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Safari adventure empowers young African women

by Jeroen Harderwijk
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A former investment banker in Europe tells how he set up Asilia Africa in the Serengeti, a 'live' experiment in developing a sustainable tourist business which has empowered the local community.

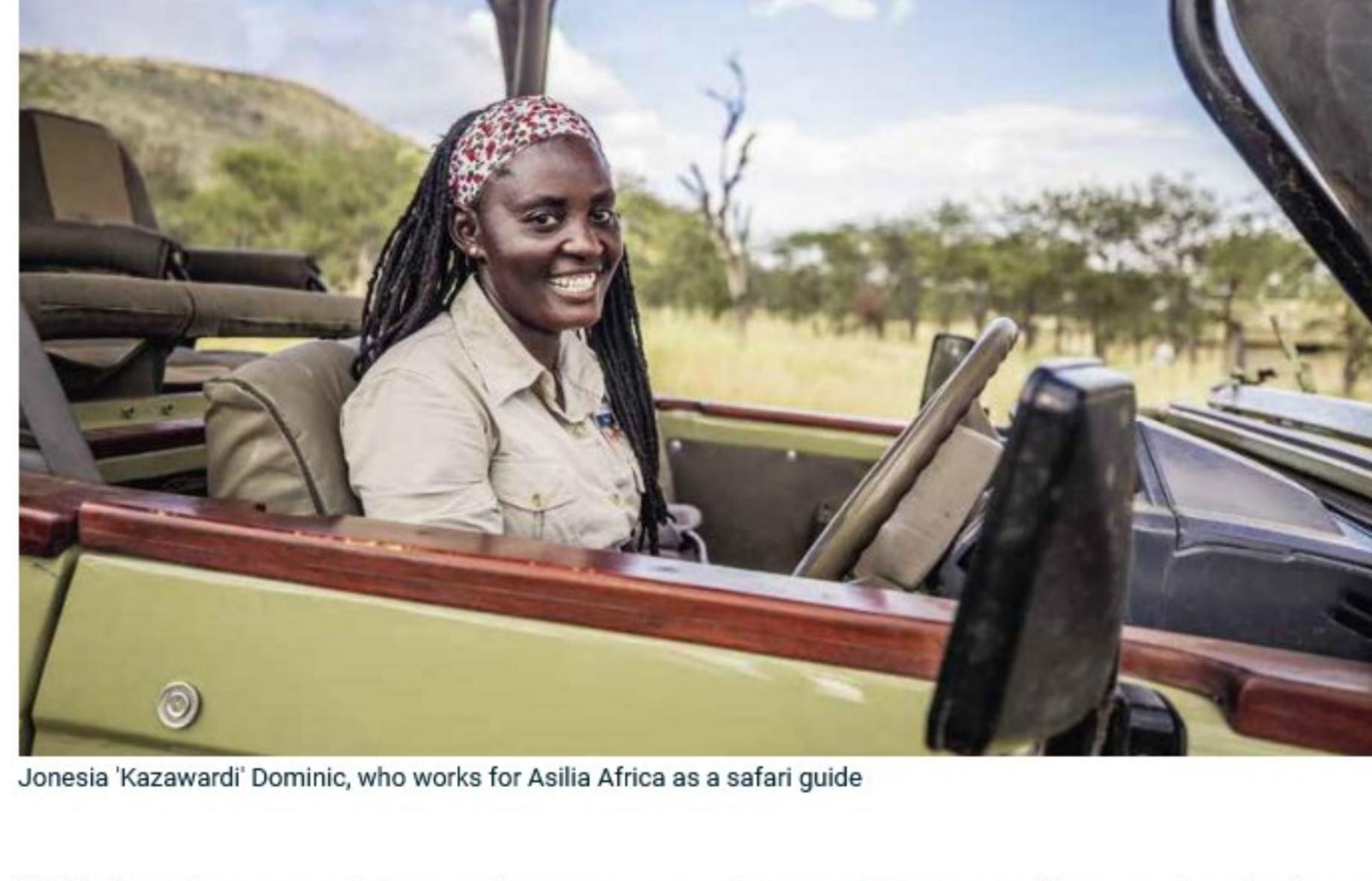
Each year, deep in the Serengeti National Park, herds of wildebeest, zebra and gazelles race for survival across the vast plains of eastern Africa. This "great migration" is one of nature's most spectacular, but brutal, shows: a quarter of a million wildebeest perish every time, left to rot in the sun from starvation, thirst and exhaustion or torn apart by the big cats and crocodiles that lie in wait for easy prey in tall grass and murky river beds. In this live run of the survival of the fittest, only the most resourceful and resilient migrating herds make it out stronger.

As vicious as it is majestic, the great migration is the mesmerising jewel in the crown of Africa's safari industry. Visitors flock from around the world to witness the natural epic unfold at Asilia Africa's Dunia safari camp, with its front row view across the Serengeti. But, for me and many of our customers, Dunia is not just a special place because of what you can see out there in the wild, but also because of the people inside. Dunia is the first fully women-run safari camp in Africa.

Safari culture, for many years, was almost exclusively drenched in white machismo. Verity Williams, one of Africa's first woman guides, started as secretary at safari company Ker & Downey in 1962. It took her 20 years to infiltrate the company's male-dominated guiding fraternity. She recalls: "In the early 1980s I got my guide licences and asked Ker & Downey's general manager for some safari guiding work. He said, 'What? You're a woman!' That was my red rag. My big break came when a friend needed another guide. He, I and the clients all survived. At the time there was only one other female guide I knew of, who always used to go on safari with her husband." Verity's daughter Julie was one of the original Asilia team, helping to build many of our Tanzanian properties.

A force for good

We wanted Asilia, the safari business we founded in 2004, to be different – a force for good that not only contributes financially but also in a progressive and sustainable way to the communities around us, including the empowerment of local women. However, this was an ongoing challenge. We had female guides who would complete the training, pass with flying colors, and would then be expected by their families to stay home once they got married. This is the norm in Tanzania: the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women 2007 states that Tanzania's "low education levels, lack of qualifications, and patriarchal attitudes limit women's opportunity of being recruited and promoted".



Jonesia 'Kazawardi' Dominic, who works for Asilia Africa as a safari guide

We had made progress in integrating more women into our offices as well as certain roles in our safari camps, but the art of guiding was another story. Safari guiding is a highly skilled calling, dominated by men who have learned the intricacies of the trail over many years. As organizations often fall short when it comes to the greater representation of women at executive levels, our incremental attempts to integrate women as guides ran aground time and time again.

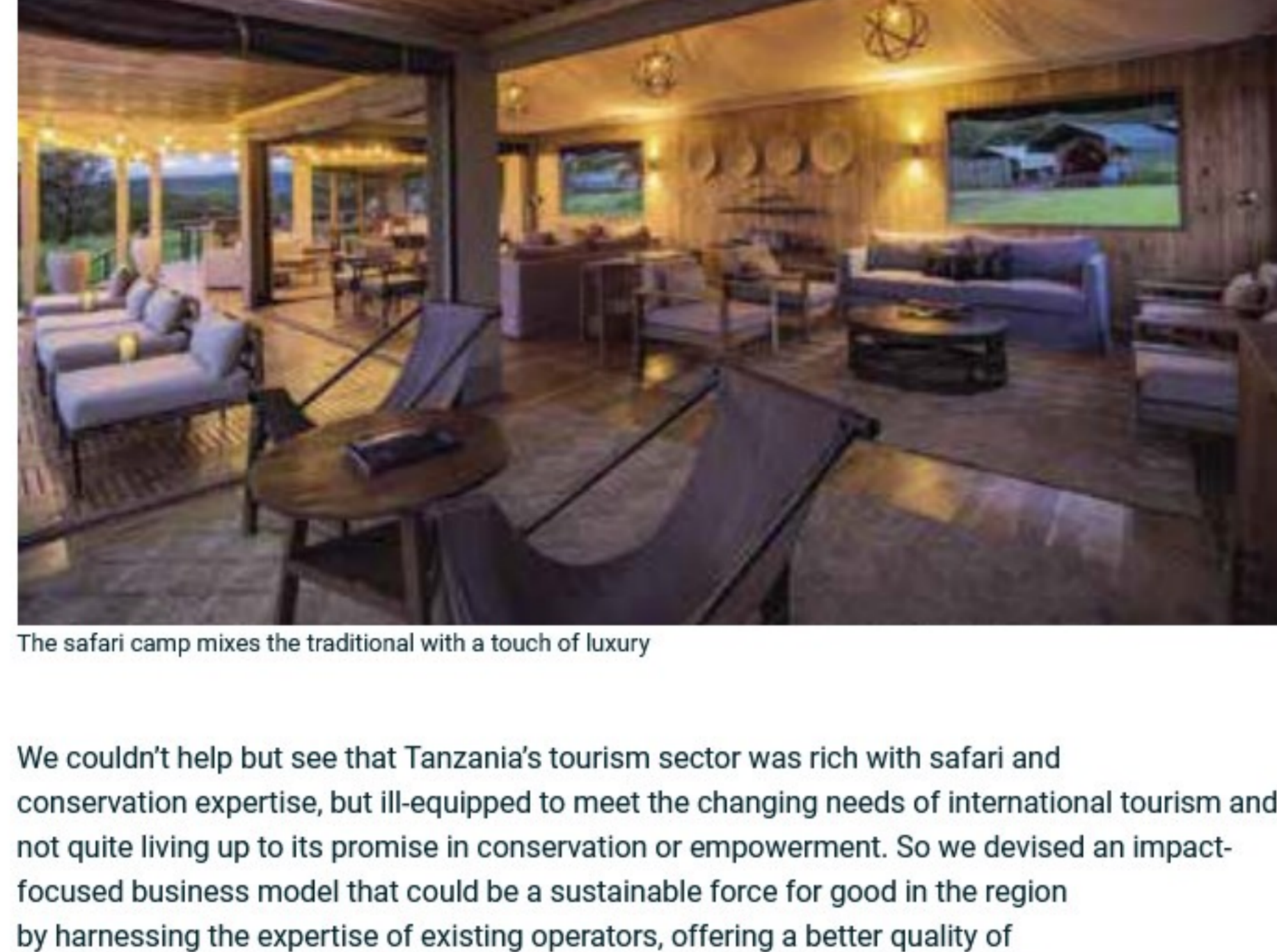
Finally, frustrated but determined to stay true to our values, we went for the jugular and created an all-female camp. "For many young women, and for their families, an all-women's camp was a necessary step to help them feel confident and comfortable living in the bush, miles from home for months at a time." There was great skepticism from inside our company, within the industry and our communities, but within six months Dunia was topping the rankings for Serengeti camps on TripAdvisor and inspiring our whole ecosystem. Soon we were seeing all-women teams popping up all over the continent – from all-female flight teams to all-female ranger units.

Positive impact

Our Dunia experiment shows that authentic purpose does not just have the power to make a positive impact on society, energize your team and change mindsets, but it also delivers tangible benefits for the business. Our guests loved it and wanted to tell the world about this unique camp and its ground-breaking women. In an industry so reliant on customer experience, our visitors could feel the impact that purpose in action had on our staff, filtering through to their own adventure.

It's had a wider impact too, helping to redraw the possibilities for women in rural Tanzania, with our male staff and community members now seeing a future career in guiding for their daughters, not just their sons. Should every organization set up an all-female operation to accelerate its own journey towards real purpose and people empowerment? There are powerful lessons from our experiences that resonate beyond the wilderness of the Serengeti.

The idea for Asilia – which means authentic or genuine in Swahili – came unplanned during a sabbatical from my former life as an investment banker in the Netherlands, as we set up an educational NGO in Arusha, my Tanzanian wife's place of birth. As a white European man, I was well aware of the colonial legacy and the long history of an insufficient share of safari profits reaching local people. A drive to break this cycle has been behind each step of our staff development.



The safari camp mixes the traditional with a touch of luxury

We couldn't help but see that Tanzania's tourism sector was rich with safari and conservation expertise, but ill-equipped to meet the changing needs of international tourism and not quite living up to its promise in conservation or empowerment. So we devised an impact-focused business model that could be a sustainable force for good in the region by harnessing the expertise of existing operators, offering a better quality of service, engaging the local population, expanding and investing to protect vulnerable conservation areas off the traditional safari track, and delivering a return on investment for our initial angel investor backers.

Atypical business model

It was clear that this venture was not going to break any records for financial dividends. There are always going to be trade-offs when you want to build an atypical business model around the concept of purpose. But we knew it could hit a sweet spot between finance and impact – an increasingly important consideration for portfolio managers, investors and potential customers.

Asilia grew from 120 people in 2004 to a pre-COVID-19 headcount of almost 1,000 people across 21 lodges in Kenya, Tanzania and Zanzibar, with offices in South Africa, the UK and the US. As the business model matured, longer-horizon-focused institutional investors came on board. This has helped us to expand into vital conservation areas that take time to cultivate as safari destinations and would have been at risk without intervention.

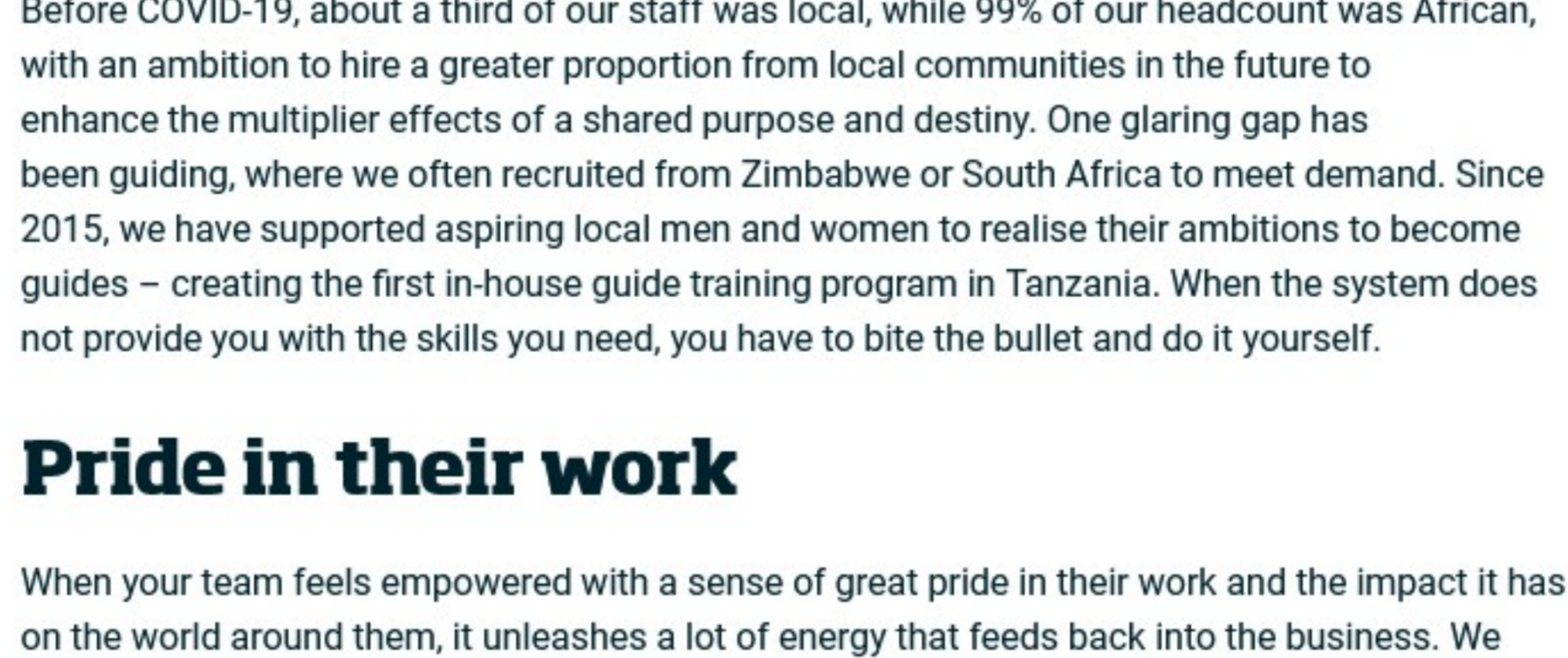
So how did we grow to reach the top of the TripAdvisor charts? How have we built an impact business that can attract significant funding to save endangered habitats? And, how can this story from the remote African bush translate into your own work?

Within our original purpose to deploy capital as a force for good in Africa, empowering people is fundamental. We set out to inspire and elevate the people working for us, and their communities, safe in the knowledge that an engaged team and a supportive community would light a fire under our ambitions for the business and the region.

Collective purpose

This empowerment starts with training – and, for Asilia, it needs to. According to UNICEF, almost seven in every 10 children aged between 14 and 17 years in Tanzania are not enrolled in secondary education. The majority of women work in agriculture, most of them as unpaid family helpers. Where they are paid, on average, women earn around half as much as men.

The skills required to deliver a world-class safari experience, from the myriad of logistics to guiding, are complex and scarce in Tanzania's rural economy. So we train our staff on the job in the skills that they will need to help us and them succeed. In creating a close-knit culture of collective purpose, we wanted to recruit and grow more from within rather than having to source talent externally. This builds loyalty and shared purpose, while also opening up doors if staff do want to move on.



The camp is set amid the wild scenery of the Serengeti

Each of our camps has online video training facilities where team members can spend as long as they want studying as part of a wider program of learning that includes assistant manager, guide and walking guide, chef and waiter/service vocational training. In the 2018/19 year, Asilia clocked nearly 80,000 hours of staff development and upskilling – or about 80 hours per person.

Before COVID-19, about a third of our staff was local, while 99% of our headcount was African, with an ambition to hire a greater proportion from local communities in the future to enhance the multiplier effects of a shared purpose and destiny. One glaring gap has been guiding, where we often recruited from Zimbabwe or South Africa to meet demand. Since 2015, we have supported aspiring local men and women to realise their ambitions to become guides – creating the first in-house guide training program in Tanzania. When the system does not provide you with the skills you need, you have to bite the bullet and do it yourself.

Pride in their work

When your team feels empowered with a sense of great pride in their work and the impact it has on the world around them, it unleashes a lot of energy that feeds back into the business. We have aligned this purpose from our staff to our investors so that everyone is on the same page and our intentions are clear. This has removed the normal tension that exists between company employees and shareholders, where driving down wages can translate into higher financial returns.

We have made impact part of annual performance appraisals and ask what each individual has done to create positive impact through their work. We share the success stories, whether it's reaching a training goal or protecting the environment, and we include impact in our reporting. We also take great care to assimilate team members with our family onboarding program, which is repeated once a year.

“ We set out to inspire and elevate the people working for us, and their communities ”

Right from the start, crucially, we accepted that not everyone knew everything. We had hardened safari experts who lacked business acumen, and we had people like me who knew about banking but nothing about the bush. This humility in leadership has served us well as we have navigated a spectrum of complexity, from diverse stakeholders to uncertain regulatory and fluid operational environments. It builds resilience and resourcefulness. When you are operating in the wilderness without the support mechanisms that exist elsewhere, a certain type of leadership evolves that is more centred, more open-minded and more pragmatic. It also prepares you for shocks.

COVID-19 has slashed our revenues by 85%. Mirroring the migrating beasts of the Serengeti, the safari industry is still navigating a precarious path. Since the start of the pandemic, many of the pre-crisis 1.6 million jobs have been lost in Kenya's travel industry. Many safari companies just shut their doors and sent staff home to live off the land. We were not immune to the crisis, but kept the number of redundancies as low as possible, paying the remaining team a reduced salary and continuing to contribute to benefits such as healthcare. It has been a massive sacrifice by our team and for that I am hugely grateful.

We have a team of people for whom work is much more than just a job, it's a shared responsibility to empower communities, educate our guests and protect precious habitats for future generations.

Bookings are already starting to return, in part thanks to the reputation we have built as a pioneer of purpose in the safari industry. A business built on authenticity and positive impact carries with it the resourcefulness and resilience not just to survive, but to emerge stronger from the wilderness.

Authors >>

Jeroen Harderwijk

Jeroen Harderwijk is Co-Founder and Managing Director of Asilia Africa (asiliaafrica.com), which runs 19 Camps and Lodges across Tanzania, Kenya and Zanzibar. He is also Founder and Director of the educational charity Kamiti Foundation. Before starting Asilia, he worked as a Director in Corporate Finance/M&A for ABN AMRO Bank.

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