ROOKIES, ZOMBIES, COWBOYS, SLEEPWALKERS & SKELMS

Pathologies of Adventure Tourism Operations in South Africa

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THE CAST OF CHARACTERS

THE NOVICE
Much enthusiasm matched only by Ignorance and lack of skills, the Novice wants to live the life of the adventurer but has a lot to learn.

THE ZOMBIE
Adventure's dead man walking, this pitiable character had good ideas once but failed to change with the times and now stagnates alone.

THE COWBOY
Flashy and full of himself/herself, a showman who succeeds by the skin of his teeth, always taking risks that may bring trouble.

THE SLEEPWALKER
This character deserves special attention due to he/she/it being very common. They worry us all. *More on this one is to come…*

THE SKELM
A sly, amiable rogue who cuts corners and may cheat the client and get away with it. Lives the life until run out of business.

PATHOLOGIES: When something is so broken, even the gullible public begin to wonder about it.

MY CREDENTIALS – *for what they're worth*

- 50 years on the adventure scene
- Made all the mistakes myself
- Founded rafting in SA (1980s)
- Launched mountain biking tours(1980s)
- Owned Trailblazers in the early days
- Grandfathered as a tour guide (1990s)
- Launched Adventure Standards Africa (2008)
- Became an Assessor (2013)
- Nature/Culture/Adventure National Guide
- Launched Adventure Audit Africa (2025)

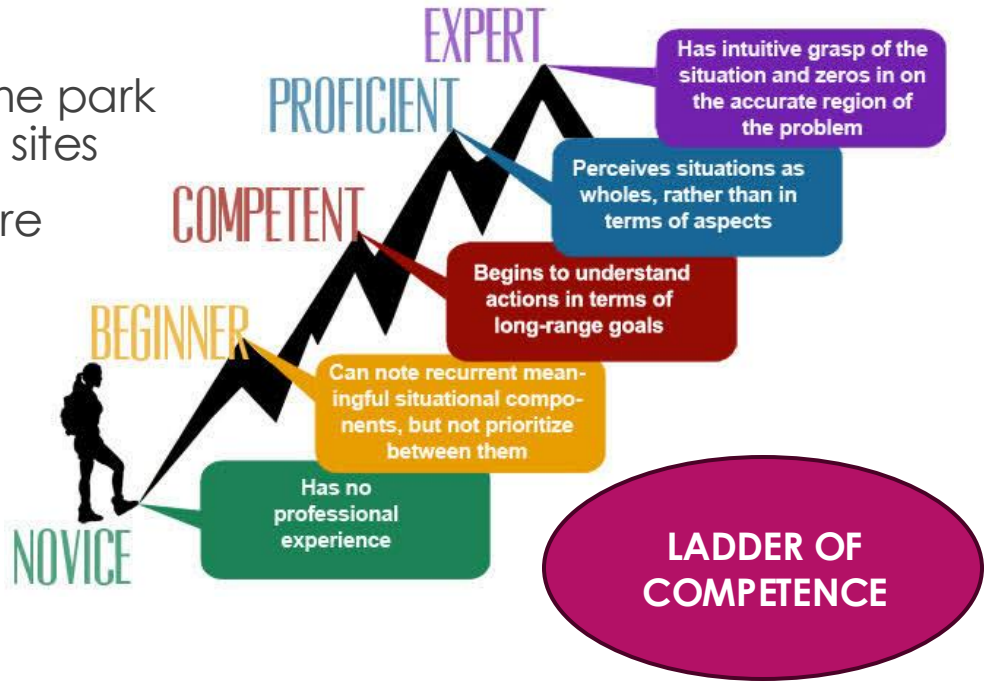
I have won fame but not fortune as a popular science writer and tour guide in the Vredefort Dome meteorite impact site.

SOFT AND HARD ADVENTURE – Key insights

- In South Africa, outdoor tourism falls under nature, culture or adventure
- **Soft adventure tourism** takes the form of game drives, theme park family fun, or visits to indigenous cultural or archaeological sites
- Thus **hard adventure** is exclusively the province of Adventure

Guides and Operators (represented by SA-AIA)

- HARD ADVENTURE is characterised by:
  - The need for **skills and safety as a priority**
  - **Elevated risk** and exposure to danger
  - **Self-reliance** by customers under **expert guidance**



PATHOLOGIES THREATEN US

🛌 **Sleepwalkers:** Too many operators stumble blindly through their duties—clueless about the risks they're running.

⚖️ **Legal Landmines:** Non-compliance with laws, permits, and heath & safety regulations is a lawsuit waiting to happen.

💣 **Negligence = Ticking Time Bomb.** One serious accident, and it's court dates, fines, or even jail.

❌ **Terrible briefings & Kit:** Clients often get no real safety briefing, no risk prep, and no clue what they're getting into.

📉 **Not Pros, Just Pretenders:** Some guides barely know their stuff—forget wilderness first aid, ropework, or environmental ethics.

😕 **Shady Ethics:** unsafe attitudes and poor service are staining the industry's name. 🔚

❑ **This Ends One of Two Ways:** Shape up—or ship out when the next incident blows up on social media or lands in court.

BASIC BUSINESS OF ADVENTURE

LOOK AT IT FROM A PROFIT AND LOSS PERSPECTIVE

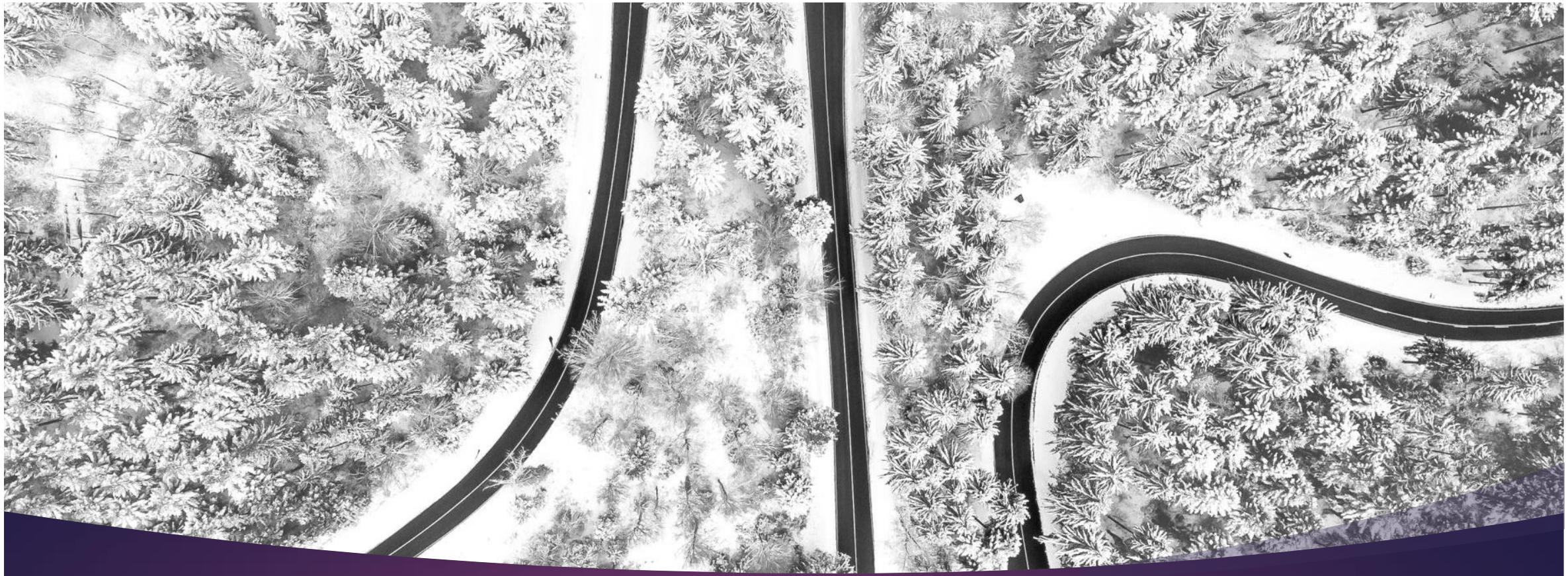
<u>SUSTAINABILITY</u> MEANS STAYING OUT OF TROUBLE

- **Resolving tensions between risk and reward**
- **Avoiding opportunism, choosing iteration**
- **Offering not just thrills but a rounded experience**

CONCEPTS

The S-Curve
Minimum Viable Product (MVP)
Minimum Viable Experience (MVI)

UNDERSTAND: These are typical business issues. Adventure is by no means exceptional.

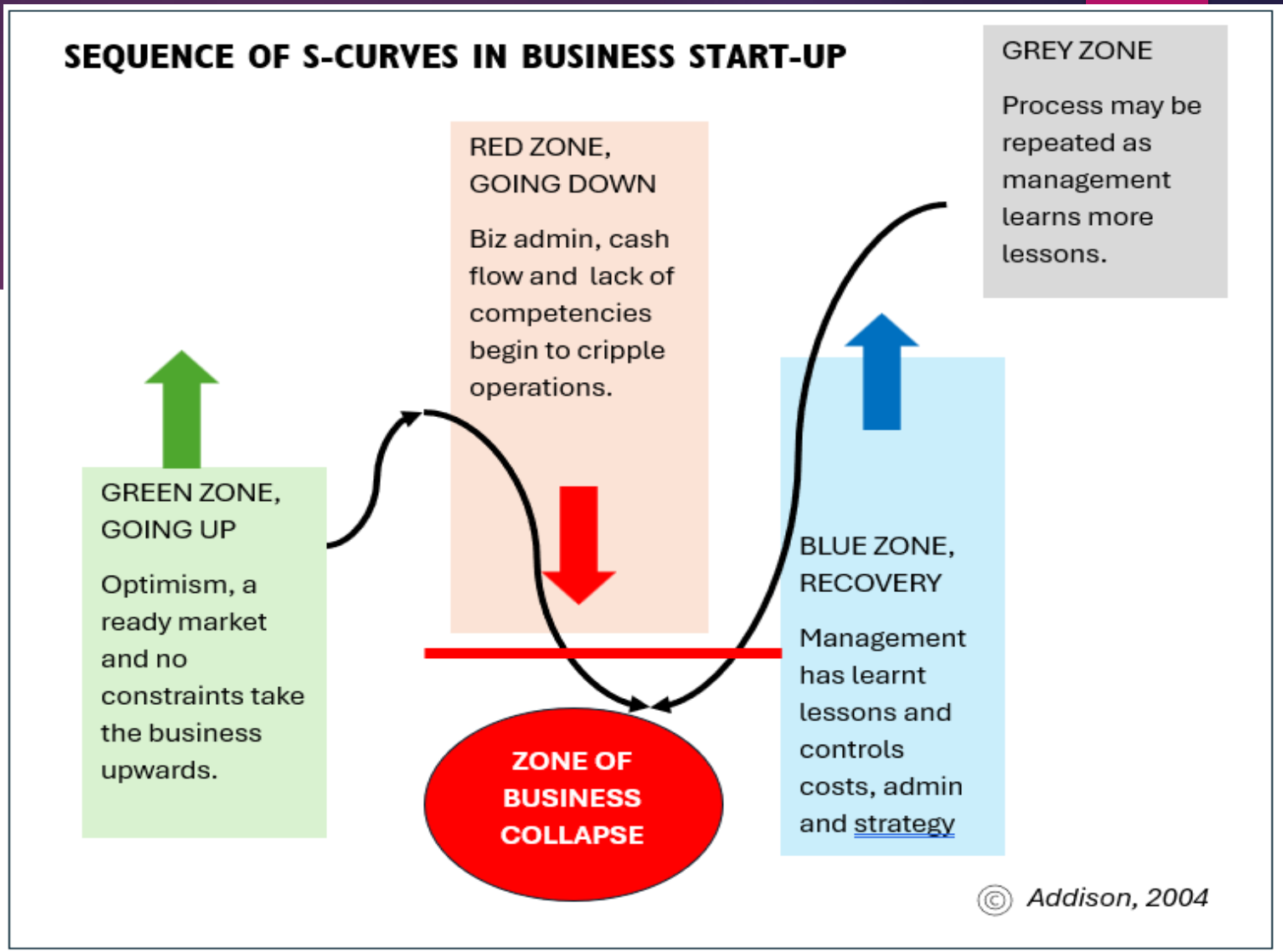


THE S-CURVE

THE S-CURVE

A BACKGROUND PAPER EXPLAINS

- How I began by looking at start-ups
- It became clear that all adventure businesses go through bursts of growth and mere survival – or failure
- The paper will be available online at:
- https://adventureaudit.co.za (NOT YET!)



RED BUTTON ISSUES

Why the S-Curve keeps recurring

Chronic, recurring issues that undermine operators:

- Over-expansion, poor admin, weak training, inadequate compliance
- Most are preventable through planning, partnerships, and mentorship
- Lack of business skills is a root cause
- In South Africa, the **lack of literacy and numeracy** of guides is a barrier to their full professionalization
- Similarly, **a business culture of smash-and-grab** undermines operational efficiencies and ethics

TENSION BETWEEN RISK AND REWARD

RISK IS WHAT YOU MANAGE

- The potential for loss, harm, liability, or failure
- Physical Hazards: Injury, illness, death (falls, drowning, exposure).
- Operational: Equipment failure, guide incompetence, poor planning.
- Legal & Financial: Lawsuits, fines, loss of license, reputational damage.
- Psychological: Panic, trauma, participant dissatisfaction.
- Environmental: Weather changes, natural disasters, animal encounters.

INFORMED CONSENT IS VITAL

REWARD IS WHAT YOU EARN

- The benefits gained by clients and operators through success
- Client emotion: Thrill, personal growth, satisfaction, stories to tell.
- Business Value: Revenue, customer loyalty, recognition for excellence.
- Cultural/Natural Appreciation: connection to place and people.
- Guides' Fulfilment: Pride in professionalism

COMES FROM SAFE, DESIGNED EXPERIENCES

OPPORTUNISM VERSUS ITERATION

OPPORTUNISM: Chasing shiny objects without a map.

- Haphazard diversification into unrelated activities.
- Driven by quick profits or trends rather than long-term value.
- Often dilutes brand identity and core expertise.
- Leads to cost overruns, underperformance, and risk exposure.
- Can result in client confusion and safety issues.

***Don't seize random chances without a clear strategy*.**

ITERATION: Builds on a solid core experience.

- Adds value through complementary add-ons (e.g. eco-briefings, night hikes, photography).
- Encourages staff development and operational maturity.
- Enhances customer satisfaction and loyalty.
- Limits costs and prevents unnecessary spending
- Supports long-term sustainability
- Avoids the perils of the S-Curve: leaps and falls

***Systematically improve and expand through feedback and experience*.**

THE EXPERIENCE ECONOMY

MOVE FROM DOING TO REVEALING

In the experience economy, clients don't just want to do things — they want to feel, discover, and connect. This shift transforms adventure from a series of activities into a journey of meaningful engagement. The guide becomes a facilitator of insight, not just a technician of tasks.

From Doing → To Revealing

- Doing: "Now we paddle 10km down the river."
- Revealing: "This river was once a lifeline for ancient traders — paddle it, and you're retracing their path. What might they have seen? Felt?"

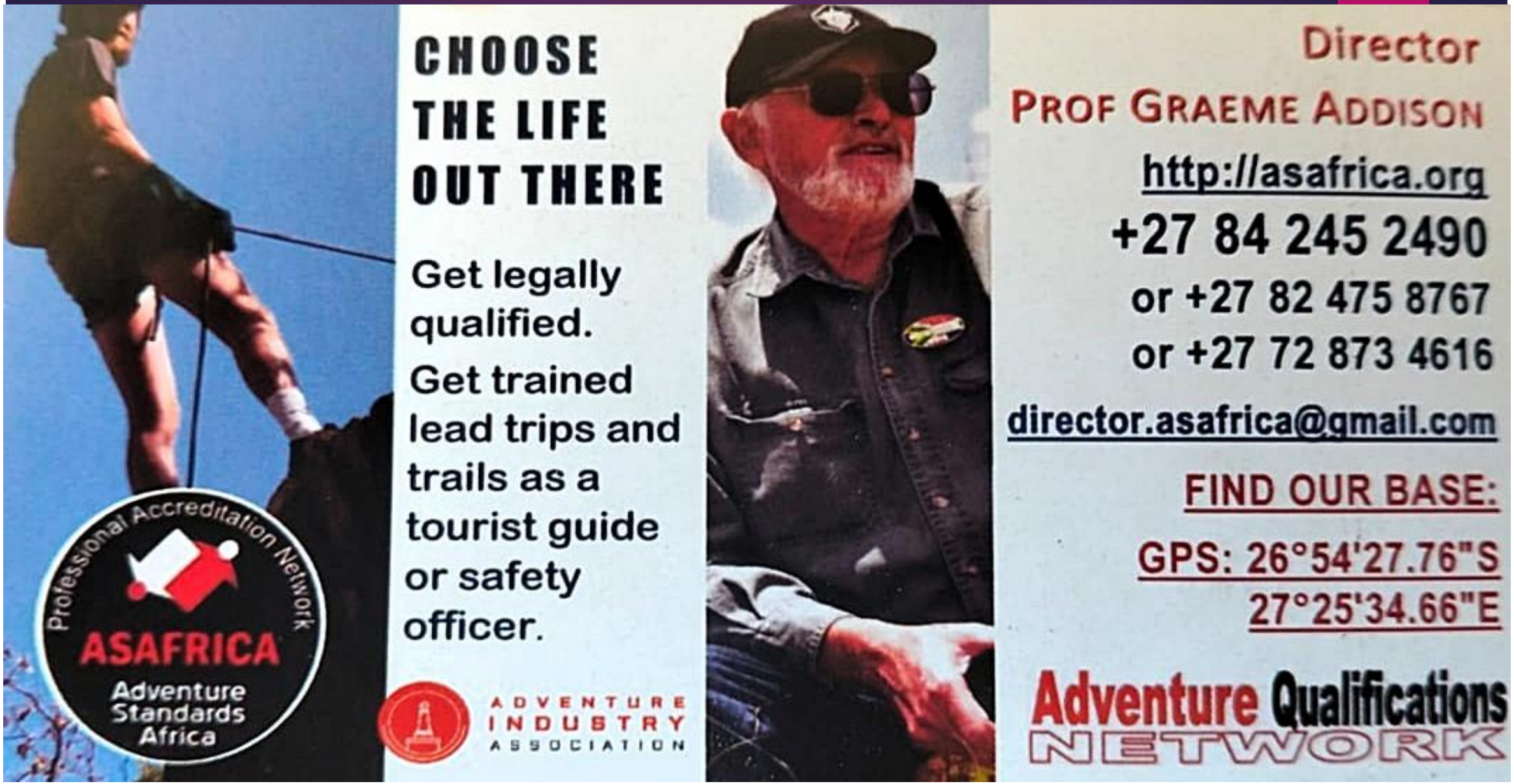
MVP AND MVI – Pursue quality of life!

MINIMUM V ERIENCE

- Cost-efficient ot just
- Focuses on lo
- Prioritises ope story-driven.
  client delight trong word-of-

Example: A ziplin w starts with a
line, fully pro gui the
harness, minimal e, a sense of
operate legally er at the end.

MVP may get the client through the activity. But MVE gets them into it — emotionally, mentally, and often spiritually.“Don't just operate. Orchestrate an experience.”


Professional Accreditation Network
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Adventure Standards Africa
CHOOSE THE LIFE OUT THERE
Get legally qualified.
Get trained lead trips and trails as a tourist guide or safety officer.
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Adventure Qualifications NETWORK

BUSINESS IS AN ADVENTURE

ADVENTURE IS BUSINESS

QUESTION: WHAT CAN SA-AIA DO TO IMPROVE THE CHANCES OF ADVENTURE BUSINESSES?

- TRAINING
- FUNDING
- REPUTATION
- LEGAL SUPPORT