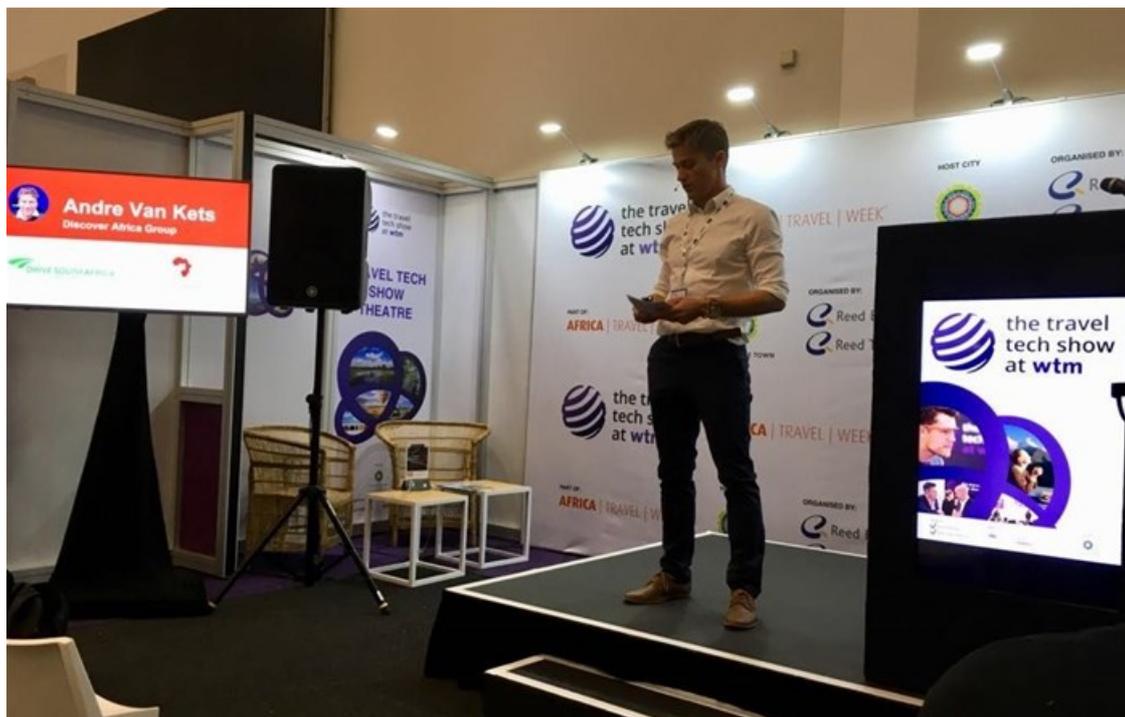


An inside look at the Google Trekker Project

 By Robin Fredericks

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Launched at the end of 2017, the [Google Trekker Project](#) saw Google, the Discover Africa Group and South African Tourism - and a whole host of tourism organisations from SanParks to Cape Nature - establish a project comprising over 200 volunteers from all walks of life across South Africa to make their way around the country's rich tourism landscapes, capturing its natural heritage.



For Andre van Kets, co-founder, Discover Africa Group this project was an exciting experience that took all participants on an adventure of nation building, putting South Africa on the global map.

Speaking at this year's World Travel Market Africa, Van Kets let attendees in on how the company stumbled on this project, how they managed to raise funds for it and how they rallied the tourism industry together, talking about the challenges that they faced and some of the stories from the trail encompassing the exciting things that happened and the benefits to the industry as whole, as well as how small business owners in South Africa (or anywhere) can use the Google Street View ecosystem at a really low cost.

Researching 360° cameras in 2015, Van Kets came across a Google Trekker image of the Grand Canyon taken in 2012/2013:



Image via [Google.com](https://www.google.com)

"I think Grand Canyon was one of the first locations Google mapped out in the way we just did South Africa and while I was searching around, I discovered this page on the web which said: 'If you like, we will lend you our camera. You go out there and map your neck of the woods.' I filled out the form, adding all my details."

A month later, Van Kets heard from Google. After checking out who he is, and what Discover Africa Group does, they sent the cameras with an agreement, online training on how to put everything together and information on how to get a hold of them should Discover Africa run into any glitches on connecting the device.

The camera, as Van Kets explained, is a heavy device which takes photos of every step of a trail, saved to a hard drive, which is then sent out to Google's head office. There it is added to their Maps and Street View data, which then, in turn, becomes available for everyone to see across the world.

"It was pretty fun just stumbling onto this. What we did was we started hiking around Cape Town, invited friends, families and guys in the office. Every time we hiked we came across someone that said, 'Woah, what is this thing?' Not long after that we had 20 to 30 people all wanting to carry this camera and be a part of the project."



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Soon after, Van Kets and his team began setting up meetings with SanParks, Cape Town Tourism and South African Tourism. "It wasn't a hard sell. To be honest, if you say you're doing something with Google for tourism, everyone is willing

to listen. SanParks immediately came to the party, bringing all of its members on board – providing access to parks, a roof over our heads and rangers to help us on trails."

As persistence was paying off, Van Kets continued his efforts to grow the project by coming into agreement with South African Tourism, managing to share the costs with them, sourcing a core team of six made up of videographers, two trackers and guys that were using the Google cameras as well as two admin coordinators that were planning ahead. With six youngsters and three vehicles, they travelled 50,000kms all around the country in eight months, overcoming a few obstacles along the way.

"We were in the Low Veld and bushveld, we found volunteers everywhere we went. We captured the wetlands, the local rangers and local guides assisting us. In Sun City, lifeguards carried the trekker for us. Our team was just bringing the technology around, explaining how to use it, training the guys up and they were sort of making this project their own."

Van Kets explained that there were a lot of these moments shared, which made it really special. To him this was more than just putting South Africa on the map, it was a nation-building project with a common cause and left everyone forgetting about the bad, political driven news and illustrating that there is some good news happening in South Africa.

"It was a great PR story for South Africa with over 250 digital stories, 20 magazines or newspapers, two dozen radio interviews – it got the word out, with three TV spots and hundreds and thousands of views on social media."

This was a positive marketing drive for South Africa as a product for the people said Van Kets. "As operators, as travel agents, we can now use this technology to showcase to our clients what they can expect when they are on a trail or whichever area they're going to. These are moments that we can now use to sell our products to the world."

Van Kets concluded by saying that no matter what sort of tourism entity you are, there are two ways in which you can leverage Google's technology for your business. "You can create images for your tourism business using a 360° camera and upload them to Google maps where anyone can discover them. The other thing is to register your business through Google Business - these are integrating solutions and are completely free. You are missing out if you do not do this."

ABOUT ROBIN FREDERICKS

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