



MDA Experiences – putting Manaakitanga at the heart of business

The safety operation plan for Rotorua-based MDA Experiences was first developed in 1989 – and co-owner Takurua Mutu, of Te Arawa descent, says it’s continually evolving, with ongoing input from team members.

MDA is a multi-faceted organisation – providing adventure experiences for overseas students, tourists and the luxury tour market, including mountain-biking, kayaking, rafting, climbing and hiking. It also encompasses the Mountain Bike Rotorua bike hire business, tourism consultancy, airport transfers, marae stays, and is part owner/operator of the Crankworx World Tour mountain biking event.

The business has 30 full-time staff but also works with many contractors and casual workers. It is committed to traditional *Māori principles such as manaakitanga* (caring for those around us), *kaitiakitanga* (protecting our planet and people) and *whanaungatanga* (creating lasting relationships with those we bring into our lives).

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The company was founded by Kim Price, a pioneer of New Zealand’s modern-day adventure tourism industry. Kim taught at Waiariki Institute of Technology and developed the first adventure tourism qualification at tertiary level.

Takurua joined the business in 2006, then bought it, with brother Tuhua Mutu, in 2012. Since then the brothers have grown the company significantly.

“Our safety operation plan grew out of those academic roots so it has always been very comprehensive,” says Takurua. “When legislation governing the industry was introduced in 2010, and then the



Activity Safety Guidelines (ASGs) came into play, we were already exceeding those requirements, and we still are.

“But it isn’t a static plan, it’s an evolving one and it always will be. All of our team are constantly involved in that – because they are our eyes out in the field.”

Before every adventure experience, the guides leading it fill out an ‘intention sheet’ with all the information required. Following the tour, they add notes regarding any incidents, accidents, near-misses, unexpected hazards or other observations.

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MDA’s Operations Manager then goes through the sheets and where needed, gets back to the staff member to discuss what actions are needed.

“In terms of identifying hazards, we break the business down into different components,” says Takurua. “There’s hiking, rafting, kayaking and mountain biking, and also transport – we do airport transfers, including between Auckland and Rotorua. Hazards for tours and transport will be very different to those for our tourism consultancy.

“We have a very good safety record but if something significant arises then we’ll also hold a staff meeting to discuss that and we let our workers know whenever any changes are made to the safety operations plan. We use Facebook Messenger for swift communication – we have different Messenger groups for different teams. So, if something happens, or if someone recognises a new hazard, the message gets out very quickly.

“For instance, one of our guides was leading a river tour and found a tree had come down over the water – so immediately the message went out to keep to the left side of the river to avoid the tree.

“We used to access a river along the narrow edge of a dam. One of our guides raised an issue. He had noticed exposed bolts in the rock walls, which could potentially puncture the rafts. So, we added that to the safety operation plan and found an alternative route to access the water.

“We are also very fortunate that adventure tourism is a mature industry in New Zealand and we had a head start on the rest of the world in terms of safety standards.

“We take tours on the Kaituna River. That’s a grade-five river run with the world’s largest commercially-rafted waterfall. Kiwi technology like self-baling rafts and changes to raft shape have been developed because of the Kaituna. Looking after people is simply a very natural part of the sector and a very natural part of our business’s culture – coming back to Manaakitanga, kaitiakitanga and whanaungatanga.

“We provide comprehensive safety inductions – tailored to the work staff will be doing. All our people re-read our safety operation plan every year and sign off on any changes. We also get together as a team once a year. We make it a fun day, with hot pools or paintballing, and we discuss the business – health and safety is a big part of that. As a team we actively welcome health and safety audits – and that’s the way it should be.”

WORKER ENGAGEMENT AND PARTICIPATION

The best outcomes are achieved when a business and its workers work together on health and safety. Worker Engagement and Participation is about having planned ways for:

- workers to give input on issues which will (or are likely to) affect their health or safety. This includes asking for and taking into account their views
- workers to improve work health and safety on an ongoing basis (eg by raising concerns or suggesting improvements).

This will help you and your business make better decisions – and keep your people and productivity thriving.

KEY POINTS

Worker participation in health and safety leads to:

- staff feeling supported to raise health and safety issues
- better communication about risks throughout the business
- manaakitanga (caring for those around us).

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