

## TRAVEL

# Virtual Tour Guide

A GPS-enabled device replaces the chatty park ranger.

■ By Ian Mount

TODAY'S PENNY-PINCHING TRAVELERS actually benefit tourism entrepreneur Lee Little, founder and CEO of BarZ Adventures ([barzadventures.com](http://barzadventures.com)) in Austin. Business is booming for his three-year-old company, which sells Palm-like GPS-enabled tour-guide devices. Called Rangers, they play audio and video keyed to points of interest in the user's location, such as a national park.

More travelers are now going lean and green on vacation, hiking and taking adventure trips closer to home instead of going abroad. A survey by TripAdvisor found that 73% of Americans say they plan to visit a national park in 2009, up from 62% a year ago.

This is where the Ranger comes in. "During a trip to Yellowstone, I was astounded by how little information there was at national parks," says Little, who positions the BarZ service as a replacement tour guide. "All I wanted was to understand why some geysers shoot straight up and some bubble out."

His Rangers are currently in use in 18 U.S. parks, zoos and historic sites. Little says his 15-employee company is

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—LEE LITTLE, CEO, BARZ ADVENTURES

growing at an annual rate of 300% and has raised more than \$2 million in funding to date. He would not specify revenues, however.

Little is also selling the Ranger as a money-making opportunity for entrepreneurs in the travel business. Bill Lilley,

co-owner of Go GPS Tours in Key West, Fla., invested about \$35,000 to buy 50 BarZ Rangers. He then filmed his own tour content. A year ago, Lilley started to rent Ranger units out of Lazy Dog Island Outfitters, the clothing store he co-owns. Since then Lilley has seen the number of \$29 rentals rise to 20 per day (other BarZ tours rent for \$9.95) and has sold 18 advertising deals for \$250 to \$1,000 apiece.

"We wanted something that could deliver stories with speed and accuracy and be small enough to carry," says Lilley. As of November 2008, he had almost recouped his investment.

A year ago, brothers Jeff and Trevor Swyers invested \$300,000 to buy 300

Rangers to launch GeoQuest Tours, a service offering GPS tours of Utah's Bryce Canyon and Zion National Parks. After filming their own content and having BarZ weave it together, GeoQuest launched two tours—each in six languages—in August 2008. During the first few months—going into slow park season—they found they were getting only about 10 daily rentals of the \$25 tours, but they are shooting for 150 per day by 2009.

Chris Jones, principal analyst at high-tech market research firm Canalys, praises BarZ's Ranger device as unique and a "neat thing." But he cautions that to reach the next level, BarZ will need to add many more locations and figure out a way for customers to take the tours using other GPS-enabled devices, such as cell phones and PDAs. Says Jones: "There's a lot of opportunity here, but it's only as good as the content they deliver." □

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Show 'n' Sell:  
Jeff Swyers of  
GeoQuest Tours  
with his children  
in Bryce Canyon

