

In the Trenches

It Ain't Disney World

By [Colleen DeBaise](#) Published: April 21, 2006

IF YOU'VE GOT MONEY to burn and want a taste of the fabulous life, Robin Wilson wants to make your dreams come true. If tennis is your pleasure, she'll arrange for you to admire the whites of Wimbledon from the Royal Box. Need an adrenaline rush? She'll hook you up with a shark-diving outfit off the coast of Mexico. Seeking a culinary safari? Then it's time for truffles at the private chef's table at Alain Ducasse, the famed restaurant in New York.

Wilson is the founder of [Wallbounce.com](#), a type of concierge service that serves up over-the-top experiences usually reserved for the more luminary among us. Much like a personal assistant for hire, she'll pull some creative strings to secure a fantastic experience — from a front-row seat at Fashion Week in New York, to a ride in a Nascar racing car on an Alabama speedway.

"My goal with Wallbounce is to have people experience the best life," says Wilson, 36, who self-funded and launched the Arlington, Va.-based venture in November.

The cost for what she calls a "discerning learning" experience, of course, isn't exactly bargain-basement. But Wilson says she's worked out deals with vendors so she can provide special packages — there's about 100 listed on the site — to clients at retail cost. (In other words, you aren't paying a premium to use her services to put the package together.) A six-lap jaunt on a Nascar speedway goes for the relatively low price of \$395. But most other adventures, arranged by category and location on [Wallbounce.com](#), target the customer with discriminating tastes and a hearty dose of disposable income. A culinary tour in Provence, for instance, sells for \$3,495 (not including airfare). But the amenities can't be beat: The package includes a seven-night stay at the hilltop home of a French diplomat, along with cooking classes, wine tastings and tours of local markets.

Customers who don't see a prepackaged program they like can ask for a customized adventure. Wilson will try to arrange anything, as long it doesn't include adult entertainment or overly risky activities.

To date, Wilson has sold 23 customized packages, and more than 20 prepackaged experiences. The cheapest package sold? A \$600 tasting at a chocolate factory in New York. The priciest? A \$12,000 trip from San Francisco to New York (via private jet) for dinner at a five-star restaurant, and an overnight stay at a luxurious residence.

Wilson came up with the name "Wallbounce" in 2004, when she was practicing tennis and hitting a ball against the wall over and over. The word popped into her mind. She recalls thinking, "Wallbounce! I don't know what it is, but it's a cool name."

She registered the domain name, but did little else until inspiration struck months later when regaling friends with a tale about backstage passes at a celebrity fundraiser. "My girlfriend was like, 'I would pay anything to be back there,'" says Wilson, a former consultant and executive recruiter, who immediately pressed her friend on how much she really would be willing to pay. The answer? \$1,000.

That's when Wilson realized she could play matchmaker — brokering deals for those seeking something truly special — and build a business around it. Wilson was already an entrepreneur — she had opened a high-end home-renovation company in 2000 — and was interested in starting another business. She opened up her rolodex and spent the fall of 2005 calling restaurants, tour operators, chocolatiers and other vendors, putting packages of once-in-a-lifetime experiences together.

Wilson persuaded vendors to charge her wholesale prices, so she could bill her clients the retail price and make a profit off the spread. Most vendors, especially mom-and-pop businesses that have little budget for marketing, are willing to comply if Wilson brings them a customer, she found.

The business has surprisingly low overhead. Wilson doesn't book any commercial travel (which, for legal reasons requires a \$1 million bond) unless the package includes a ride on a private jet. She has a staff of three, but uses outside agencies to keep operating expenses at a minimum. A call center answers Wallbounce's 800 number, and an outside web developer handles the site's design. "Today, to start a company, you don't need to have in-house employees," she says. "I can outsource and get what I want."

What remains to be seen, though, is whether the concept of so-called "branded experiences" (which in marketing parlance means that customers connect the brand Wallbounce with unique adventures) will take off. A number of companies are trying to get in the game, from travel sites that offer personalized excursions, to guides like DailyCandy.com and ThingsToDo.com that provide tips on hot or off-beat entertainment ideas.

Part of Wilson's plan for success is to create a community of clients and potential clients through the Wallbounce web site. "Members," or registered users, get email blasts about new packages and exclusive access to special events, such as a private pastry party at the New York restaurant Payard. Wilson won't disclose exactly how many members Wallbounce currently has, but says it's between 1,000 and 5,000, located in 40 states and four countries. The goal is to have 25,000 members by the end of year, and to be profitable within 18 months, she says.

Ultimately, success for Wallbounce will ride on the ability to dazzle customers. Visitors to New York City, for example, won't be loaded onto a crowded tour bus with diesel fumes billowing up. Instead, Wilson is currently negotiating a package that includes lodging at a \$4 million apartment on the Upper East Side with butler services, Broadway tickets, and dinner at trendy Tao restaurant. In other words, with Wilson's help, you can find out what it's really like to live the good life — if only for a night or two.

Over the Top



Your name: Robin Wilson

Name of business: Wallbounce LLC

Year founded: 2005

Business type (industry): Experience & Adventures

Location: Arlington, Va.

No. of employees: Fewer than 10

Web address: Wallbounce.com

Where do you look for business advice?

My advisers include friends in private equity, many of whom are adventure travelers. My friends have been involved in critique from the start of the web site, to tell Wallbounce about different experiences they would want to purchase.

What do you know now that you wish you'd known when you started?

Web development costs are two times what you budget.

What's the smartest move you've made so far?

Adding the charitable organizations division. We have partnered with some phenomenal charities and helped them develop phenomenal fundraising options for their online auctions. For instance, we helped Dress for Success with a recent gala, selling great things via an online auction.

What is the best business book you've read?

Po Bronson's book titled, "What Should I Do With My Life?"

What keeps you up at night?

Reading a book.

And extra credit, please answer: when/where was your last vacation?

Holiday 2006, skiing in Breckenridge, Colo.