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Sub caters to adventurers with zest to learn

By Catherine Lackner

Businesses are springing up to cater to a new type of traveler — the adventurer who wants to stay active, learn a skill and perhaps contribute to science while on vacation.

"We are an ocean exploration company," said Guillermo Söhnlein, co-founder and chief operating officer of OceanGate. Founded in Seattle in 2009, the firm recently opened its second outpost, this time in Miami.

OceanGate's submersible five-person submarine, "Antipodes," supports marine ocean research and is available for hire, but that's not its primary purpose.

"Sometimes we get calls from researchers who have funds and need a submarine," Mr. Söhnlein said, "but our focus is more on researchers who do not have funds. We find researchers who are doing interesting, valuable work or who are in interesting locations. We package expeditions around what they do, and we fund it by catering to what I call the citizen scientist."

The citizen scientist, he explained, becomes part of the crew, helps gather data or does whatever is required to propel the expedition.

"What we do is not a tourism operation," he said. "Our expeditions are working in the field. Everyone has to participate. We allow citizen scientists to pay, but we hire them as part of the crew."

Training takes from two to seven days, he said.

His clientele "comes from all different walks of life," Mr. Söhnlein said. "They do have some financial resources; this is not cheap." He said costs can range from \$7,500 to \$40,000 per person, depending on the length and complexity of the mission.

"It can be pricey, but for somebody who takes a number of vacations or trips per year, it's not unreasonable," he said. "This is for someone who is looking for more than just a destination vacation, who wants to do something active and meaningful in their time away."

OceanGate chose to expand its business here for a number of reasons, he said. "Miami has great weather year-round, and it has connections to the ocean, both in the maritime industry and the tourism industry."

The company also looked at San Diego and Santa Barbara, CA, but "we liked the Atlantic, the Gulf of Mexico and the Caribbean," Mr. Söhnlein said. "Miami is an international hub of business, and the Rosenstiel School at the University of Miami is one of the top marine programs."

Initially, the Miami location will run with about eight staff people, but Mr. Söhnlein said the company hopes to eventually employ 22. If all goes well, he said, OceanGate will acquire another submersible that can dive deeper. The future, he added, looks bright.

"This business model is trending in other areas, and we think it will do well here. This trend of using citizen scientists is a slight offshoot of another idea — voluntourism — in which people pay money to volunteer. It also ties into the growing trend of social entrepreneurship. That's why we decided to do this, instead of another tech company in Silicon Valley."

"We are talking of working with OceanGate," said Roni Avizzar, dean and professor of meteorology and physical oceanography at the University of Miami's Rosenstiel School of Atmospheric and Marine Science. "As of now, we don't have any programs for taking people who are interested on our scientific missions."

"I know OceanGate is interested," he continued, "but I have not yet identified any scientific mission that would be able to take crew members along."

Nevertheless, "The job of the university is to educate kids of all ages," he said. "We see it as part of our mission to broadly diffuse what we have learned to the public. This would be a hands-on way of showing what research is all about, and a different technique of teaching. It's one thing to watch it on TV, but to experience it yourself is so much better

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uning to watch it on TV, but to experience it yourself is so much better. Certainly this is something we have in the back of our minds."

"We are not exactly like OceanGate," said Emily Penn, program director of Pangaea Exploration. "We have a sailing boat, and we work on both oceans." Pangaea's vessel, the "Sea Dragon," has sailed more than 35,000 miles across the Atlantic and Pacific, studying the state of the marine environment.

"By allowing guest crews to come on board, scientists can get the research for free," Ms. Penn said. "Everyone is part of the watch system, 24/7. They steer, change the sails, work on the rigging, as well as cooking, cleaning and so on.

"With the scientists and mission leaders doing the training, we generally find that everyone has some sort of brilliant skill," Ms. Penn said. "It might be something unexpected — if you're already a sailor, then maybe you're also a filmmaker or a writer. A big part of what we're trying to do is to communicate and tell the world what's happening.

"A whole mix of people make up the team," she continued. "The most important thing is willingness to participate and get involved. We make sure there's an even mix of skills for each expedition."

Expeditions are usually one to five weeks and team members are expected to pay about \$300 a day, plus their air fares to wherever the boat is docked, she said.

A second sailboat is the next goal, she said, along with being able to take on more research projects with the larger fleet.

But even with one vessel, "The experience that our crew members have is just absolutely incredible," Ms. Penn said. "I went out there and had a life-changing experience. It's an opportunity to spend time in a very unique environment, among an amazing bunch of people."

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