

Redwood Rides continues to expand

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When Minnesota transplants Adam Spencer and Alex Kwan first set out eight years ago to start an adventure outfitter geared toward rafting, kayaking and mountain biking in Del Norte, they had their doubts.

“It wasn’t an easy commit by any means,” said Kwan.

Sharing a love for the outdoors instilled into them from their childhood experiences back East, the Midwesterners jumped in anyway, and Redwood Rides was born.

“We used to bike all the time to fishing holes and stuff. We had that connection of doing things together outdoors back home, so all those factors coalesced into us thinking about doing an adventure outfitter,” said Spencer.

Initially, their “fleet” was composed of a handful of used inflatable kayaks and mountain bikes, which they stored in a crawlspace under their small-town house along the Smith River. Their business plan was drawn up on the back porch.

Now, the fleet has grown to more than 50 boats, 20 mountain bikes, as well as three vans, three trailers and a headquarters in Gasquet. What’s more, a business that began as a back-porch dream has become a full-time gig for co-owners Spencer and Kwan, a former reporter and a former hospitality worker. During peak season they hire about 18 workers, mostly local college kids.

Although they offer a plethora of guided kayak and raft tours on all forks of the Smith, Spencer said their most popular is a gentle float through the redwoods of Jedediah Smith State Park, which focuses on ecotourism. Ecotourism is the practice of responsible travel to natural areas, while conserving the environment and the well-being of local people.

“There’s only so many places you can float by ancient redwood forest like that,” said Spencer.

Recently, Spencer and Kwan have focused on helping local kids get connected with the outdoors. In partnering with local schools like the Gasquet Mountain School, they have taken students on rafting field trips. And, through another partnership with the nonprofit, Gateway Education of the Wild Rivers Coast, they brought local adopted kids on overnight river trips for the first time this spring.

In addition, they partnered with Gateway Education again to offer a “summit-to-sea” themed overnight youth adventure camp last year.

The multi-day trip began with a summit of Sanger Peak, afterward, the group pitched tents near a mountain lake. Then, the convoy biked along Patrick Creek before dropping into rafts on the Smith and camping out near the river. The following day, they floated by the redwoods and biked through Jedediah Smith into Crescent City, followed by a camp-out by the ocean. The adventure culminated with a full day of surfing and kayaking at the ocean.

For many kids, these experiences were a first.

“That was good exposure for those kids because for a lot of them, that was the first time either being on the ocean or on a surfboard,” said Kwan.

Spencer said Redwood Rides also assisted in the filming of river scenes for the 2018 movie, “Bird Box.” In fact, Spencer said he convinced the filmmakers to shoot all of the river scenes on the Smith, where they had initially planned to travel to other rivers in the region.

All in all, Spencer and Kwan said running one of the longest standing adventure outfitters in the redwood region has been surreal.

“Some of our hesitancy in those early years...it was kind of like ‘how is nobody else doing this?’ ‘How can we be the ones who get to do this?’” said Spencer.

Eight years later, Redwood Rides is still doing this.