looking for ways to weave together experiences—always centered around walking—to introduce North Americans to thought-provoking cultural conundrums, compelling historical stories, and close up connections with natural wonders...seeking to stretch our American paradigms as we ventured off the most isolated cultural island on planet earth.

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Next [CUBA](#) trip 2025!

THE WAI MODEL

While I was involved, along with a small team of dedicated travel planners and guides, in this 20-year history of ever-expanding WAI

horizons, the focus was more on refining the travel experience than on building a business. Our marketing budget was small, and our team remained small. The result was a unique, destination-rotating, 7-continent model that could be confusing to the uninitiated.

The understandable expectation of the traveler is that a travel company offer a menu of tours year after year, sometimes adding and subtracting destinations but generally running the same tours each year, usually offering them multiple times each year. This provides travelers a sense of clarity about what destinations are available and when they are

offered.

WAI is a bit different. Over the past 35 years, we've served walking travelers in a growing list of destinations, as illustrated above, while remaining small. Post pandemic, we adopted an even more minimalist approach. Three or four people work behind the scenes on tour planning, maintaining the website, preparing final itineraries for guides, as well as managing the administrative side of things. Half a dozen guide teams work on a part-time basis to lead tours 3 to 5 times per year. We serve about 400 travelers each year on about 18 to 20 different tours in diverse corners of

the globe.

Rather than develop a static list of 18-20 tours that are consistently offered every year, we rotate destinations, offering travelers a dynamic buffet of international and domestic Adventures that changes every year.

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***FIJI:** The best way to enjoy water aerobics...back in 2025*

How we select our destinations

Over the years, we have developed walking adventures in approximately 100 different destinations. Some of these tours have been retired, but the majority are still active and can be periodically pulled from the WAI

tour bookshelf, refreshed, refined, and then re-offered.

These trips have been developed with intense on-site curating. All of them, of course, are special to us. We are emotionally and financially invested in all of them. You can't spend 3 weeks immersed in the on-site planning of an hour-by-hour itinerary, following innumerable hours of pre-trip research, without having it imprinted on your mind and soul.

Each winter, we start cogitating about what parts of the planet to offer travelers in the next season. It is not a scientific process. It is

nuanced and intuitive, based upon ruminations such as:

- **How long it has been since we've featured the destination? Our mailing list and staff are not large enough to run most tours annually. Yet if we let a tour get too stale, we run the risk of not having staff currently trained, or that the itinerary and/or walks require on-site refreshing.**
- **Does the destination seem to be of general interest? What is currently popular with the traveling public. WAI planners and guides can have absolute confidence that a tour is high value, but we've learned that**

we can't swim against the current of popular demand. Guides and former traveler agree, for example, that Sri Lanka is one of the best itineraries we've ever offered, but we have only been able to sell it one year, in 2019.

· Is there a core group of alumni travelers requesting a destination?

Sometimes a groundswell of interest from frequent travelers develops for a destination, influencing us to offer a tour we would not otherwise have included.

· Do we have trained staff available to plan and lead the tour? Most of our guide teams are involved with WAI as a second, seasonable job,

or a retirement gig they committed to out of a passion for travel. These are intensely loyal WAI team members who love to share travel. There may, however, be conflicts with other destinations a team is trained on, or there may have been a gap of too many years since a destination was last offered, leaving no current team members trained.

· Do we have a solid travel partner in-country? The original WAI model in Europe, back in the late 80s and early 90s, was fully hands-on. By that I mean that dad and I did it all ourselves: made all contacts directly with hotels, bus, airlines, walking clubs, restaurants, local guides...then led

the tours ourselves without the help of a national guide. We still operate largely this way in North America, but overseas we are committed to working with a local partner and benefitting from their expertise and the increased security of having a local support team always behind us. It takes time to develop the trust necessary for these vital international relationships.

· How does the destination fit into the blend of destinations offered in that year? We strive to provide a pleasing cross-section of the world each season. 2025 is unique in that our initial offering of 21 tours touches on all 7 continents in one travel year.



SOUTHERN SPAIN: *Not offered since 2007, this Adventure is back in 2025 with new, upgraded itinerary and walks!*

When browsing our schedule, keep in mind that any given year is a snapshot of the broader WAI travel library. It is not a list of destinations that will reliably be offered again in the next year. Prioritizing your travel

plans becomes even more strategic, for example, when you realize that:

- Antarctica is a destination offered only every 5 years;**
- Galapagos Islands has not been offered since 2017, and there is no guarantee that this pricey bucket list destination will be offered again any time soon;**
- Australia returns in 2025 for the first time since 2019, but the innate expense of the destination added to the cost of flights necessary to fly down under, then cover the distance between points**

of interest, make it a destination that comes up infrequently;

· Route 66 is a personal favorite of the author but has not been a fan favorite, so it is likely to join the tour rotation less frequently in the future;

· Great Lakes, Utah, Norway, and Appalachian Trail have enjoyed a run of popularity and are on the 2024 and/or 2025 schedule but will probably need to lay fallow for at least one year thereafter;

· Alaska is one of most unique destinations in the USA (and most expensive), so after seeing it flounder and be cancelled in 2024 for lack of participation, we are

watching with interest to see whether it reaches a viable stage (15 or more travelers) in 2025.



NORWAY: One of our most stunning scenery smorgasbords is offered again in 2025 but not in 2026

I hope this gives you some helpful insight into how WAI operates and unravels a bit of the enigma of destinations decisions that

**mysteriously manifest on our
Adventure Schedule from year to
year.**

Dan & Team WAI

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***“A traveler without observation is a
bird without wings.”***

**Moslih Eddin Saadi, 13th c Persian
poet**

Walking Adventures International...

·t's a journey of Discovery: We go

beyond the obvious

·It's a labor of Passion: We love what we do

·It's a commitment to Integrity: We do our best to get it right

WAI shares the wonders of culture and Creation with travelers in a wholesome, safe, thought-provoking, and fundatory (obligatory fun) manner. We help people experience a country or region - seeking the most interesting, delightful, enlightening, educational, and scenically stimulating ways to help them feel that they have “been there.”

We allow travelers to move out of comfort zones, offering places of cultural, historical, and scenic



The WAI Travel Model...A Look Behind the Scenes

ANTARCTICA NORTH AMERICA [...]

**18
Jun**



Mediterranean Antiquities: Greece & Turkey

**by Dan Friesen I've been pondering
for the past 30 to 45 minutes how
best [...]**

**16
Jun**



How “Damn the torpedoes! Full speed ahead!” Led to Lincoln’s 2nd Inaugural Address

By Dan Friesen In 1992, my first year leading tours with my father, George Friesen, [...]

05
Mar



**Cultural Lesson #1*: European Style versus
American Pragmatism**

**by Dan Friesen * from a presentation
of 10 Cultural Lessons given in 2015**

The [...]

**04
Feb**



**Cultural Lesson #6: The Uniquely American
Challenge of the 3Cs**

by Dan Friesen In 2007, I led a group

of North Americans on a river [...]

**19
Jan**



**November 19, 1863: Lincoln's Gettysburg
Address**

November 19, 2022 by Dan Friesen

**Today, November 19, 2022, marks
the anniversary of one of [...]**

**19
Nov**



Veteran's Day Address ~ San Diego 30 Year Reunion

**Three years ago this weekend, WAI
was wrapping up our 30th
Anniversary Reunion in sunny [...]**

**12
Nov**



Cultural Conundrum on Capri

by Dan Friesen By 1999, I had been leading tours in Europe and the USA [...]

Nov