

Afghanistan's media mavericks

By Rachel Morarjee

Published: July 4 2007 03:00 | Last updated: July 4 2007 03:00

If you know how to avoid the minefields, you can ski in Afghanistan between December and May, says Emmanuel de Dinechin, one of the three founders of Altai Consulting.

The firm's Kabul headquarters is only three hours from skiing country, so many expatriate staff bring snow-shoes and skis to make the best of their time in the country.

"We don't take stupid risks in our business operations or with our security but we want our staff to enjoy their time here," says the 29-year-old Mr de Dinechin, looking out of the window at five Afghan employees seated among the roses in the firm's garden while conducting telephone interviews for a US-funded health project.

Altai Consulting is a name familiar to most expatriates in Kabul, partly because of the speed with which Mr de Dinechin and his 33-year-old business partners Rodolphe Baudeau and Eric Davin have built the country's biggest advertising firm and its only private-sector consulting firm. It is also, though, down to the flamboyant style of the French entrepreneurs.

The trio met while backpacking in Tibet. "There were not many travellers in Lhasa in 1999, so it was a case of, 'You're French, I'm French, let's have a beer'," Mr de Dinechin says.

Mr Baudeau and Mr Davin arrived in Kabul in December 2001 to set up AINA, a media charity geared towards training Afghan journalists. Mr de Dinechin, who always had a fascination with Afghanistan, heard about AINA, then recognised the names of his backpacker friends and joined them in 2002. The trio left the charity in July 2003 and, looking for an opportunity to stay in Afghanistan, spotted a gap in the advertising market. Mr Baudeau had worked in marketing for L'Oréal, while Mr de Dinechin was a consultant with Monitor, a global consulting firm, and Mr Davin worked for Himalaya, a web design agency.

"There were companies coming in looking for communications firms and there were no billboards, there was nothing. The field was wide open," Mr de Dinechin says. Their first client was Roshan, the country's biggest phone company.

With a start-up capital of just \$60,000, which they used to rent an office and buy computers and printers, they took Altai's name from a central Asian mountain range and launched the business.

"You couldn't start anything in France for \$60,000. It's nothing really - although it didn't feel like nothing at the time," Mr Baudeau says. Revenues have grown from \$3.3m in 2005 to \$4.1m in 2006 and the company is predicting growth of 7-10 per cent this year.

The beauty of the advertising business, Mr Baudeau says, is that the firm can grow as it adds clients to its roster without the need to invest heavily in equipment.

The three Frenchmen hired two other expatriates and 10 Afghans to begin working on advertising and communications for Roshan and have now built up staff levels to 25 permanent expatriates and 150 Afghans. They also have a network of Afghan freelance researchers across the country in fields as diverse as medicine and education, which they mobilise for surveys and consulting work.

Security restrictions prevent many international organisations such as embassies and the United Nations from meeting Afghans to conduct research or monitor projects. With a small number of Afghan and expatriate staff, Altai can take a more pragmatic and flexible approach to security.

Since becoming the local partners of JWT, the international advertising agency, in April 2004, the firm also has an international presence which has enabled it to add multinationals such as Nestlé and Western Union to its advertising books.

"People who are on the ground know us, but whether we would have got the big-name clients without the link to JWT is hard to say," Mr de Dinechin says.

Altai's consulting business grew in tandem with its advertising work, with the first project for the United Nations Children's Fund (Unicef) beginning in 2004.

A lack of iodine in landlocked Afghanistan had led to widespread disease and birth defects, so Unicef commissioned Altai to do a survey of private-sector salt factories and scout partners for public-private partnerships to make iodised salt

"Almost none of the salt in Afghan bazaars had iodine in it, but now almost all of it does," says Mr Baudeau, adding that the project resulted in the opening of 12 iodised salt factories.

Afghanistan has no other private sector consulting firms; there are two other firms doing communications and advertising, but neither draws on the resources of an international partner such as JWT.

"We can outsource work to their offices in Pakistan when we have too much and we can hire photographers at the top of the business, who have worked for clients like Pepsi and Diesel, to shoot campaigns in Afghanistan," Mr Baudeau says.

He acknowledges that there are a range of difficulties facing entrepreneurs, from poor infrastructure to growing security concerns, but he still contends that it is an easier operating environment than France for entrepreneurs with a little flexibility and imagination.

"It's a small paradise for entrepreneurs. There is so much business. Five of our staff have left to start up their own ventures, which is a lot for such a small company," he says.

Altai's success was built on a commitment to offer international standards of research and advertising in a country where few other people aimed so high.

"We hear a lot of people saying that you can deliver less because it is only Afghanistan, but we have taken the opposite approach. This country needs top quality strategic research and consulting now. Not in 20 years' time," he adds.

The glamour of the business enabled the three Afghan graduates to recruit staff who had Harvard degrees and backgrounds at McKinsey. "We've just taken on five people who have better degrees than us," Mr de Dinechin says.

He concedes that two years ago, very few job applicants worried about the security situation in Afghanistan because the international media focus was on reconstruction and development.

Now, with bloodshed constantly in the headlines, he has to answer more questions when looking for recruits, and the firm no longer sends international staff to do research in the troubled south.

"I spent my 25th birthday in Kandahar but I rarely go any more," Mr de Dinechin says.

[Copyright](#) The Financial Times Limited 2007