

THE CANYONS OF MIKE HARRIS

INTERVIEW BY JEFF KAVANAGH

Having got involved in the country's outdoor adventure scene in the mid-nineties, ex-Dunedin man Mike Harris returned to Japan at the end of that decade to set up Canyons, his own company, after honing his outdoor guiding skills in places as far flung as Nepal. Now operating with a staff of 50 in four different locations in Japan taking 7,000 clients a year canyoning, and another 8,000 rafting and back country skiing, the 38-year-old has carved out a very tidy slice of the adventure industry for himself in the land of the rising sun. Taking a break from the winter snow and ice of his home in Minakami, a couple of hours north of Tokyo, he chats to NZ Adventure from Nelson, where he's chilling out with his wife and three kids.

TELL US A LITTLE ABOUT YOURSELF Well, I grew up and went to school in Dunedin, where I started studying Japanese at high school after watching too many ninja movies. After my first year of uni at Otago in 1992 I went on a home-stay to Japan to practice my Japanese skills, and fell in love with the place. After graduating in Accounting, IT, and Japanese in 1994, I headed straight back for round two and worked on the ski fields in Nagano, the home of of 1998 Winter Olympics. I bumped into a Kiwi guy there, and he told me all about the township of Minakami and how another Kiwi fella was setting up a rafting company there. The day I arrived I met my future wife, Aki, and went on my first rafting trip on the Tone River. The more I explored Minakami, the more I grew to like the place, finding it really similar to my old kicking grounds in Queenstown and Wanaka. I spent much of the rest of the 1990's travelling around Asia and working as an outdoor guide in a lot of different countries, which was critical to the forming of Canyons. These days, I've got three kids aged eleven, nine and seven, so much of my jet-setting days are over, but being a dad is an awesome adventure too.

HOW LONG HAS YOUR COMPANY CANYONS BEEN AROUND FOR? I'd learned canyoning guiding skills from some Swiss guides while working as an expedition raft guide in Nepal, and brought my newly found skill set back to Japan in 1998. There I started the first canyoning tours within the rafting company I was managing for a local Japanese guy in Minakami - the first canyoning tours in Japan, actually. It became very popular very quickly, so in 2000 I started Canyons as my own business, while still running the local rafting company. The demand for canyoning exploded exponentially over the first few years, so I soon outgrew the small garage that I'd been running tours out of, and moved to a large rustic wooden building in the forest. Then, I got a group of like-minded investors involved and expanded operations, creating new base locations in 3 other areas - Kusatsu, Akagi, and Okutama - and moved the main Minakami operation again to a larger facility.

WAS THERE MUCH RED TAPE INVOLVED SETTING IT UP? Although everyone has an image of piles of red tape doing business in Japan, for the outdoor industry it was exactly the opposite, there were no regulations at all. Inevitably a lot of copy-cat companies began to spring up, but because of our training and experience, none could match the level of course that we

provided. And because of the lack of regulations I adopted the CIC (Association of Professional Canyoning Guides) standards and went about creating the most professional company in Japan.

WHAT'S THE ADVENTURE SPORTS SCENE GENERALLY LIKE IN JAPAN? Growing rapidly. 18 years ago there were around five rafting companies in Japan, now there are over 200. The same has happened with canyoning. The big issue now is regulation. There are a lot of companies out there that shouldn't be doing tours - some of their guides can't even swim. Good regulation is needed to protect the customers, industry and environment.

HOW DID THE LOCALS REACT TO A KIWI SETTING UP A BUSINESS THERE? WAS THEIR MUCH RESISTANCE, SUSPICION, OR ANIMOSITY? The early days in Minakami were hard. In Japan the old model of group hot-spring tourism was in rapid decline but most tourism operators were in denial. Most saw outdoor operators as young punks just trying to make a quick buck "playing around" on the river. There were, however, a few key supporters that saw the potential in adventure tourism. By slowly building up relationships with the local guys my age, which pretty much means going for beers and sakes regularly with the local crew, and creating packages with local accommodation, the outdoor adventure industry gradually became more accepted.

As far as being a Kiwi goes, I actually think that had some advantages. Japanese pictured Kiwis as being more authentic outdoors people because they come from a country that has the "real deal". Often the locals didn't know the quality and potential of what they had on their back doorstep and valued being told that the natural assets they held were world class from people such as myself who had worked in a lot of countries.

It wasn't all plain sailing and there are definitely those that didn't agree with my Kiwi "can do" attitude, and a lot of cultural differences to be overcome. As in any small town, not just Japan, it takes outsiders, and not just non-Japanese but those from other areas, a while to be accepted.

WHAT KIND OF CULTURAL DIFFERENCES? In Japan officials are very risk averse so you could imagine that none of the local government really want to take any responsibility for creating rules and regulations for adventure tourism operators. It has taken a long time for adventure tourism to become accepted as a valid form of tourism. All adventure tourism operators were finally



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