



Photos Courtesy
Incredible Adventures

For some thrill seekers, roller coasters just aren't going to do it.

Daredevils that yearn to roar up to the edge of space at 70,000 feet in a MiG 29 jet fighter, swim with sharks in San Francisco, train to be a covert operative with an ex-Israeli counter-terrorism expert, drive a tank, or dive in a submarine can do so—complete with hosted tours, accommodations, and expert guides—at Incredible Adventures.

For the right fee.

“Our success and longevity are incredible, given that we started pretty much by accident back in 1993,” says Jane Reifert, president of Florida-based Incredible Adventures (www.incredible-adventure.com). “Since then, many of the adventures we now offer have tended to find us

rather than the other way around. But that's been enough to keep us going; backed by solid commitment to customer service and attention to details.”



Fighter Jets Reifert isn't kidding when she says that Incredible Adventures was started by accident. It happened because a young U.S. entrepreneur named Kent Ertugrul was in Russia. His mission was to hire software engineers at

bargain rates. Instead, he

ended up buying a ride on a Russian MiG 29 fighter jet at Mach 2.5. “Russia is the only country in the world where the government will let you buy such rides,” explains Reifert. “That’s still the case today.”

Ertugrul was so impressed by the ride, that he came home and founded “MIGS Etc.” For a fee running into the thousands of dollars, you got a ride in a MiG 29 near Moscow, plus airfare, luxury hotels accommodations, meals, and guided tours in Russia.

It soon became apparent to MIGS Etc. that customers were willing to ante up for all kinds of blood-pumping thrills. Ironically, it was the Russians who came up with the company’s second adventure. Officials at the Yuri Gagarin Cosmonaut Training Center—the place where they train Russian astronauts—found out about the money being made on MIG flights and wanted in. So they asked MIGS Etc. to offer tickets on their IL-76 zero-gravity flights. These are jets that dive at terminal velocity, to give the passengers the experience of being weightless in space. (Actually, they are simply falling in tandem with the aircraft.)

MIGS Etc. liked the idea, and sold its first Russian weightless flight in 1994, taking a CNN reporter along for the ride. The free press helped drive sales.

In 1995, Jane Reifert and other employees—she had been with MIGS Etc. since 1993 in marketing—purchased the company from Ertugrul and renamed it Incredible Adventures. From that time on, a three-person full-time team (plus one part-timer and associates across the globe) has “worked together in a tiny office with a tiny window overlooking the Gulf of Mexico,” Reifert quips, selling some of the most mind-boggling adventures they can find.

Who’s Buying?

With fees running into the tens of thousands of dollars for all-inclusive trips, the thrills offered by Incredible Adventures are not for everyone. This said, the company’s Florida-based “swim with sharks” adventure can cost less than \$1,000.

“Our clients are generally wealthy, successful entrepreneurs who are



seeking an adrenaline rush,” says Jane Reifert. “We get our share of doctors, lawyers, and other professionals. However, we have also been known to get the occasional grandmother who has always wanted to jump out of an airplane at 30,000 feet—with a parachute, of course.”

Incredible Adventures has been able to attract these clients through a mix of media attention, Internet buzz—“we were on the web back in the beginning, in 1996,” Reifert says—and word-of-mouth.

It doesn’t hurt that up to 25 percent of the company’s clients come back for more adventures, and that even more stay in touch years after their last adventure took place. “When you help someone achieve a once-in-a-lifetime experience, you earn a place in their heart,” she explains. “This is why we receive cards and e-mails from our clients, even if they haven’t been with us actively for years.”

What’s Hot in Thrill Seeking

Beyond the many thrills listed above, Incredible Adventures offers customers the chance to take part in aerial combat—in real planes; attend Rock Camp in Las Vegas with KISS’ Gene Simmons; balloon across the Everglades; or train to be a firefighter, complete with entering a burning building and driving a fire truck. (Yes, you get to turn on the siren.)

This said, “it is still the MiG 29 jet fighter flight that is our core business,” Reifert says. “Adrenaline-lovers can’t get enough of the experience of shooting to the edge of space at twice the speed of sound. We have one client who has taken the trip 13 times, and is due to do it again.”

The second most popular adventure is swimming with the sharks. The good news is that clients are safely protected

inside a “shark cage” that is lowered in the water to fend off the friendly nips of 12-foot to 18-foot great whites.

Incredible Adventure’s number-three most-popular adventure is Covert



A guest prepares to dive in the Incredible Adventures’ deep-sea submarine label.

Ops, where clients are trained to be spies. “There’s lots of shooting done in training, and self-defense, and counter-terrorism tactics,” says Reifert. “You then get to take part in a very realistic simulated mission; like a “hostage rescue weekend.”

As was the case with weightless training, many of these thrill trips began by people contacting Incredible Adventures and suggesting them to Reifert and company. “We have been truly lucky in how much has come to us over the years,” she tells Funworld. “We never know what’s going to come to us next.”

The Importance of Customer Service

The glamour associated with supersonic jet rides and spy training belies a very serious fact: Incredible Adventures’ trips are premium-priced, and clients expect to be very well-treated during them. As a result, the

company takes customer service very, very seriously.

“We cannot control the weather, or the fact that all aircraft could be grounded



A guest experiences weightless flight in a special trainer aircraft on an Incredible Adventures tour.

during one of our scheduled trips because the president is flying through this airspace,” says Jane Reifert. “But what we can control is how our customers are treated. So we go the extra mile to make sure their accommodations, meals, and tours are top quality. And we watch out for the little things; like making sure the jet hangar is stocked with lots of cold drinks and all the other amenities that keep our clients happy.”

It is this commitment, plus reliably delivering promised thrills again and again, that has kept Incredible Adventures in business for nearly 20 years.

“We love what we do, even if we’re not necessarily the kinds of people who buy our trips,” admits Jane Reifert. “I mean, I was an adrenaline wimp as a kid; the kind who would never climb up a tree!”

Still, since taking over the company, Reifert has skydived, flown a fighter jet, floated in zero-gravity, and stared down a great white shark. “In fact, all of us here at Incredible Adventures have tried out our trips, one way or another,” she says. “I guess when you spend so much time surrounded by adrenaline-seekers,

the rush rubs off on you.”

James Careless is an experienced freelance writer with credits at Business Week, NBC News, and NPR. He is a frequent contributor to Funworld.

Five Tips for Incredible Customer Service

Experiencing incredible adventures, however thrilling, can be trying for clients. Here are five ways Incredible Adventures keeps these clients happy:

1. Client comfort comes first: It’s cold swimming with sharks off San Francisco. This is why Incredible Adventures’ crew has “towels, blankets, and comfort food” standing by as soon as the clients come out of the bay’s frigid waters, says Greg Barron, Incredible Adventures’ director of West Coast sales. “The deck and customer service folk should be standing by with towels and asking if anyone needs hot soup,” he says.

2. Minimize potential problems for clients: For the MiG flights, for example, “Customers are provided with a

prepaid cell phone for use during their stay in Russia, so they don't have to pay the high cost of using their personal phones to stay in contact with our staff, guides and drivers," says Jane Reifert. "The phones are programmed with the telephone numbers of our staff, so help or information is just the push of a button away."

3. Look out for clients' unanticipated needs: People don't always think ahead, for instance, by having enough dry clothes to warm up in after a cold water dive. This is why "I usually have at least one extra coat with me," says Barron.

4. No tipping necessary: "You wouldn't think of tipping your doctor or your accountant or your lawyer, because they are considered professionals and not service staff," says Reifert. Incredible Adventures wants its staff to have the same professional attitude. This is why "We pay them well and instill the message they are professionals working to provide excellent service ... They aren't working for tips."

5. Don't go cheap on your clients: Your customers are paying good money for your services. Provide them with the value they expect and deserve. This is why, at Incredible Adventures, "we don't try to be the cheapest," says Reifert. "We try to be the best we can for the best possible price."