

Web stocks are down, but Internet planning is not. More than 59 million travelers used the Internet last year to get information on destinations, prices or schedules. That's up 395% in the past three years.

SOURCE: TRAVEL INDUSTRY ASSOCIATION OF AMERICA

# Out of the Cubicle

Adventure-travel firms take New Economy employees on rugged 'team-building' excursions in the great outdoors. There are risks, as well as rewards.

BY DEBRA KLEIN

**T**ANNA OLDFIELD'S SOFTWARE company needed to establish rapport between some new hires and the firm's old guard. She says the company, which is based in Austin, Texas, wanted to do something different—to "step out of the box." So she asked her employees to step out of a plane. At 14,000 feet. Oldfield says the sky-high bonding exercise left the workers "exhilarated" and "more confident" in just one day. "If they could conquer fears about sky diving," she says, "they could overcome work issues."

Even in a climate of corporate cost-cutting, Oldfield's company (she prefers that it remain unidentified) and many other New Economy survivors continue to invest money in training sessions that do not involve blackboards, computers or conference rooms. Instead, they send their employees on increasingly elaborate, and even risky, "team-building" trips. From white-water rafting to caving and rock climbing, corporate trainers are raising the difficulty level on challenges for the cubicle set.

"Companies are using team-building adventures to reinforce corporate cultures, and the high-tech culture is about taking calculated risks," says John Logan, whose company, Adventure Alliance.com, arranged Oldfield's trip. "Corporations want to take people outdoors and push them out of their comfort zones." Despite recent layoffs and cutbacks in the New Economy, Logan and adventure-travel organizers say their team-building business is up from last year, with an increase in bookings for trips that start at \$150 a day per person.

Hard times may even persuade some



ERIC HEWSON

Rappelling on Raven's Roost in the Virginia mountains

companies to loosen their purse strings. Diane Katz, who has a doctoral degree in conflict resolution, says half the clients who go on her year-old Working Circle team-building exercises in Arizona are there because bosses want to reward them for good work. "People need to let off steam in harder times," says Katz, who uses horse whisperers—who claim to speak to the animals, a practice popularized by Robert Redford's movie "The Horse Whisperer"—as facilitators on singing trail rides

in the Sonoran desert (the people sing, not the horses).

After an office shake-up, Elizabeth Burg, a project coordinator for Visa U.S.A. in Foster City, Calif., staged a regatta to help employees learn how to work together in a new environment. A corporate training firm, Adventure Associates of El Cerrito, Calif., taught boating basics to Burg and 20 landlubber co-workers and then set them loose on 34-foot sailboats for a race on San Francisco Bay (with a professional skipper aboard each yacht, just in case). "As adults, we don't usually get to play in areas where we're not experts," Burg says. "People cooperated and interacted differently."

After a reorganization last fall, DMR, a New Jersey-based telecommunications consulting firm, flew more than 100 employees of various ages to the Blue Ridge Mountains in Virginia for a four-and-a-half-day program run by the Outdoor Wilderness Leadership School. "I expected a total disaster," recalls John Tedesco, a fiftysomething sales executive. But after dangling 90 feet above the ground in a rope harness on a granite rock face, Tedesco learned to rely on much younger colleagues.

"You're taking risks you usually don't deal with, and suddenly your co-workers are helping you," he recalls. "Nothing has been the same since." That's because rugged outdoor challenges can topple rigid office hierarchies and encourage the sort of camaraderie often missing from traditional off-site work events. "You see people in a different light," says Tedesco. And when the most junior employee turns out to be more wilderness-savvy than the CEO, everyone relaxes—except possibly the CEO. ■