



Last updated: 12:52 PM ET, Wed January 13 2016

Ashish Sanghrajka: Sharing a Life of Travel

[TOUR OPERATOR](#) | [DAVID COGSWELL](#) | JANUARY 13, 2016



Photo courtesy Big Five Tours & Expeditions

Ashish Sanghrajka, president of Big Five Tours & Expeditions, is only 38 years old, but he's had more travel experience than most people twice his age.

Sanghrajka was born into a travel family. His father was the founder of Big Five Tours in Nairobi, Kenya. His mother was born in Sudan. His grandparents were born in India and his family moved to New York when he was 7 years old. But the family was constantly traveling as part of building a travel business. Travel and multicultural experiences were second nature to him from his earliest memories.

So when Big Five Tours introduced a series of specialty tours called President's Picks, presented by Sanghrajka, it comes on good authority. Sanghrajka has been a world traveler since an age when most people are riding tricycles.

"I went to Sudan regularly as a child to see my grandmother," said Sanghrajka. In addition, he visited relatives in India from an early age. When he was 15 his grandmother moved back to India from Sudan and he began staying with her regularly.

"Sudan was absolutely amazing," said Sanghrajka. "If you put the political issues aside, from a standpoint of authenticity and of literally being able to hear your thoughts, it's amazing."

For a kid growing up, Sudan was an idyllic place.

"We used to take this truck out to this area where there were mud hills, natural hills that were pure dirt that during the rain would turn into a natural slide," said Sanghrajka.

"During the rain we would go up and use them as slides, then come back all covered in mud. It was a kid's dream."

For an adult seeking a different kind of adventure Sudan also has much to offer.

"We talk about souks and medinas in some of the old cities," said Sanghrajka. "In the old cities in Madani and Khartoum, Sudan, you couldn't take your car in, and walking through them with your parents, even at a young age you start appreciating what you are smelling, what you are seeing. It's a normal life, and there's not a tourist in sight. I went to Sudan twice a year till I was seven. My most vivid memories are of Sudan."

After the family moved to New York, Ashish kept going back regularly to East Africa to visit family, go on safari or go on other kinds of explorations.

His first solo airplane trip was when he was 8 years old, flying from New York to Kenya, with an overnight stop in London to visit an uncle who met the child at the airport and kept him overnight.

Born into Travel

The family safari business was actually born before Ashish.

Ashish's father Mahen Sanghrajka, founded Big Five Tours with two partners in 1973. Mahen was the front desk manager of the Intercontinental Hotel Nairobi. He and the revenue manager and food and beverage manager of the hotel dreamed of starting a safari company. They met to talk about it at a bar in the hotel. When they were thinking about what to name the company, they looked up and saw a sign: The Big Five Bar.

The company was well on its way by the time Ashish was born in 1977. He grew up in a family of not just travelers, but people who earned their livelihood in the travel industry. It was travel travel travel, day and night. Many times Ashish met safari takers who had dinner at the family home in Nairobi as part of their safaris.

The family moved to New York in 1985 and then to Florida in 1993. After starting its operations in East Africa, Big Five expanded to Egypt and Morocco. The company expanded into Latin America in 1989, starting with Galapagos, then expanding into Peru and beyond into Latin America.

In 1997 the company purchased a California operator of tours to Asia called Amtour and incorporated it into its own operations. By 1998 and 1999 Big Five was offering tours throughout Asia.

"We were coming into Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos just as they were opening up in '98 and '99," said Sanghrajka.

While the company was expanding around the world, Ashish was following the growth with his own travels. "I climbed Kilimanjaro when I was 14," said Sanghrajka. "I traveled to Costa Rica when I was 15. I went to the Ecuador and the Galapagos swam with piranha in the Amazon when I was 17. It was when the Amazon was just opening up. And just kept maturing my travels after that point."

While expanding in Latin America and Asia, Big Five also continued to expand in East and Southern Africa.

In between his trips to Big Five's new destinations, Sanghrajka kept going back to Africa on a regular basis. He did a pilgrimage to remote parts of India when he was 18. He explored remote parts of Kenya in his 20s.

"It was nonstop," he said, "always seeing something different each time."

It was these kinds of experiences that formed Sanghrajka's worldview and that still guide him in his role as president of Big Five.

"A lot of people talk about authenticity and want to be authentic because of this or that," said Sanghrajka. "We have a different approach. We hold Sudan as the benchmark. Whenever we're looking at authenticity I always try to compare it to what my experience was there, remembering that market, remembering those hills, remembering that scene and not a tourist ever, just knowing I was somewhere special. Or at night taking my mattress out, we would sleep outside under the stars. These are memories that guide me today."

It was Big Five's brand manager Deborah Kilcollins who suggested to Ashish that he should gather together a list of some of his favorite trips beyond the standard brochure itineraries. The trips were derived from custom trips that had been put together for specific clients.

"We were talking about itineraries and she said, 'Why don't have collection of things that stand out. We do things off the grid all the time, stuff that's not in the brochure, stuff you can't find online, something so different.'"

"It started as sample itineraries to offer travel agents, showing them some of the creative things we've done," said Sanghrajka. "From there we looked at it and said, 'We actually have a collection here. This isn't just sample itineraries of what is possible. These are trips we have actually operated for clients who have come back happy and loved it. And they were so off the wall we decided this is really cool to keep handy to show that this is something we've done successfully.'"

The President's Picks series is comprised of a dozen programs.

- President's Pick: India, 14 Days
- President's Pick: Ecuador & Galapagos, 14 Days
- President's Pick: Colombia & Guatemala, 11 Days
- President's Pick: Chile's Patagonia & Mapuche Culture, 11 Days
- President's Pick: China, 29 Days
- President's Pick: Namibia & Botswana, 14 Days
- President's Pick: Private Conservancies in Tanzania, 11 Days
- President's Pick: Australia & New Zealand, 29 Days
- President's Pick: Argentina Adventures, 16 Days
- President's Pick: Australia's Primeval Landscapes, 11 Days
- President's Picks: Peru's Amazon, Andes & the Coast, 13 Days
- President's Pick: Laos & Cambodia Rural Landscapes, 12 Days

“I’ve been very fortunate that at 38 years old I have seen more of world than many people have, and that’s a blessing,” said Sanghrajka. “I don’t want to take for granted. It’s something not everybody gets a chance to do. I’m very fortunate and I want to put it to use for good.”

#

Travel Pulse, online link: <http://www.travelpulse.com/news/tour-operators/ashish-sanghrajka-sharing-a-life-of-travel.html>

For more information, contact:

Deborah Kilcollins

Brand Manager

800.244.3483, 772.287.7995, ext. 2214,

deborah@bigfive.com