

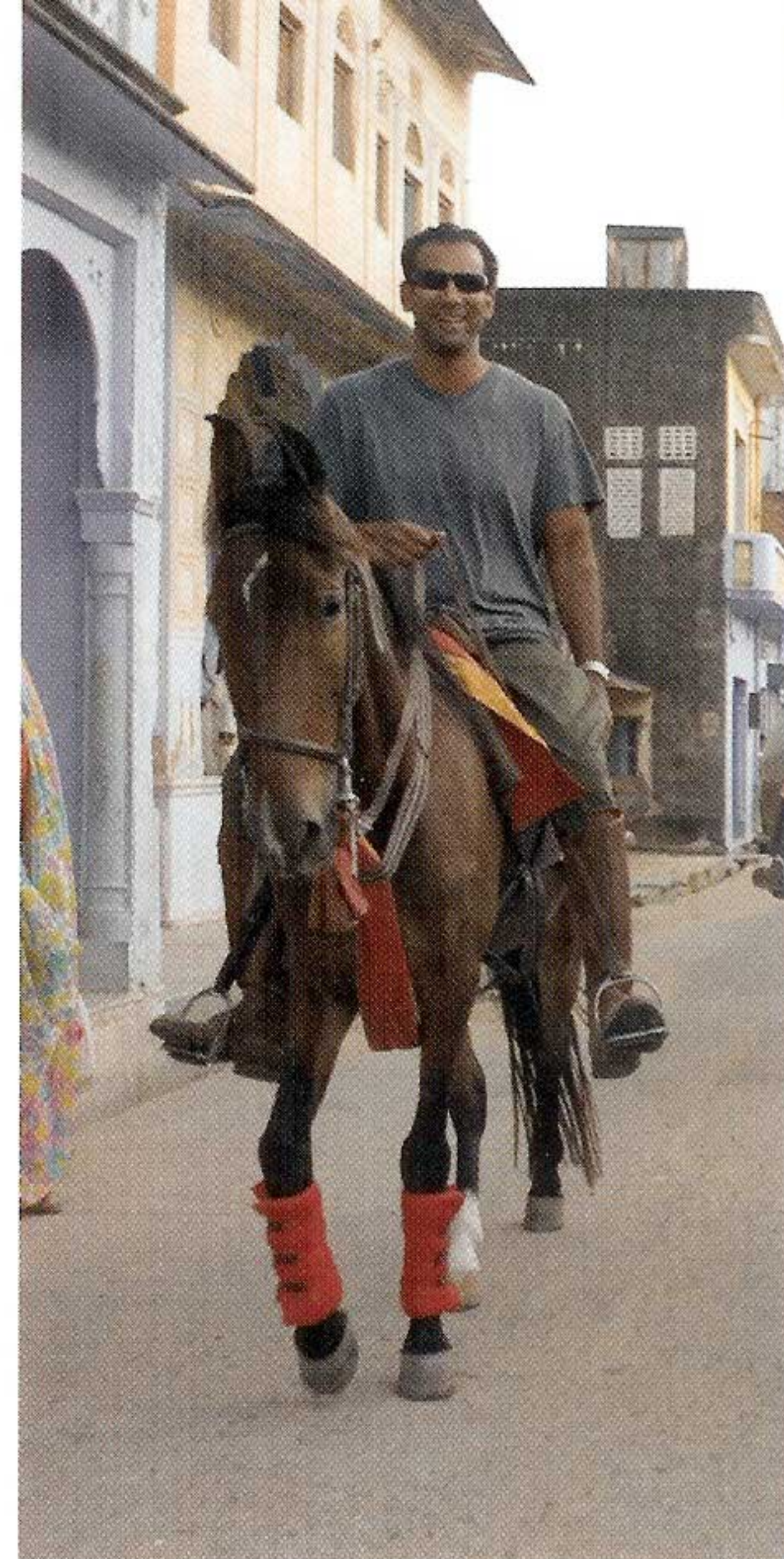
Alexander Souri's young company carries the banner of medical care to poor Indian villages. **Judy Martin** shows how.

RIDING TO THE RESCUE

Wearing a long Indian kurta shirt, flowing pants and a mane of black hair, Alexander Souri can barely contain his energy as he shares a story about bringing medical care to a sickly infant girl in an impoverished, remote Indian village. "The moment wasn't about me," he effuses. "But it was joyful. It was like silent thunder in the soul."

That little girl, and thousands like her, fuel Souri's commitment to what might sound like a nonprofit, but is actually a for-profit company. The 37-year-old Souri is the founder of Relief Riders International, an adventure travel company that leads humanitarian expeditions on horseback to villages in India.

PHOTOGRAPHY BY MARC LECUREUIL



Photos: Alexander Souri on one of his travels/relief trips to India.

There, they set up medical camps, distribute school supplies and donate livestock to people in need.

During these excursions, Souri rides a white Marwari horse (ancient lore exalts them as being loyal) to work. His office is the vast Thar Desert of Rajasthan, India. His clients are generally about 15 adventure tourists paying nearly \$6,000 each for a rigorous 150-mile, two-week ride. It's not a typical vacation for his clients – nor a typical job for Souri, a former theater and film producer who had worked on the special effects team of *The Matrix* and *X-Men*.

"You can spend a lifetime making money and that just wasn't going to do it for me," says Souri, who knew deep down he had a wild streak in him, and a calling to serve. But he wanted to have fun doing it. "I decided the best way to do it was to jump on a horse, travel the desert and show up at the right time, in the right place, to help others."


That dream was realized out of the sheer necessity to add purpose to his life following the deep pain of his father's death in 2002, he says. Born of an Indian father, he tapped his own cultural roots and love for riding to create Relief Riders. The decision to be a for-profit company, he adds, was born of practicality and the desire to be independent of the business edicts dictated by society. "I wanted to create a company fueled by passion, emotion and spirit that could be of service to humanity."

But the orchestration of that dream might not have sat well

with a nonprofit board at a moment's notice, Souri remarks. "At times, these programs can be quite elaborate," he confidently smiles saying, "We're doing free eye surgery, in the middle of the desert, for 800 people. Convening a board at two o'clock in the morning EST to ask for \$10,000 while I'm on a horse in India wasn't going to work."

That kind of compassionate engagement makes Souri a "change agent," according to Deepak Chopra, president of the Alliance for a New Humanity, a group trying to catalyze social transformation in business. "The human soul is looking for meaning, context, relationships and archetypal stories to participate in. Social entrepreneurs like Alexander are creating meaning and purpose for themselves as well as for others," says Chopra, who adds that the byproduct of serving the world can be your own success.

That resonates with Souri. "It's about numbers in terms of sustaining a business, but it's not about volume. It's about a quality business experience for myself." And Souri is sharing his business model with other travel companies. Changing the world isn't the goal. Instead, he wants to show others that such a business is possible, and can be richly rewarding both financially and personally.

"The biggest paradigm shift as a social entrepreneur is the illusion that we have to do business in a certain way. Relief Riders is different. Our clients don't define us, our mission does." 

New York journalist Judy Martin also writes *The Work/Life Monitor* on her site www.judymartinspeaks.com