

## As global business world shrinks, he helps people make connections

By PATRICIA SIMMS

About 10 years ago, Karl Gutknecht swapped a cubicle for a suitcase and a bucket of frequent-flyer miles. At 69, he is president of Culture and Cycle Ventures International LLC, which offers, as he puts it, “custom-designed small-group and individual experiences for sophisticated and knowledgeable travelers.”

You might call it a travel agency for the cognoscenti.

**Q.** What exactly does your company do?

**A.** Sophistication and knowledge are the keys. We celebrate cultures and discover our similarities. We have partnerships in Croatia, Slovenia, Italy, France, Germany, Austria, India, New Zealand, Scandinavia and Hawaii. In 10 words or less, I am a client-focused organizer. I’m a travel facilitator. I organize experiences for individuals and small groups and businesses who want to make a difference. The agenda is set by myself in collaboration with business and government needs. We have to realize that what happens in Stockholm or Mumbai impacts Wisconsin. For example, a recent program in Germany was designed around high-speed rail, and it was hosted by the German transportation system, in part.

**Q.** Hasn’t the financial ability of people to do this kind of traveling been impacted by dire economic times?

**A.** This market wasn’t hit by the recession. In fact, this year was the best year I’ve had. There are certain businesses and government areas that are interested in furthering strategic business partnerships. Actually, there is a niche, especially with government stressed by their finances and the U.S. State Department cutting back on their programs. There are still businesses in Wisconsin and Minnesota that are interested in issues like climate change and renewable energy, medical technology, banking and finance. I build the relationships, then I propose the itineraries and connect people here with people abroad. Right now, I am in the midst of putting together a Scandinavian sojourn trade and energy delegation with former U.S. Ambassador to Norway Tom Loftus and the Consul General Offices of Germany, Denmark and Norway



### Karl Gutknecht

**Title:** President, Culture and Cycle Ventures International LLC

**Age:** 69

**Hometown:** Madison

**Family:** Married to Susan L. Hunt

**Education:** UW-Madison BA, MA; German literature at University of Goettingen, Germany, University of Hamburg, Germany

**Experience:** Public Affairs professional, state of Wisconsin, Department of Agriculture, Trade and Consumer Protection and the Division of Vocational Rehabilitation; Wisconsin Newspaper Association director of member services. Vietnam war veteran.

**Hobbies:** Photography, running, bicycling and gardening. Owns and operates the family farm in town of Buena Vista, Richland County.

### Culture and Cycle Ventures International LLC

**Founded:** 2001

**Address:** 4509 Mallory Circle, Madison

**Web site:** [www.culturetouring.com](http://www.culturetouring.com)

**Subcontractors:** Collaborative partnerships with subcontractors in India, Croatia, Germany, Italy, France, New Zealand, Hawai'i, Scandinavia, Austria, Slovenia, Istria, and with AMA Waterways, European River Cruises on the Danube and Rhine rivers.

**2010 sales:** 20 percent revenue increase from 2009 to 2010

based in Minneapolis. We are designing the next business program for interested people in the Twin Cities, Madison, Milwaukee, and other cities in Wisconsin.

There is great interest in European governments and maintaining business relationships with Wisconsin and Minnesota. This is a way to build business relation-

ships that can produce longterm enduring benefits. In plain English, people in the business world see a value in this. They sign on as delegates, they pay their way.

**Q.** You've been doing this for 10 years?

**A.** Yes. I have other clients as well. Ten years in the travel industry is a celebration. There are businesses and people in the public sector that are very committed to globalization and know that the future is going to be involved in different types of employment. Strategic partnerships are important. For example, Ernst & Young provided financial support for the program in Germany. Their footprint is very strong both in Wisconsin and Europe.

**Q.** You didn't start out organizing these types of business trade missions, did you?

**A.** I began by organizing a bicycle tour from Berlin to Prague on the Elbe River. Joan Gilman (from the UW-Madison School of Business) said, "You need to go to Croatia." And I did. I also do culinary and wine experience tours for the Madison Club — I did a program in the Napa Valley, for example. Those combine fun and stimulating experiences. Photography is also a big market niche for us. We worked with (local photographer) Zane Williams to lead a photography tour to Croatia.

**Q.** You worked for the state of Wisconsin for a long time, then the Wisconsin News-

paper Association. How did you make the step into your own business?

**A.** Most of my adult life I was in a cubicle, but those jobs took me to communities all through Wisconsin, promoting cheese and cranberries. My title was director of public affairs for the Department of Agriculture, Trade and Consumer Protection. I did that for 10 years. Prior to that, I was the public information director of the state Division of Vocational Rehabilitation. Then, I went to the Wisconsin Newspaper Association as member services director. This is the 10th year of my firm. This business trade mission work is relatively recent. For example, I've done a culinary and wine tour in Italy. Cooking schools are big element of our tours. My clients are not interested in 10 European cities in nine days.

The world is changing at warp speed. We either reach into tomorrow or we sacrifice today. I don't think we have a choice about change. To not develop relationships in other countries and not continue to learn would be very short-sighted. People are living longer, are healthier and are looking for hands-on experiences. Being in a vineyard and assisting with a grape harvest is a once-in-a-lifetime experience. My partner in New Zealand is a cherry farmer from Christchurch.

**Q.** How many collaborators do you have?

**A.** 10 countries, one in each country.

**Q.** Do you make a profit?

**A.** I make a profit. My profit increased at least 20 percent this year. My overhead is low, and my partners respond to our need to keep costs in line. The businesses in Europe I work with are family owned firms. When we go to Croatia, for example, we go to a vineyard that has been in the family since the 6th century.

**Q.** You belong to the Downtown Rotary Club of Madison. Has that helped your business?

**A.** My job is much easier because of that instant credibility with Rotary. For example, I led a Rotary group study exchange to South Korea about five years ago.

**Q.** Are there any downsides to the business?

**A.** I have to price two years ahead, so my risk is considerable. With the world economic situation, I need to follow the money markets, pay attention to value of the dollar. I pay my bills in dollars. I need to price my product accordingly.

**Q.** What's your favorite city?

**A.** Berlin. It's the capital of the new Europe. When I come to Berlin, I feel like I'm coming home.

**Q.** How many frequent flyer miles do you have?

**A.** You never get enough. ■

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