

RACING THE PLANET: The Business of Real Experience

Daniel Isenberg Mentions Few Women in his new book on Entrepreneurship, but Mary Gadams's Racing the Planet Stands Out.

Susan Hall reports for W-T-W.org



Gadams started her business in Hong Kong in 2002 with the idea that people would pay to run 250 kilometers across the Gobi Desert. A predecessor of Tough Mudder, the business model is very different. Gadams thought she could build a brand like Ironman and REI from the sweat of people running across deserts.

This year's event was a huge success in Iceland.



One couple joined the run on their honeymoon. Here is their story:

For most women, the perfect engagement involves champagne and a ring; the honeymoon, a tropical beach and cocktails. But for RacingThePlanet women, romance can be a little different: grueling runs across the desert by day, freeze-dried meals and an eight-person tent by night.

Kyle Pennell married one such woman. “You’re either ready for adventure or you’re not,” he says. “Different people have different ideas of what an adventure is.”

Kyle married Sarah Diaz just three weeks before Iceland 2013. The Californian couple registered not for plates, mixers and utensils, but instead for headlamps, socks and sleeping pads. “A lot of people still think we’re crazy,” says Kyle.

For the active couple, a stage race wasn’t so crazy. They hike and do yoga together, and Sarah challenged Kyle to reach for more in his

running. Kyle had run in high school, but didn't get back into it until meeting Sarah. He worked up to an ultra-marathon, and then Sarah pushed him even further after she returned from RacingThePlanet: Nepal 2011 and convinced Kyle to race Iceland 2013 with her.

Most couples finding wedding planning daunting, but Sarah and Kyle did it alongside training. "On the whole, it was horrendous!" Kyle said. But they pulled off a destination wedding, bringing Sarah's Cuban family and Kyle's family from Michigan to Southern California. Shortly after, the pair hopped a plane to Reykjavík.

Dogged by an injury, Sarah withdrew from the race after Stage 1, Between Two Glaciers. She appreciated the experience nonetheless. "It's a life-changing experience that you get to do with your best friend." Both Kyle and Sarah say they helped each other along the course that first day, shifting the burden back and forth, and knowing intuitively when the other needed a boost. "He makes me laugh at rock bottom. He can bring me up," says Sarah. Kyle went on to place 81st, finishing his first RacingThePlanet event in 40 hours and 24 minutes.

With this long adventure behind them, Sarah and Kyle are ready for the much longer adventure of marriage, as well as a much more second honeymoon. "We love being active," says Sarah. "We are going to have a relaxing honeymoon, though!"

In 2012, Isenberg reports that the company had 10 million in revenues. RacingthePlanet's online store doubles its revenue every year. Gadams started Expedition Foods to provide specialty freeze-dried foods for sports enthusiasts.



While Isenberg does not take the final leap to matching the temperament of an entrepreneur with their ventures, it does not stretch the imagination to see that staging events in hostile and remote environments, where you have to import medical care, and provide translators to understand the natives. In one instance, Gadams had to cut and bail a farmer's hay so she could provide space for the runner's tents.

Distribution centers in Europe and Asia ship out product to customers on English, French, Italian and Chinese websites. The company's charitable arm has raised a million dollars for communities near the race courses.