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T.J. Sassani of zozi is exploring discovery channels.

TRAVEL

Trip of a lifetime

zozi is cashing in with unique guided adventures

Twenty people tore up Squaw Valley with Olympic gold-medal skier Jonny Moseley. National Geographic explorer Mireya Mayor led a small group on a wildlife "safari" through California's wine country. A group of thrill-seekers sharpened their whitewater skills in Nevada's Truckee River with world-record kayaker Tao Berman. These are the types of once-in-a-lifetime adventures, guided by celebrity gurus, that have helped drive zozi to rapidly multiplying revenue, backed by $11 million in venture funding.

"No other company has built an online platform that easily connects anyone to some of the most unattainable people in the world to go on experiences that will give you a lifetime of stories to tell," says T.J. Sassani, founder of the San Francisco-based company. "Zozi is ultimately a discovery engine that makes bite-sized adventures accessible to all kinds of people."

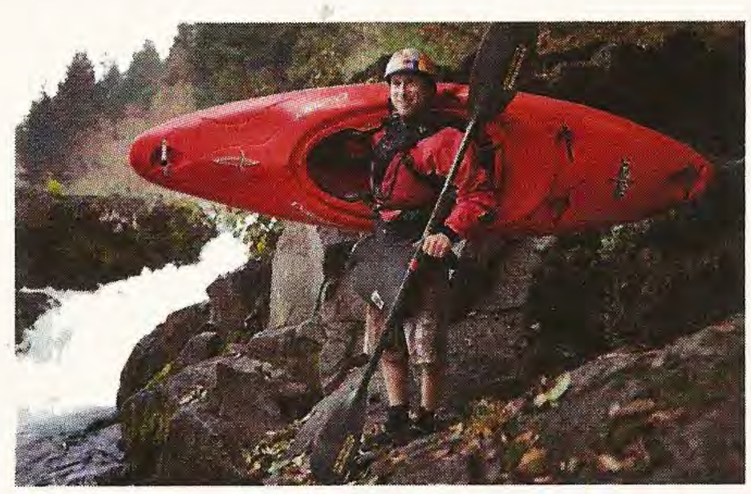
When the site launched in 2010, it specialized in discounted nonguided quests, like a tour of medieval castles in Ireland, a five-day surf and spa retreat in Baja or the chance to hang glide to a beach picnic. But Sassani says he's pivoting the business to also focus on unique, full-price celebrity excursions, starting at $300. Zozi's niche is in creating short adventure trips that aren't available anywhere else.

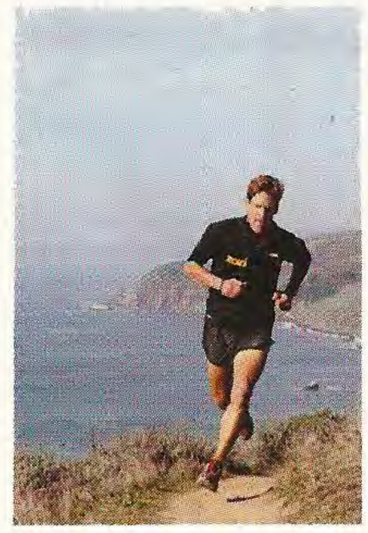
The site operates in 19 U.S. markets, and its user base is approaching 1 million. Sassani will not disclose revenue, which comes through shares with merchants and partners, but says it grew 700 percent last year.

Venture capitalists are clawing for a piece of the exploding tech travel sector. Last year zozi raised $7 million in Series B funding from investors that included LaunchCapital; meanwhile, San Francisco-based travel search site Hipmunk raised $4.2 million and Seattle-based flight tracker Yapta locked down $5 million.

LaunchCapital co-founder and managing director Elon Boms says his firm was looking for a concept that could be a category leader through true innovation. "They've done just that. Zozi is unlike any other company in the tech travel space," he says. "Zozi is pioneering the future of travel and entertainment, and as VCs that excites us." He adds that leadership in the fragmented but huge U.S. travel activities market—worth $26.8 billion in 2009, according to PhoCusWright, host of the annual Travel Innovation Summit—will be "driven by a brand that both customers and merchants embrace, one that stands for quality and is used not as a bargain hunter but as a tool for discovery."

PhoCusWright senior technology analyst Bob Offutt agrees that the time is right for investment in travel companies with a tech component. "There's a sense that there's some gold to be found if you mine the right mines in this category," he says. "VCs feel there's opportunity to move the needle and come up with new ideas that will shift share to something more appropriate for the 21st century." —Kara Ohngren





Top-flight travel: (clockwise, from top) kayaker Tao Berman, running coach Eric Orton and Olympic skier Jonny Moseley lead zozi jaunts.

MORE TRAVEL BRILLIANCE

inBed.me: This social booking site for hostels (and beds and couches) allows travelers to connect before their trip begins.

Ogomo: A business traveler's dream, this online store offers travel-size products that can be delivered directly to hotel rooms.

Tortuga Backpacks: A traveler exploring Paris doesn't necessarily need a rugged backpack fit for traversing the Himalayas. The carry-on-size Tortuga is designed for long-term urban trips.

Traveler's Joy: Register for "experiences" on this online honeymoon registry that has partnerships with The Knot, WeddingChannel and WeddingWire. Couples choose a dream destination, and friends and family contribute money toward their travel expenses, accommodations, dining and activities.

IMGuest: Business travelers who check in at their hotel on this free social networking platform can browse for like-minded guests and set up face-to-face meetings.

SpareOne: Ideal for travel or emergencies, this spare cell phone runs on a single AA battery and provides up to 10 hours of talk time.

Nanny in the Clouds: Matches parents with experienced nannies already booked on the same flight who can help take care of kids during air travel.

Hotel Tonight: Negotiates discounted rates for last-minute stays at curated properties.

OceanGate: This submarine operation funds marine research through "citizen scientists" who pay for the privilege of working alongside oceanographers as they explore the deep sea.

PHOTOS COURTESY OF ZOZI