

Home is where

By Stephanie Porter (St. John's)
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In starting a small business, St. John's native Shawn Stratton has encountered a few more hurdles than your average budding entrepreneur.

"A lot of people start a small business, keep their day jobs for a while and work on their own thing on weekends and evenings," Stratton says from his home in Vancouver, B.C.. "But that's kind of hard when your day job is being on expedition and being out of touch.

"People think when I travel, 'Oh great you'll be checking e-mail ...' But no, I won't be. You'll hear from me in a month or so ... people don't like that when you're sending them business proposals."

Stratton's "day job" — a senior instructor of the National Outdoor Leadership School (NOLS) — has brought him to some of the most remote backcountry and wilderness areas in the world, sometimes for months at a time.

And when he's not working? He's usually on, or planning, an expedition of his own, whether it be scaling Mount Logan, on safari in Kenya, or exploring Guatemala.

Through his fledgling business, Live More Adventures (www.livemoreadventures.com), Stratton has already worked as a consultant with school and other groups and taught wilderness first-aid courses.

"I'm slowly building as I go, paying the bills and doing everything else it takes to build a small business," he says. "The idea and the thought have been going for about 10 years and last year was time for me to take the plunge."

Now, fresh back from leading a 28-day wilderness course in Alaska, he's doing his familiar scramble to catch up with the rest of life and business.

(About that trip in Alaska: he says it rained 25 of the 28 days. "It's a harsh environment and if people are coming on these courses to learn about leadership and tolerance for adversity and camping ... it's one of the best locations because if you can camp there and do it well, you can do it anywhere.")

Stratton laughs as he says he's "from a family of accountants." He's a middle child and

grew up an enthusiastic member of the Boy Scouts in St. John's — the organization provided his only opportunity to go camping.

He was also heavily involved in water polo and triathlon, the latter sport the reason he enrolled at Dalhousie University (Halifax was nearer more competitions than St. John's).

While working on a degree in recreation management, Stratton took a course in experiential education, which immediately changed his career path.

“That focused me,” he says. “It set off the light bulb, blew me away, and that's where I found out about Outward Bound and NOLS and I kind of committed then to one day working for them.”

While in university, he worked with the North Carolina Outward Bound organization, and spent a couple of summers at a camp in Alberta, leading trips into the Rockies. After graduation, he did a month-long instructors' course at NOLS and was lucky enough to secure regular work with the popular school.

Since then, he's been working on contracts for the school, and his own freelance outdoor education work.

He's been based in Vancouver for the last seven years — at least that's where his mailbox was.

“Vancouver is kind of in the middle between Mexico and Alaska, where I spend a lot of my time,” he says. “I kept a mailbox here because I had too much mail being lost ... after a few months away, I'd come here for a couple of weeks and do all my life's business, go to the bank, the doctor, renew my insurance ...”

“I went through eight-and-a-half years without living in one place more than three months — which was living my dream, it was awesome, I loved it.”

He's got a fixed address in the city now, has had it more than a year, and admits, “It's nice now to have a closet to come home to.”

In starting Live More Adventures, Stratton says his goal isn't to do more trips. “I feel like I've done that,” he says. “I love it and I'll always do it, but I'm starting a company and I'm looking to settle a little more, have a little more control over things ...”

That said, he is currently the only employee of the company — though he will contract work out to guides he trusts. He's already developing a trip with a school in Chicago to bring a group of environmental studies students to Newfoundland.

He's also promoting his first major international tour, a trip to Kenya (there are 11- and 18-day options) next February. It's a wilderness adventure, with only a handful of nights scheduled for hotels. Key attractions include three safari trips, a rare cultural experience

— four days living among the Maasai, a traditional culture — and the opportunity to sail a traditional dhow boat to a remote island in the Indian Ocean. “That’s an incredible place,” he says, “there’s snorkeling on a coral reef, body surfing off the coast, camping and eating unlimited mangoes and pineapples.”

Stratton spent six weeks in Kenya earlier this year to scout all the events and meet with Kenyan guides. “Experiences like that blow your mind,” he says of the entire experience.

While there are many more world adventures ahead for Stratton — he says he’d like to spend time in China and Tibet, and is planning a sea-kayaking trip along the coast of Labrador — he’s trying to stay focused on his business.

“I’m excited,” he says. “Excited to offer opportunities to staff and others to see some of the things I’ve seen all over the world.”

Shawn Stratton will present a slideshow on Kenya Sept. 13, 6:30 p.m. at The Outfitters on Water Street. Space is limited and can be reserved at 579-HIKE.