

AUGUST 2025

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# RESPONDING TO *THE CALL OF THE WILD*



**A former  
Wall Street  
businessman  
started a guided  
expedition  
company,  
embracing his  
dream of being  
outdoors and  
helping others.**

BY JENNIFER KING

PHOTOS COURTESY OF FERNWEH

**A** strong desire to travel is the Merriam-Webster definition of “wanderlust,” a word that aptly encapsulates how Joel Hempel lives his life.

Owner of fernweh, a company that plans guided expeditions for those looking for off-road adventures, Hempel says the name of his company is German for the “deep, aching desire to explore distant places.”

So how did a former Wall Street businessman get into taking groups on desert trips in their off-the-grid vehicles?

“I’ve always been an outdoorsman,” Hempel says. “At a very young age my dad exposed me to camping — canoe camping in the Adirondacks specifically. We ended up doing that for many, many years, and you realize that whether it was by way of canoe or a car, [it was] whatever you could do to get [out] and be with nature.”

Raised in the Bronx and Long Island, New York, Hempel spent summers fishing, and the common thread through all of his activities was being outside.

“I love the outdoors. I love travel, and when I bought my Storyteller van, I had spent 30 years working for a big Wall Street bank running an asset

management business for them. I bought my van in September, and in October they said ‘Your job was eliminated.’

“So after 30 years with the same company, doing all the things you think you’re supposed to do, they came and said your job’s eliminated. I took the next year and traveled this amazing country and met some rad people. I got to use my van and went from Maine to Key West to Oregon and everything in between ... I think I was able to see things that the average American never gets to see, and along the way I realized, there is a community of people [here].”

Embracing this community and discovering a need some travelers have to gain confidence in their ability to go boondocking led to the creation of fernweh. These guided expeditions were “born from a love of wild places, good people and meaningful journeys,” according to the company website.

Since off-roading and overlanding can be intimidating for some, taking the stress out of the logistics helps travelers just “show up, drive and enjoy the ride.”

“You can visit places, you can have a campfire, you can do some fun stuff, but at the end of it, doing it together is a whole lot better than doing it alone,” Hempel says. “There’s a quote that I have



used quite often, an old African proverb, and it basically says ‘if you want to go fast, go alone. If you want to go far, go together.’

“A guy who exposed me to that was from South Africa, and it just resonated with me as I was building this business.”

Fernweh launched last September, and the company’s first trip was in Death Valley over New Year’s Eve.

“We were as far away from the light pollution and noise and the ball falling in New York Times Square as we could possibly be, and we got to have an amazing time,” Hempel says.

While there are other expedition guides who will take people off-grid to help learn all the tips and tricks, Hempel says he wants to do all this, but do it differently.

For example, one of their trips was in the San Luis Valley in south-central Colorado to watch the migration of the sandhill crane. A professional photographer is brought along on each of fernweh’s expeditions to capture these unique moments.

Fernweh also partnered with Storyteller Overland this year to hold Camp Her Way outside Nashville in April (Hempel also owns a Storyteller HILT and TAXA travel trailer in addition to his Beast MODE van).

“That was a huge, raving success, and it was all about bringing women together and having an education of the van, how to off-road, doing recovery discussions,” he says. There were other elements as well, such as yoga, a nature walk with an herbalist and fly-fishing.



Joel Hempel

This September, fernweh has a trip planned to Vermont to see the fall colors. A professional mountain biker will join them for anyone who wants to go on the mountain biking trails, and that Sunday of the trip, attendees can go to the US Open for downhill mountain biking competition.

No matter what activities are included on the trip, there is always an element of giving back included. Hempel says he believes in “Adventure with a Purpose,” so wherever they travel, they select a nonprofit to work with to help people in the area. For Camp Her Way, fernweh partnered with Sackcloth & Ashes, which manufactures and distributes blankets to shelters for every blanket that’s purchased. In Vermont, they will partner with the Mountain Biking Association, which maintains trails.

“We don’t want to just take a group of people in what are perceived as

expensive vans, whip into town, rip up trails and leave,” Hempel says. “We’ve also worked with Tread Lightly so we’re educating our participants on how to [camp] responsibly, and Leave No Trace.

“So yes, we do trips, we teach a bunch of stuff, but we’re trying to be a little different in the themes that we’re doing and our ability to give back.”

When asked why he opted to take his love of off-grid traveling and turn it into a business, Hempel didn’t hesitate with this answer: “Retirement was not an option because I can’t sit still.”

“I’ve always been somebody that wants to help others. I did it in a world where I was helping people retire and manage their money,” he says. “Now I am helping people in a very different way and in a way I think is really important — which is I think we have the greatest country in the world, and I think there are places that people may



Adventurers on a fernweh expedition at Bell's Reserve in Kingston Springs, Tennessee, outside of Nashville.



Bonding around  
a campfire at  
Overland Expo in  
Flagstaff, Arizona.

## FERNWEH

A German word that means you have a deep, aching desire to explore distant places. From the fernweh website: "it's a pull — something in your gut that tells you there's more out there, beyond the next ridge, beyond the next dirt road."

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- Faraway places
- Exceptional meals
- Remember the moments
- New knowledge
- Worthy causes
- Engage with community
- Have fun







Fernweh campers in Death Valley, California, near Eureka Dunes.



not get to, and [I am happy] to be able to bring that together.

Building community is also an important benefit for Hempel.

"If I could build a business and partner with some people along the way, then I was going to go do that. I've given myself a budget of time and money, and I don't know where this business takes me, but it's very interesting to see how my network of friends and professionals have now latched onto this. The people that are still in the banking world are fiercely jealous of the fact that I'm out having fun. The business is growing, and I'm not slowing down."

What fuels Hempel to bring more off-roaders to the experience fernweh offers is the growth of confidence he sees during their trips.

"I was in the middle of the Black Rock Desert and a 79-year-old man, who is a [widower], owns one of these crazy vans and travels all over the place. He was with us, and we went up this

fairly challenging ... hill. We had to go up and over it, and he did it and he was smiling ear to ear.

"He said to me, 'Joel, if I don't wake up tomorrow morning, I will have missed nothing in my life.'

"So here was this man who had lived this amazing professional career, he's a dad, he's now a [widower], he's a grandfather, and now I call him a friend ... the transformation of this guy who did not know how to air down or up his tires, and we helped him through that. Now he's going over this terrain and just having an amazing time. It is really nice to see how he has evolved with the confidence in his van."

He was able to coach another woman who travels solo on how to change a tire and understand how to take care of the van — and in turn, herself — while out on the road.

"Whether it's how do I change a tire or know where the tools are to be able to do that," he says. "That for me is more rewarding than anything, to see that transformation in the people that are here."

Another rewarding aspect, Hempel says, is the conversation around the campfire each evening.

"The discussions that happen around the campfire will never cease



to amaze me," he says. "Some of it is superficial — I like your clothing, the weather's nice, how are your kids, typical conversation. By the third day, it can be the most revealing, vulnerable personal conversations. And that's the power of the community and the trust and the bonds that come together.

"I think it's the transformation of humans, the education of the people, and the connection and vulnerability that gets created as to why I keep doing it." **RVP**