

## Tour Company Proves to Be Winner for La Jolla Couple

By Lori Weisberg  
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Inveterate traveler Edward Piegza thought he was destined for a career in banking and even spent three years working for a financial institution after graduating college, but ultimately wanderlust got the better of him.

After organizing a few out-of-town conferences for his then employer's corporate customers, Piegza quickly realized a career in travel beckoned. Soon after leaving the bank, he and his wife were packing up their belongings in Chicago and heading to San Diego to help run a Coronado-based travel company that led tours to Britain and Ireland.



The Piegza family on 1,000-foot-tall sand dunes in Merzouga in Morocco. Classic Journeys takes them on a sunset camel ride that ends with an overnight at a luxury tented encampment in the Sahara desert.

Today, the couple is celebrating their 15th anniversary of operating Classic Journeys, a La Jolla tour company they started in a converted garage and which now spans the globe with trips to such faraway destinations as Morocco, Croatia and Costa Rica.

Operating with a locally based staff of 10 full-time employees and 175 guides around the world, Classic Journeys is expected to have its second best year in 2010, despite the continued economic downturn.

“I realized while I was a banker, it didn't fulfill me in the same way I thought it would,” Piegza recalled. “I wondered at the time if there was a way to combine my love of travel with the business principles I was being taught as a banker and in graduate school.”

Piegza, who was able to find that winning combination in a few short years, spoke recently about the evolution of his company and his philosophy about what constitutes a rewarding and memorable travel experience.

**Q:** How and when did your passion for travel first evolve?

**A:** There were a handful of things that happened to me when growing up that created my interest in what I'm doing now. When I was around 12, my dad, who was a career IBM-er and loved to travel when he got older, surprised my brother and me and my mom with Eastern Airlines all-system passes where you could travel for three months or a month. He said, you get to plan where we're going for the month, and we planned out our family's vacation for the whole time... Traveling for me has never been and certainly isn't now about just going places, but the experiences you have with people and exploring interesting places in a unique way.



Edward Piegza founded Classic Journeys 15 years ago with wife Susan.

**Q:** There are a number of well respected companies offering specialized, higher end walking tours like yours. How are you able to compete with them, and what distinguishes your operation from theirs?

**A:** This is really a tiny niche in the whole suite of options of how people might travel, so there's a lot of room for what we do to grow. Our philosophy is you can't know southern Italy as well as our head southern Italian guide, Sergio, who lives in Naples and has been our guide for all 15 years. They're empowered to make every single departure the best it can be. Our walking is not hiking or trekking or mountain climbing. We pause to absorb the scenery and the history and culture. You could visit a shepherd or a potter or vineyard owner. Or you could go to Stonehenge at sunrise or meet with a truffle hunter in southwestern France. The maximum number of people we take in a group is 18. Some of our competitors will take groups in the 20s and 30s.

**Q:** What is the demographic of your travelers?

**A:** Eighty percent of our guests are between their late 40s and late 60s. Right after college, took great backpacking trips living on a shoestring, and now they have the financial wherewithal to experience whatever level of travel they want, but they still want the visceral connection to the country and its people.

**Q:** How do you pick the destinations for your tours? It seem like many of the companies tend to have very similar itineraries.

**A:** We send a post-trip questionnaire to our guests asking where would you like to have Classic Journeys travel. Number two, we ask our guides. We want to look at areas where it's kind of on the forward edge, but not too much on the leading edge. Montenegro is our newest tour region, which will debut in 2011. You'd be amazed at how many families annually we take to Morocco. You're riding camels in the Saharan desert and sleeping overnight in a tented encampment that's very luxurious, lanterns everywhere and dining in a tent with tables skirted with fine linens.

**Q:** During the economic downturn, the travel industry has suffered substantially. How has your company been affected, and what adjustments have you made to survive financially?

**A:** 2007 was the high water mark for our business. Business did dip down in 2008, 2009 was better, and this year, we're up 20 percent over last year at this same time. People have retrenched in their spending. I know from speaking firsthand with our guests that they're measuring a vacation not just in dollars and cents anymore. They're looking at what the value of the vacation means to them. There's a lot of money sitting on the sidelines in our economy, and the benefit to Classic Journeys is they're investing it in travel. We have not made any significant adjustments in pricing. When the dollar rallied, we stepped in and bought a whole bunch of euros, and that will allow us to spend less on our tour costs. We also looked at additional value during the tour. We have wine included at every dinner where before it was limited. And we've gone to our hotels and said we don't want a guest to be in a single room.

**Q:** These sorts of tours can be pretty pricey. Can't travelers plot out their own trips for less money?

**A:** A person could stay at a two- or three-star hotel that's a chain property, eat inexpensive meals, rent a small car, and not hire a guide. But if you stay in accommodations equal to ours, eat the same kind of meals, hire local guides on your own, rent a good vehicle and create visits to wineries and sights, we're going to be a better value. I can get a better price than you can. We can buy things on a better price than you can, have long term relationships with places that will only take business from us. We can do it at a better price than you can build it on your own. In the Dordogne Valley (France), we get access to historic sites and people that would be impossible to do on your own.

**EDWARD PIEGZA**

**President and co-founder:**  
Classic Journeys

**Personal:** Born Jan. 20, 1966, in Bradford, Pa. Married; two sons, 13 and 11.

**Education:** Bachelor's in finance, University of Illinois, 1988; master's in marketing and finance, Northwestern, 1991.

**Career:** Worked at Continental Bank in Chicago before heading to San Diego in 1992 to run a British tour company. Co-founded Classic Journeys in 1995.

**Hobbies:** Skiing, tennis; coaching sons in football, basketball and baseball; hiking; long beach walks.

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For more information on Classic Journeys' Cultural Walking Adventures, Family Journeys, Culinary Tours and Private Journeys in 68 regions worldwide, please call 1-800-200-3887 or visit [www.classicjourneys.com](http://www.classicjourneys.com).