

Around the world in 30 years

It's the oldest cliché in the business: Become a travel agent and see the world. But Gig Gwin took this saying absolutely literally.

Gwin is the only travel agent to have actually visited each of the Travelers' Century Club's list of 318 countries, which includes territories and remote islands.

Chairman of St. Louis-based Gwin's Travel, Gwin devoted 30 years to the endeavor, finishing up last September on the island of Lampedusa, in the Mediterranean off the coast of Africa.

His travel dream started when he was a soldier in Vietnam, taking an interest in "the culture and the people." That led to Gwin's going back to college for a degree in Asian history, with a minor in business.

His first travel job was as a res agent at TWA in 1970. Then there were nine years with Maritz Incentives in St. Louis, escorting groups around the world, honing his love for far-flung destinations.

But it was during his stint as product director for Maritz — checking out new properties — that the exotic travel bug really bit him.

That is when he learned of the Los Angeles-based Travelers' Century

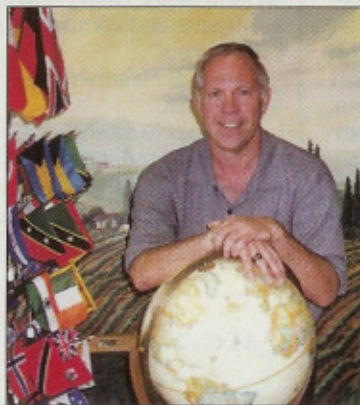
Club, whose members share notes on how many countries they've visited (only about six have matched Gwin in visiting every one).

Founding his own agency 20 years ago, he started his global quest in earnest, using travel agent airline discounts to get around.

There's no doubt his worldly knowledge has helped his agency service clients. "I'm the person they call for trips to more unusual places," said Gwin. "People might know American Samoa, but they don't know Western Samoa, they're a little rusty on Laos and they don't know there are two Congos."

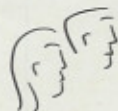
He also has used his experiences to become more visible in his community. He appears on a travel segment on a local TV news show, does a half-hour show once a month on local radio and currently writes a column for the St. Louis Post-Dispatch. Next up, he's planning a book about the foremost landmarks of the world.

Still, his wanderlust continues. And when a new country comes into being (a not-infrequent occurrence these days), Gwin firmly intends to pack his bags.



World traveler Gig Gwin.

By Phyllis Fine



SAVVY AGENTS

"Sydney, Australia, has great pubs."

Earth travel 101

"Since I had the challenge of trying to go to every country in the world, I decided to become much more literate on geography and culture," said world traveler Gig Gwin, chairman of Gwin's Travel in St. Louis (see story above).

Gwin accomplished this goal by signing up for the Institute of Certified Travel Agent's Destination Specialists (DS) program, which currently breaks the world down into nine areas.

Studying the DS materials gave him the chance "to read something besides the in-flight magazine when I was sitting on long flights going to the ends of the earth," he said.

The upshot of all his studying: "I would go to all these unusual destinations with a pretty good basic knowledge of what the highlights were," said Gwin.

Still, he found that there was no substitute for actually visiting all of the countries, "meeting the people and eating the food." Those experiences helped him develop a list of "bests" of the world. Some of his offbeat discoveries: Hong Kong "has the greatest variety of food in the world"; Sydney, Australia, has great pubs, and for best animal viewing, he rates not only the more obvious — Kenya, Tanzania and Denali Park, Alaska — but Antarctica and the Galapagos Islands.



Gwin in South Georgia Island, Antarctica.