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An experience that will last a lifetime

By Diane Claytor



Orinda's Rundell family hike the Hell For Sure Challenge last year Photos provided

Dreams of vacations are filling our heads. It's been almost a year that we've been staring at the same walls of our homes, walking the same nearby trails, playing in the same neighborhood parks and getting food from the same local restaurants. By now, most of us are ready to break free as soon as possible! As wonderful as a Hawaiian beach vacation sounds, most of us have been sedentary long enough. It's time to breathe fresh air, move our bodies, challenge ourselves and take in the beauty of the great outdoors.

Chris Casado has been bringing adventurous backpacking trips to hundreds of people of all ages for 10 years through his company, TSX Challenge. And in keeping with COVID and the safety concerns that are on everyone's mind, TSX is now offering private TSX Pod Challenges.

Casado, an Orinda dad of three, wasn't always a backpacker. In fact, even though he grew up in the central valley with the Sierras in his backyard, he was 14 when he took his first backpacking trip. But that first trip - one week, 75 miles across the Sierras to the top of Mt. Whitney led by Mike Murphy, a local teacher and family friend - hooked him. He knew he didn't want to stop. "It was so inspiring," Casado remembers, "and gave me the confidence to believe I could do just about anything I set my mind to."

Over the years, Casado and Murphy dreamt about providing this same unique sense of accomplishment to more people. Murphy continued teaching in Clovis. Casado went on to college, moved to San Francisco and got a job in finance, "a desk job where I was stuck in a tall tower," he notes. But the dream continued and in 2010 it became a reality when Casado and Murphy co-founded TSX Challenge.

"We started out doing three or four trips a year," Casado explains. "We wanted to keep it simple. We weren't looking to set up a typical guide business. We just wanted to do one thing really well." That one thing was the same trip Casado had taken all those years before - the 75 mile, week-long TransSierra hike to Mt. Whitney, the highest point in the lower 48 states.

Andy Wagemaker, a friend living in Arizona, introduced Casado to the Grand Canyon. "Very few places can rival the Sierras," Casado explains, "but the awe-inspiring Grand Canyon is definitely one of them." So a new backpacking challenge was added to TSX's list - a three night, four-day trip from the Grand Canyon to the Colorado River.

Casado continued working his day job while slowly growing TSX.

People started requesting additional experiences so one more backpacking journey was added: the Hell for Sure Challenge, named after the Hell for Sure lake, one of more than a dozen high Sierra lakes passed on this four-day, five-night loop.

Casado eventually left that "tall tower" and for the last five years has been organically building TSX Challenge. "We have a tight, singular focus and passion for our routes," he notes. Each of their three challenges traverse awe-inspiring terrain with a small group of backpackers and knowledgeable, passionate guides.

And TSX handles everything. As their website declares, "Don't own a backpack or tent? Not a problem. We provide backpacks, tents and sleeping pads for those who need them, at no additional charge. We also take care of all group items like pots, stoves, food, food storage, water filters, first aid and more. Your guides will do the cooking and dishes. Just show up with your boots and personal items, ready to hike!"

Casado explains that these are called challenges rather than hikes because "each trip affects people in different ways. For many participants, this is their very first backpacking experience. They face mental, physical and emotional challenges. And once they've reached the top of Mt. Whitney or the bottom of the Grand Canyon, they realize that they can do almost anything. These are very empowering trips," Casado continues, "and people feel a tremendous sense of accomplishment. For most, these are definitely trips of a lifetime.

"We take motivated people aged 11 to over 70 and band them together for an unbelievable journey. The best parts of these trips are the scenery and the people . the opportunity to share these experiences with

others is the most inspiring part of every trip," Casado says.

With COVID concerns and restrictions, Casado has created TSX Pod Challenges, a private group experience for four to 10 participants. "We're offering a life-changing adventure," Casado writes. "A chance to reconnect with friends, take an off-the-grid family vacation, a getaway with fresh air, good food and no crowds."

Murphy, who led backpackers for more than 35 years and proudly declares that he has stood on the top of Mt. Whitney 48 times, is now retired. But the experiences he and Casado developed continue to inspire adventure-seekers. "No matter your age, background or experience, if you put your mind to it, you can do just about anything," Casado states confidently.

For more information, go to <https://tsxchallenge.com>.



Chris Casado and his children, Brooks, 10, and Claire, 12, at 12,000 feet on Red Mountain, in Kings Canyon National Park last year. Photos provided

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