

Spotlight On:

Darren Sweet | Co-Owner and Founder

Ogopogo Tours, Est. 2015

Darren Sweet grew up in Penticton and spent most of his life in the Okanagan. Struggling with an anxiety disorder, Darren held over a hundred different jobs, and never really felt like he fit in anywhere. Ogopogo Tours, an environmentally sustainable tour operator based in Summerland, B.C., has given him a new lease on life and allowed him to feel connected to his customers and community. Having struggled with physical and mental health, it is important for Darren that Ogopogo Tours remains an accessible business with an inclusive, non-discriminatory hiring policy.

What was the motivation behind starting your own business?

I wanted to find somewhere to work that would accommodate my mental health challenges and aligned with my values. Starting my own business was a good option for me.

How did mentorship and networking play a role in where you are today?

I've realized that I love networking, and I go to many networking events and courses. I've acquired quite a few mentors who've taught me how to scale up my business while maintaining my quality.

Why is environmental sustainability such an important part of your business?

I wanted to earn a living while doing no harm to the environment. Sustainability has been important to me for as long as I can remember, so it had to be a part of my business. To us, sustainability is also about relationships with our customers, venues, our community, and staff.

What are some of the challenges of operating an environmentally sustainable business?

There is a perception that if you're environmentally sustainable, you can't also provide the best service. But to us, these two things go hand in hand. We strive to provide the best experience possible, keeping environmental sustainability in mind.

What has been your greatest reward to date as a small business in the tourism industry?

Our customers are our greatest reward – the looks on their faces, the comments and reviews we get, and the hugs. I've felt disconnected most of my life, and now I'm solidly connected with our community, the venues we visit, chambers of commerce, and the regional tourism industry. I've never felt as connected as I do now.

What has been your biggest lesson learned about being your own boss?

I've finally learned that I can't do it all. I've learned how to recruit talented staff, work with mentors, and hire consultants. It's a real team effort.

What advice would you give to aspiring entrepreneurs?

Find a mentor or business group to bounce your ideas off of. And give back to the community. We donate to the community and in return we gain customers, word-of-mouth recognition, and most importantly, we get to support our community.

How do you plan to grow your business in the coming years?

We're growing rapidly – we'll be increasing our number of vehicles and staff and expanding our range throughout the Okanagan. We're planning to work with cruise ships to bring people from Vancouver to the Okanagan on multi-day tours.

What do you see as your greatest accomplishment to date?

Providing inclusive and accessible experiences while protecting the environment.

Tell us a little-known fact about your company.

Originally it was going to be just me working three days a week for three months in the minivan that we had. Now, we have six vehicles and employ several staff. I work 100 hours a week, all-year-round, and I love it.

Where is your favourite B.C. destination?

I could never leave the Okanagan – particularly Summerland. I haven't seen the level of friendliness and openness here matched anywhere else.

The Bottom Line:

- Ogoogo Tours employs seven staff.
- They are working towards an all electric fleet.
- First Biosphere Tourism certified business in Canada and the U.S.