



# Creating adventure

## Business caters to those wishing to explore Zion National Park

BY BRIAN PASSEY

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SPRINGDALE — For Zion Adventure Company co-founder Jonathan Zambella, downsizing led to his dream job.

In 1995, he was working as a banker in Pennsylvania but lost his job due to downsizing, giving him the “opportunity to be unemployed.” Zambella, an avid rock climber, knew he didn’t want to stay in the financial sector.

“I said, ‘I don’t want a job. I want to create my own job,’” says Zambella from a loft overlooking the floor of his Springdale-based business.

Enjoying his severance package, Zambella spent some time leading outdoor adventure trips with a climbing buddy, Rick Pratzel, for Lehigh University in Bethlehem, Penn. They also made a trip out west to climb at Red Rock Canyon National Conservation Area near Las Vegas.

While climbing at Red Rock Canyon, Pratzel mentioned to Zambella that he had hiked the Narrows in Zion National Park with his son. After 10 days of climbing six of the climbers decided to take a break and drove to Zion in the middle of the night, arriving after dark to camp at the Watchman Campground. It was Zambella’s first visit to the park.

The next morning, Valentine’s Day 1996, he looked out the flap of his tent and saw West Temple looming high above him — his first glimpse of Zion.

They began the day with one of the park’s most popular hikes.

“When we got to the top of Angel’s Landing I was in awe,” Zambella remembers. “I looked at my friends and said, ‘I want to live here.’”

It was then that Pratzel first mentioned a business idea to Zambella that would eventually become Zion Adventure Company. Hiking was still the top priority of the day so they continued on to the Temple of Sinawava, where Zambella first experienced the cold waters of the Virgin River for himself.

He says Pratzel told him about his trip up the Narrows and how they wanted to go farther but the water was too cold without a dry suit.

“At the time there wasn’t an outfitter in Springdale at all,” Zambella says. “You couldn’t even find a Nalgene bottle.”

That’s when the business idea truly began to blossom. Pratzel suggested opening an outfitter shop in the park’s gateway town to prepare tourist for hiking the Narrows. Zambella liked the idea but said he also wanted to offer guiding services, especially for the rapidly emerging sport of canyoneering.

They soon returned home to Pennsylvania but immediately made plans to return to Springdale and build their fledgling business. During the second trip out West they looked for buildings to rent and hiked the Narrows in dry suits.

They loved it.

Soon they hooked up with New Jersey-based Henderson Aquatics to make dry suits for the Narrows adventures. Then they met with Five Ten, a California climbing company, which agreed to build an aquatic climbing shoe perfect for the Narrows. Finally they began to manufacture their own neoprene socks.

They met their last major obstacle as Flanigan’s Inn owner Larry McKown agreed to rent out the old liquor store to the startup outfitters in what Zambella calls a “great deal.”

“To this day I’m grateful to Larry for being so kind to us,” he says.

Even with McKown’s support, it wasn’t easy for Zambella and Pratzel. Zambella says it wasn’t easy to start a business at that time in Springdale. Yet they “persevered.”

Then on Sept. 1, 1996, Zion Adventure Company opened its doors to the public.

### Building a business

For the first few years, Zambella says he often worked 16-hour days, six or seven days a week.

Initially the business only offered gear rentals. By the second year they began guiding tours in the nearby public lands. Mountain biking and river tubing tours soon followed.

Then there is the bright yellow, 1974 Mercedes-Benz Unimog, the company’s open-air, four-wheel drive shuttle they use for overland tours on nearby back roads. Zambella says the vehicle,

Courtesy of  
Nick Wilkes / Hurricane  
Valley Neighborhoods

**ABOVE: Zion Adventure Company offers a variety of outdoor excursions.**

Brian Passey / Hurricane  
Valley Neighborhoods

**RIGHT: The cliffs of Zion National Park tower over Zion Adventure Company near the park’s Springdale entrance.**





Water bottles line the walls of Zion Adventure Company in Springdale.

which was originally designed as a European military personnel carrier, deserves a story of its own.

During the first couple of years, Zambella and two friends ran the business themselves while Pratzel remained more of a silent partner in Pennsylvania. They didn't begin hiring their first employees until 1998.

Pratzel and Zambella added a third partner, Michele Vanhise, as a sign of their thanks to her after she worked for the company for a few years to help launch the business. Zambella says they could not have done it without Vanhise because she worked for nothing during that time except room and board.

He says the company did not have a major financial investment in the beginning. They just built it up little by little, investing early profits in improving and expanding the business. Behind it all is a business model based on helping others.



**ABOVE:** Springdale's Zion Adventure Company provides gear rentals and guided recreation tours throughout a 50-mile radius. **ON THE COVER:** Maria Wijnker,

"That's the basis of what we do," Zambella says. "We want to learn and we want to grow."

Zion Adventure Company now has 24 people on staff,

including eight year-round employees. Summer and fall are both extremely busy seasons for the business, Zambella says. Springtime is moderately busy and winter

right, a shuttle driver and tube outfitter for Zion Adventure Company, demonstrates techniques for floating the Virgin River outside the Springdale-based business.

is slow, just as it is for most businesses in Springdale.

Yet Zambella says the tourist season is becoming

• See ADVENTURE on page 12



Photos by Brian Passey / Hurricane Valley Neighborhoods

**Jonathan Zambella, co-founder of Zion Adventure Company, stands among the recreation gear available for sale and rent at his Springdale-based business.**



Zion Adventure Company uses this 1974 Mercedes-Benz Unimog for overland tours of local backroads, like the Smithsonian Butte and Grafton areas.

## COOPER

• Continued from page 5

war-ravaged family.

To earn his keep he performed all the house-keeping chores for residents of at least one tent of G.I.s, airing sleeping bags, filling water basins and personal canteens, cleaning and polishing boots, emptying the ever-present cigarette butt cans, running errands, arranging for laundry duties with villagers and guarding the property of that handful of gum-chewing visitors from a foreign land he quickly adopted as “big brothers.”

All of this for a carton or two of cigarettes — the

universal currency — or Korean when paper money of questionable and varying worth.

The most sought-after “boys” were also accomplished “scroungers” — expert in locating whatever odd thing was needed, no questions asked. (Rolls of bathroom tissue, the occasional light bulb, and bottles of real Coca Cola were of particular value.)

Perhaps even more important, and less appreciated, was the bridge between cultures and language represented by this humble ambassador of good will dedicated to serving others, and willing to forgive the unintended indifference and lofty

hubris of those they cared for with such loyalty.

For me, that unforgettable companion and mentor of all things “Korean” was a 13-year-old boy known to us as “Sammy.” His real name was Ko, jin Ho, and he lived in the nearby village of Chi Hyang ri.

For nearly a year, he saw to it that my jump boots were the spiffiest, my sleeping area the neatest, and the field jeep I sometimes used, far cleaner than any other in the unit. His attentiveness was indefatigable, and I tried always to show my deep appreciation.

When asked by the documentary TV film crew from Korean Broadcasting System who accompanied our group of Utah Veterans on our 2009 revisit if there was someone from the past I might like to locate, I told them about Sammy.

Such a reunion seemed so unlikely, even impossible, given the passage of so much time and the vagaries of wartime memory that I held no real expectation of success.

In fact I was more amused than anything by the enthusiastic effort being made by my Korean hosts in their persistent search for Sammy.

I was still doubtful when, on May 30, we drove south from Seoul to the distant city of Deagu where the researchers at KBS Television claimed they had located Ko, jin Ho now in declining health and impaired memory in a care facility.

Even as the wheelchair-bound patient, with his younger sister at his side was pushed from an elevator into the room where our small party waited, I was uncertain; time had indeed taken its toll on the young boy I had once known.

As we talked and friends interpreted, his memory began to come back, and his recollection of small details brought a smile to his face and a glow to his countenance.

My own son who had just flown to Korea to be with me managed to snap on unplanned picture with his cell phone as I once again shared a hug with a friend from out of the past. The search for Sammy had come to an end.

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Courtesy Zion Adventure Company / For Hurricane Valley Neighborhoods

**Springdale-based Zion Adventure Company offers guided canyoneering expeditions among other activities.**

## ADVENTURE

• Continued from page 7

longer each year.

“Even in the economic downturn we’re growing,” he says. “When the economy is slow, people go to their national parks. ... Rather than going on an African safari, they go to a national park.”

European travel is up because of the weakness of the dollar compared to the euro, meaning its more

affordable now for Europeans to travel in the United States.

## Adventuring

Once customers arrive at Zion Adventure Company there are a variety of activities they can try.

The business offers guided trips for canyoneering, hiking, climbing, biking, river tubing and overland tours. Additionally they

• See ADVENTURE on page 12

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**Events:** What's happening?.....Page 2

**School:** All-State athletes .....Page 3

**LaVerkin:** Car wash opens .....Page 4

**Cooper:** Search for Sammy .....Page 5

**Carter:** Keeping cool .....Page 9

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**Mountain biking is also part of Zion Adventure Company's outdoor activities.**



Brian Passey / Hurricane Valley Neighborhoods

**Zion Adventure Company in Springdale rents equipment for exploring the canyons of Zion National Park and beyond.**

## ADVENTURE

• Continued from page 8

operate shuttles to trailheads and rent gear for climbing and canyoneering.

Amy Nichter has worked at the company year-round as an outfitter, matching customers with the right product or service. She says the No. 1 rental at Zion Adventure

Company is shoes for hiking the Narrows.

As a former national park ranger who first moved to the area for its rock climbing, the job is a good fit for Nichter.

"You get to share a beautiful place, which I think is probably the best part of my job," she says.

Although many of the guiding activities take place in public lands within a 50-mile radius of Springdale, Zambella says they have been operating limited guiding in Zion itself since commercial activities were first allowed in the park a few years ago.

Among the activities inside the park boundaries are guided hikes, seasonal photography workshops and commercial shuttle service to trailheads.

Zion Adventure Company is also getting in on the world travel scene, offering niche canyoneering trips to Costa Rica, Mexico and Switzerland. Zambella says they also plan to expand canyoneering trips to Lake Powell as well as kayaking expeditions.

Yet in Zion alone there is a "lifetime of canyoneering to be had," Zambella says. The canyoneering trips are not only for the hardcore outdoor enthusiasts.

"One thing we really press upon is that canyoneering is for everyone," Zambella says, adding that they have expeditions for every skill level. "If you can walk you can go canyoneering."

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