

## realpeople

### Small business

#### Making a hobby a full-time job

Anne Block, Los Angeles

**L**ike many actors, Anne Block, 54, moved to L.A. to get work. In between gigs—like guest shots on the sitcom *Designing Women*—the Arkansas native made the most of any downtime. “I would fill those gaps by exploring L.A. as if it were a foreign country,” she says. As an actor, she often earned \$60,000 a year. But as a woman nearing her fifties in a tough business, she worried that she was reaching the end of her shelf life. So Block turned her sense of adventure into a side business. ■ In 1992 she opened Take My Mother, Please. Busy studio executives shelled out \$375 a day (she now charges \$475) for tours of little-known corners of L.A. for their never-ending stream of guests. In 1995 she took her first group overseas. “I realized that I had the chops to show people the world in a kind of intimate way,” she says. Block is not a travel agent: She arranges local transportation, meals and hotels but not air fare. In the 1990s, she ran trips to the Berlin Film

Festival and the opening of the Guggenheim in Bilbao, Spain, and through gourmet kitchens of Italy and France. Next up: the Chocolate, Cheese and Escargot Tour, with private visits to fine chocolatiers in Brussels and Lyon. ■ Block went full time in 1999. Now her challenge is to expand profitably. In 2002 she doubled sales, grossing an estimated \$320,000. But trouble in the travel industry has already hit her bottom line. “I’d hoped to double my sales this year, but I’ve already had to cancel one trip to Sicily,” she says. ■ Until now, her business has grown through word of mouth, her website and a growing network of travel agents. Block wants to launch a marketing campaign and hire a part-time employee. She has an untapped line of credit in the low five figures, but she’s shopping for an adviser. Regardless of war and the economy, Block is optimistic. “I believe in travel as a way to connect with other cultures,” she says. “Now more than ever we’re determined to keep exploring and communicating.” —ELLEN MCGIRT