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Rory Byrne

Founder of Powder Byrne

Rory Byrne's love affair with skiing began at the age of four. The youngest of eight children, he was taken on holiday to Grindelwald in Switzerland with his family after his father decided it was time they all learnt the sport he loved. Accommodating the entire family in a hotel was too expensive, however, so Byrne's father bought a caravan and towed it to Grindelwald instead.

Byrne says: 'He persuaded the owner of a caravan site to open in winter so we could park it there. Then my mother and the kids stayed in the caravan while my father stayed in a hotel.' His family returned to Grindelwald every winter to ski and as Byrne grew up he became good friends with local families. By the time he started university he was spending all his holidays there, working as a ski guide.

After graduating from university he got a job in the City with a stockbroking firm. But by the age of 23 Byrne realised he had made a mistake. He says: 'I knew I could not wear a suit for the rest of my life and walk in and out of office buildings. And I didn't like being part of a hierarchy.'



It was like being back at school.’ He decided that he wanted to work for himself and as the only thing he could do well was ski, he started a holiday ski business.

Byrne rented three chalets in Grindelwald for the 1985–86 winter season, produced a brochure with the help of the stockbroker’s production department, and then left his job. He raised £5,000 by selling his car and borrowed £10,000 from his mother. Then he called everyone he knew to see if they wanted to book a skiing holiday with his company. He called the company Powder Byrne as he wanted to teach clients how to ski off-piste, known as powder skiing.

Within a few months he had filled all the 178 nights he had reserved in the chalets. Byrne came back to England the following spring determined to find a way of turning his success into a fully fledged business. He was wondering how to go about it when a friend who worked in the City told him about a fund being launched by the businessman Lord Harris to invest £1 million in 10 entrepreneurs. Byrne got in touch and was taken on.

The fund took an option to acquire 25 per cent of Byrne's company for £7,500. More importantly, it led to lots of publicity for his skiing holiday business and provided two experienced businessmen to sit on the board. Byrne says: 'They were fantastic. One was a financial guru and the other a really good marketer. We got great advice.'

The company grew rapidly and was soon renting 10 chalets in Grindelwald for the season. But in 1989 Byrne made the bold decision to stop using chalets and switch to five-star hotels instead, installing his own staff at each hotel to look after his clients. 'It was the biggest decision I ever made but it was also the best', he says. 'People were demanding better quality and by using hotels we could offer luxury accommodation.' He realised that there might also be a demand for teaching children how to ski so he started up a kids' club which now teaches 1,000 children a year.

In the 1990s, however, things got tough. Byrne says: 'Powder skiing really went out of fashion. Some years the snow was really poor, all the talk was of global warming, and people were saying that skiing would be finished. Even I thought what is going to happen if skiing stops?' By 1999, however, Byrne faced the opposite problem. So much snow fell that the road to Grindelwald was closed and holiday-makers were stranded in the resort.

Fortunately Byrne had a big advantage. He managed to get in touch with some local men he had skied with as a child and through them rented two Puma helicopters. Within hours he had flown out all 140 of his clients. He says: 'Some people were trapped in the resort for ten days but I got all my clients out and they all made their flights home. It was like a military operation. The Pumas lifted the clients out with their luggage slung underneath in nets.' Byrne footed the bill for the operation which came to £20,000.

Byrne thinks much of the secret of his success has been due to his eye for detail. 'I am always looking at ways of doing things better', he says. 'I have a phenomenal eye for detail which in the office can be positively annoying. Visually I am a perfectionist and I will pick up on the tiniest thing that isn't important to anyone else but me. When I see something wrong I want to put it right.'

Powder Byrne now offers skiing holidays at 11 resorts in Switzerland and France and handles up to 8,000 customers each season, 85 per cent of whom are repeat clients or have been recommended by friends. The firm also operates a summer season in nine resorts around the Mediterranean. In the past four years it has also branched out into two new areas. In 2005 Byrne started up a franchise business, PB Kids, which provides childcare services in five-star hotels around the world, and in 2006 he launched Powder Byrne Property which builds and sells luxury bespoke chalets. Owners can then arrange for Powder Byrne to manage the property and rent it out to their customers. As a result total turnover for Powder Byrne in 2009 is expected to be around £16 million.

Fact File

Date of birth: 1 July 1961

Marital status: twice married with six children

Highest level of education achieved: university

Qualifications: BSc (Hons) in Mathematics from London University

Interests: skiing, sports cars, boats, rugby and wine

Personal philosophy: 'Why be ordinary when you can be extraordinary?'

Aged 47, Byrne now lives in Switzerland full-time and owns 100 per cent of the business. He still does not think of himself as the owner, however, saying: 'I have never felt that Powder Byrne was mine. I don't associate the name with my surname. From the first day I started my own company the only way I managed to sleep at night was to believe that I was working for somebody else and that the company just happened to be called Powder Byrne. I never considered myself to be the owner of the company because otherwise I wouldn't be able to switch off from it and shut the door of the office and walk away. And you have to be able to do that.'