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# BRUCE HODGE

FOUNDER OF GOWAY TRAVEL

*Marathon man: a globetrotter's guide to life & business*

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# *Marathon man:* A GLOBETROTTER'S GUIDE TO LIFE & BUSINESS

GOWAY FOUNDER BRUCE HODGE & FAMILY LOOK BACK ON 46 YEARS OF REINVENTION AND ENDURANCE IN THE WORLD OF LONG-HAUL TRAVEL

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**T**here was a time long ago when Bruce Hodge, Globetrotter was known as Bruce Hodge, Economist.

"I was with the Reserve Bank of Australia. I took a year's leave of absence so I went to Europe," the banker-turned-world traveller recalls from the cozy surroundings of his favourite locale, just steps from the company's Toronto headquarters. "The first morning at breakfast I met this bloke at a table and introduced myself as Bruce the Economist – he said 'I'm Graham the Bus Driver; I drive minibuses full of girls around Europe.' That's how I got into travel; I applied right there."

It's been many years since Hodge traded his suit for more casual dress (and the occasional themed costume when dropping in on agencies to announce a new tour or brochure), but for the Goway Travel founder, swapping a career in banking for a lifetime of travel is a decision that he's never regretted.

An avid squash and rugby player for many years, Hodge also climbed Mount Kilimanjaro in his 60s and took part in his first marathon at age 55 ("the original one - in Greece," he jokingly clarifies). Considering Goway has only continued to grow since its inception in the early 1970s, it's the perfect metaphor: a long-distance approach where endurance wins the race.

"Each year, we get a little stronger and our total strength has been built up over those years," Hodge says.

Choosing Toronto as Goway's base of operations to sell European tour packages was the culmination of two factors; not only had one of the operators Hodge represented identified Toronto as an up-and-coming market for Europe travel, but a former rugby coach also offered temporary lodgings to Hodge as he got the company off the ground. Taking on a night shift in a peanut butter factory to subsidize his dream in the early days, Hodge recalls an invitation to Australia which led to the expansion of Goway's product offerings beyond Europe; somewhat ironically, the company became synonymous with

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(From left) Bronwyn, Bruce and Claire Hodge.

South Pacific travel while its Europe product was discontinued for many years, before returning in 2013.

Likewise, a shift in Goway's target demographic also paid dividends for the fledgling company, Hodge explains.

"In the early days we specialized in adventure travel and (geared towards) young adults and eventually over the years, because I was Australian, I was invited on a business trip there and the idea was to sell adventure holidays in Australia," he says. "I was really struggling selling to young adults and the real money was in selling to older people."

Like any long-lived business, customer service has been key for Goway. Offering a literal world of travel packages (save North America) to 'Globetrotters' has been crucial to Goway's success, Hodge says, allowing the company to "recycle clients" who may have already visited Australia but want to repeat the Goway experience in South America, Africa or Asia.

And he hasn't been alone on that journey. Son Adam, daughter Bronwyn and wife Claire Hodge are also part of the Goway team (serving as marketing manager, product manager of the IslandsEscapes by Goway division and vice-president

respectively) and that family approach has been extended to the entire international team of approximately 260 fellow Globetrotters; in addition to its Toronto and Vancouver locations, Goway has offices in Australia, Los Angeles and most recently, the Philippines, along with hundreds of international home-based representatives as far-flung as New Zealand and Japan.

Hodge explains that by eliminating hierarchy, such an approach provides fertile ground for new ideas and encourages staff to come forward with their best visions for the company: in fact, the company's Philippines office was the suggestion of staff within Goway's accounting department.

Not surprisingly, employee retention is strong, best exemplified by Marilyn Bryson, who retired from Goway's Vancouver office in December 2015 after 43 years with the company. Former staffers who left on good terms are also invited to return as part of Goway's 'Boomerang Club,' which currently sits at a membership of 26.

The concept of strong relationships extends to suppliers and travellers as well. Hodge states that Goway has been working with many of the same suppliers for upwards of 30 years in some cases, which affords the company better buying power, →



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while many consumers have been travelling with Goway for a similar amount of time, if not longer.

“Over 46 years, we’ve had thousands of clients who travelled with us and had a good time; we’ve got a product for each of them and they all come back,” Hodge says. “I’ve grown with the baby boomers and we have people who travelled with us more than 30 years ago. I had a client whose daughter travelled with us – and she travelled with us in 1973!”

With strengthening consumer bonds in mind, Goway also recently began featuring traveller reviews via third-party review website TrustPilot, with the tour operator receiving an average rating of 89 per cent across 600 reviews.

“We review every single one – there’s a member of the Goway team dedicated to that – both good and bad, and anytime there’s a less favourable review, we address ways of making it better for the next time,” Bronwyn says. “A lot of the time, if something goes wrong, we can connect with clients during the trip and fix it while they’re there.”

A diverse product portfolio also allows Goway to remain flexible; for example, when tragedy or disaster strikes one part of the globe and travel to the region is affected, the company has

more than enough destinations to make up for any related losses.

“In travel, things like Ebola and wars happen,” explains Bronwyn. “One of our strengths is that we have a lot of different product that we can grow and develop if one particular area isn’t selling. On top of that, it’s about carving your niche – finding what sets you apart from your competitors and focusing on that.”

And while the leadership reins will gradually pass to the younger generation, the elder Globetrotter says he doesn’t intend to slow down anytime soon. According to Hodge, he’s always working for Goway – at the time of this interview, he had just returned from traversing Africa by rail on the tour operator’s month-long ‘Cape Town to Cairo’ *Trip of a Lifetime* itinerary, and was preparing to depart again, this time to the South Pacific for three weeks. The marathon, it seems, will continue for some time.

“If anyone wants to start a business, you’ve got to believe in what you’re doing; you’ve got to hang in there and not give up, because there will be many hurdles that will be thrown at you, but that’s life. You’ve got to make sure that when tough times happen you don’t get too weak, but when the good times come back, you haven’t been weakened. I’ve always understood that.” ■





## Growing up Goway

*Adam and Bronwyn Hodge weigh in on growing with and into the family business*

### HOW LONG HAVE YOU WORKED FOR GOWAY?

**Adam Hodge:** When I was a teenager, I used to do odd jobs here and when I was a university student; I was a part-time employee on the systems team, which involves data-loading, but when I finished school I briefly worked for another company and since the end of 2010, I've been working here full-time. I became marketing manager in late 2015.

**Bronwyn Hodge:** As a family business, you're always involved, whether stuffing envelopes on a Saturday or covering reception part-time in high school.

### WERE YOU ALWAYS PLANNING TO JOIN THE FAMILY BUSINESS?

**AH:** To be honest, Goway wasn't always the most obvious path; when I was younger, I imagined I would do something to do with travel, whether it was hotels, or a tour operator. Since sometime in my teenage years is when it went from a seed and started to crystalize; it started to pull me in and in time, I was doing stuff for Goway. By my early 20s I was set on working in travel.

**BH:** I was never pressured to get into the family business, but it took a while to decide what I wanted to do. It was never a thing that I always knew I'd get into the family business, but rather (the plan) evolved over time. If I wasn't here, I'd want to do something that allowed me to travel for free.

### DESCRIBE GROWING UP IN A FAMILY BUSINESS WITHIN THE TRAVEL INDUSTRY

**AH:** Growing up in a family business has allowed me to travel to a lot of different places and I definitely got the travel bug at a young age; at the same time, it made me want to travel on my own, without family. It's nice to see your family in a different light – I work on the same floor as my mom and dad, and my sister is on the floor below.

**BH:** I got the opportunity to see some exotic places on the March Break and experience Goway trips. Both Adam and I love travel and both of us taking opportunities to see the world on our own terms helped us fall in love with travel; and once you're in, you can't get out.