

Globe Trotter

Lake Forest resident Jim Staples turned a lifetime love of travel and adventure into a thriving educational travel company.

words by **Mitch Hurst**
photography by **Katrina Wittkamp**
styling by **Theresa DeMaria**

JIM STAPLES GOT THE TRAVEL BUG at young age. His father was an attorney, and often would travel to the firm's offices scattered around the globe, taking the family with him. Staples was all too happy to tag along. A four-year rugby player at the University of Michigan, Jim spent a summer in Australia playing the sport and his passion to visit other countries and continents grew.

"When I was an early teen, I remember thinking as I walked along one of the stunning beaches of Rio de Janeiro with my dad how lucky I was to go on these trips every other year and see these sites and cultures I otherwise never would," Staples says. "I would replay the tour in mind for weeks after returning."

Staples also possessed a keen interest in business and started a lawn-moving service during his high school years. A few years later, while attending business school at Northwestern University, he took a job as a sales rep for an educational travel company owned by one of his lawn-service customers. After a decade moving up in the company, he struck out on his own.

Today, his passion for travel and business is evident in the company he founded in 2008 and continues to run, Orbridge. The company, which celebrated its 15th anniversary in 2023, partners with colleges and universities around the country to provide rich educational

travel experiences for alumni.

"In a nutshell, the educational travel market solicits and markets to college and university alumni associations throughout the country. We work with 140 different alumni associations, including several in Illinois like the University of Chicago and Northwestern University, as well as the University of Illinois and Northern Illinois University," Staples says. "We also work with many Ivy League schools, PAC-12 schools, SEC, Big 12 and ACC schools along with dozens of small liberal arts colleges, which happen to have wonderful travel programs."

Orbridge's economic model depends somewhat on how tight the connection is between the associations and the schools' alumni. Staples mentions Williams College in Williamstown, Massachusetts, which has a close-knit group of alumni who maintain an affinity for their college experience. Staples says those shared, formative years make for a collegial group of like-minded travelers eager to learn and immerse themselves in a local culture.

"Then you have Principia College in downstate Illinois, a Christian Science college and they love traveling together and do exceedingly well on our programs," says Staples. "It might surprise you. It's not just the big schools that travel well."



Jim Staples

“Our goal is to always exceed expectations and doing that can be difficult.”



One key to Orbridge’s success is that the company often brings along professors from the respective universities on their trips, so the trips become highly educational because the professors give insightful commentary throughout the program, as well as several lecturers. Orbridge also employs top tier local guides, travel directors, and expedition leaders.

Although a niche market, the educational travel space is crowded and competitive. Orbridge is one of five major companies that offer tours around the world. It can put together a small ship for a tour to Alaska or the Galapagos Islands or a deluxe tour around the world by private jet. Wine and cuisine focused tours, in particular, are growing in popularity.

“We’ve developed connections over the years in these travel markets so whether it’s a food and wine tour or an African safari we have an advantage when it comes to buying power, knowing the top guides in the region, and knowing the behind-the-scenes authentic excursions,” Staples says. “That’s some of our secret sauce.”

Staples says the key to creating an authentic tour experience is having relationships with people on the ground, whether it be vineyard owners, a deluxe sailing ship company

in Egypt, or a supplier in Africa that can provide high-end safari vehicles with open-air roofs and access to the best private properties.

“Our goal is always to exceed expectations and doing that can be difficult,” Staples says “In most cases, our guests are well-traveled, and the bar is high. By providing experiences that are immersive and meaningful, we’ve been fortunate that they keep coming back to us.”

For its higher-end programs, Orbridge only books 4- and 5-star hotels, five-star ships, and deluxe villas, particularly across Europe. The company maintains a large guest services team of 11, and its university partners often rely on that team to handle the needs of guests. Team members are in regular communication with guests to answer questions about everything from the weather to travel itineraries.

“We often say there are three parts of a travel program. There’s the pre-tour, the tour itself, and post-tour, and hearing from guests over the years we are hard pressed to discern which is most important,” Staples says. “The obvious choice would be the tour itself, but you’ve got to get all three right if you want your guests to have a memorable travel experience.”

Though his mom passed away a few years ago, Staples says she was on one the first Alaska tours Orbridge planned. They saw humpback whales roaming the waves and bears roaming the coastline. They went out on the water in kayaks and skiffs. He says the trip was “magical,” and she spoke about the experience at every major family gathering.

“We had a joke about wondering when she might bring it up,” he says. “It was lovely because it was so meaningful to her. She so loved wildlife and she showed the impact we can have first-hand in our business, and we take that charge very seriously.”

For more information about Orbridge, visit orbridge.com, and its sister company Sports and Entertainment Travel.



Jim Staples kayaking in
Churchill, Manitoba with
beluga whales