

A Dutchman sails across the Atlantic and innovates travel logging



This post was [originally published on The Next Web](#).

Every startup has a story to tell. From the conception of an idea, to the first lines of code, early hires, and preliminary funding rounds – every company has a unique narrative.

But there are always shared experiences. Processes, tactics, and habits that shape the experience of the fledgling startup. In this series, *Tales from the Trenches of Tech*, we talk to founders to hear their perspectives on what the key element was to their successful strategies.

This week, we talked with **Koen Droste** of [Polarsteps](#), based in [Amsterdam](#), a personal travel log in your pocket. It helps you track and share your journeys in an easy and visually appealing way.

A year after launching with a zero dollar marketing budget, Polarsteps reached 20,000 users. When the team were unable to tell an investor where users were coming from, they decided to launch an investigation. Their conclusion was something most startup founders will be envious about – it was all word of mouth.

The team behind Polarsteps are travelers, design and code-savvy, with a clear vision of creating “the best mobile travel log in the world.” Before securing [half a million euros in funding](#), they worked on this project on the side, focusing principally on building the product. After the investment, they quit their day jobs to work on Polarsteps full time.

We talked to Koen about the Polarsteps journey and the importance of product innovation.

How did you get into tech?

I’ve always been passionate about tech. I started working in the industry when I was sixteen building websites for local companies and continued to do that while I was studying International Relations at university.

What’s Polarsteps’ elevator pitch?

Polarsteps enables you to automatically track your trip and share it in real-time with friends and family back home. You can share it on a beautiful map that shows your route and any attached photos.

What’s the story behind Polarsteps?

Niek, one of the other co-founders, went sailing across the Atlantic. Before he left, he wrote a small script that read off his coordinates from a GPS tracker and sent them to a server in the Netherlands via satellite phone. The server would then put them on a map.

That was a long time ago, before the iPhone existed. The concept went viral on backpacker forums. That’s how I got in touch with him. I wanted the product myself!

How did you come up with the name Polarsteps?

It refers to the trail left behind when polar bears walk in the snow. That’s the idea behind it. Steps in the snow – wondering where the traveler went.

What are some cool Polarsteps stories you can share with us?

We’ve had some great stories and beautiful trips, like travel junkies [backpacking solo in South America](#) and [voyages around the Pacific Islands and Oceania](#). We had a bunch of guys participating in a [rally from Amsterdam to Dakar](#). They all bought a car worth a maximum for €500 and they had to get to Senegal with it. They tracked it live with us.

How do you like being a tech startup in Amsterdam?

The chief technical officer and I both have previous experience with other tech companies in Amsterdam.

From there, we have a base. We know a lot of people; we know the industry. For us, it's a nice city to work from with a nice work-life balance. It's a good place to start a company.

Are you involved and engaged with the tech scene?

Not so much. We have not been part of any well-known incubators or anything. In the past year, we've had to work part time alongside our regular jobs, so we really had to choose what to focus on and that was building a product instead of networking.

Now, with the investment we raised recently, we're finally able to work on it full time. We quit our jobs actually. So that's a shift, as a company, that we now have the space to do more than just build a product.

How do you manage product innovation?

It's a combination of three things. We have the user data – what our users are actually doing; user feedback – what people actually tell us; and our own ideas – how we think the product should be.

So far, it's been an interesting balance. Are you going to follow what people ask, are you going to follow how people behave, or are you going to follow your own vision? We usually tend towards the latter but we take into account the first two.

Why travel stories?

What we've seen in the past year is if you enable people to tell and share their travel stories in a more beautiful, vivid, and engaging way, that is something people aspire to.

What we do on top of that is give extras like travel statistics. People love to see how many kilometers they've traveled and how many countries they've visited. We're adding a few more features in the coming year. We want to make it smarter and smarter all the time.

Do you have a favorite travel book you could recommend us?

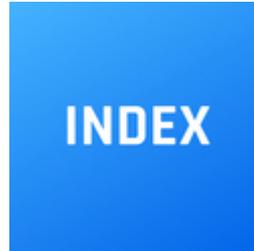
I really like [In Europe by Geert Mak](#). He travels to key historic European places and compares it to their contemporary happenings. It's really awesome. It would be such a good Polarsteps trip. I should ask him to do it again!

As told to [Jennifer Ho](#) and [Laure Albouy](#).

[Keep up-to-date with Polarsteps](#)

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