

Condé Nast Traveler

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APRIL 2024

ONE of *a* KIND

THE NEW SECRETS OF LUXURY TRAVEL

**the world's most
unforgettable trips—
and the specialists
who can build them**



Mallorca
Botswana
Mongolia
Istanbul
Toronto

»» how great trips are made

MEET THE MAGICIANS WHO CAN TAP THE WONDER THAT MAKES TRAVEL UNFORGETTABLE

WHEN INTEREST IN ChatGPT exploded a year ago, a cottage industry arose of people asking it to perform tasks that have long been the province of experts—write a recipe, curate a wardrobe, and, of course, plan a trip—and then evaluate how well it had done. Generally, the results, while not disastrous, were mediocre. Ah, but ChatGPT is quickly going to get much better, Silicon Valley insists. Perhaps. But AI tools can rely only on the reams of data they've scraped from the Internet. So while they might, in the near future, be able to put together an itinerary as effectively as you could based on your own online research, they'll never be able to deliver the kind of next-level journey a travel specialist can.

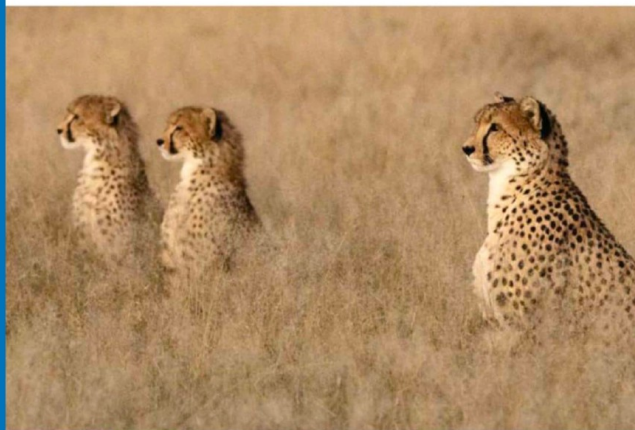
That's because they don't have an insider's understanding of how experiences like the ones in these pages are crafted. They don't know the general managers, the designers, the suppliers; nor

are they familiar with the broader network of individuals—drivers, shopkeepers, government officials—indirectly connected to a tourism experience. And they don't have the human understanding of their clients that allows them to deliver not only what folks want but also what they never knew to ask for. They're not plugged into a global community of travel professionals and providers who ensure that your pack makes it into your tent while you raft down a river without a care, that your cruise ship pulls into port at the optimal hour, that cocktails appear in your hand right at sunset. They can pair you exclusively with the best bush guide in Botswana or get you a private viewing of the Sistine Chapel ceiling.

And they can also help if something goes wrong. Say a conflict or natural disaster strikes, or there's a snafu with the airline—they'll get you home safe and sound. Try asking ChatGPT to do that. →

Find the list of 2024 Condé Nast Traveler Top Travel Specialists at cntraveler.com/travel-specialists 35

making it



From top: Watchful leopards at Somalisa; a guide consults a birding handbook

colorful history of Hwange National Park, says that ABC increasingly serves as an incubator for guides who go on to work for other outfitters. “Very few companies in this country understand how important retraining is,” he says, “and ABC has set the bar very high.”

In 2021, the company adopted a new mandate to cultivate women guides, in an industry that has long been resistant to them, through its foundation's new ABCF Female Guides program. Its goal is for a minimum of 25 percent of its guides to be women by 2030. During a subsequent stop on my trip at Thorntree River Lodge, near Victoria Falls in Zambia, I would meet one of ABCF's first students, Zita Hwambe. Many African men “believe that a woman's role is in the kitchen,” she says. “But they're warming up to us, because they know we're here to stay.”

Before I head to Thorntree, however, I go on a last sundowner with the Zimbabwe guides at Somalisa. From a hide, I watch, G&T in hand, as a pair of hyenas scamper past a water hole. It's probably the best happy hour I've ever been to. On our way back to camp, I tell Calvet about seeing the lionesses. He says that they were born to one of the daughters of Cecil, the famous lion who was shot by a trophy hunter just outside of Hwange in 1915, prompting an international outcry. After I process that, I remark on how lucky I felt to be there, with people who know so much about this beautiful land and its difficult history.

“Yes, you are,” he says, with the most serious expression he can muster. Then his face lights up in an enormous smile. “Yes, you are.” JESSE ASHLOCK

SPECIALISTS CAN PUT A NEW SPIN ON SAFARIS

Mozambique

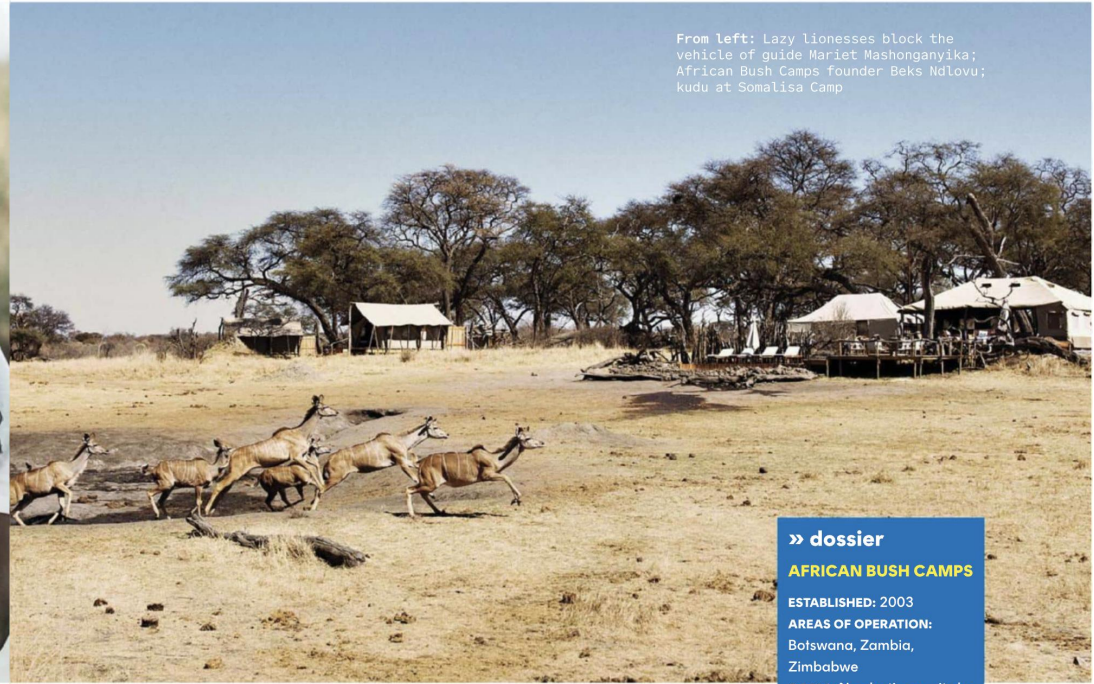
Once you've seen the Big Five, you're ready to meet unfamiliar fauna, says Teresa Sullivan of **Mango African Safaris**, who can bring travelers to biodiverse Gorongosa National Park, where wild dogs known as painted wolves are one of the park's many conservation success stories. *From \$2,000 per person per night; mangosafari.com*

Tanzania

For pioneering adventure, **Go2Africa's** Giada Claassen plans trips to the only camp in the Usungu Wetlands' Ruaha National Park, where guests can participate in research projects like tracking, collaring, and monitoring nocturnal animals captured by thermal-infrared night cameras. *From \$9,000 per person, sharing; go2africa.com*

Kenya

Deborah Calmeyer of **Roar Africa** reimagines the safari experience by curating fresh itineraries, like a trip that blends wilderness, wellness, and workshops with renowned poet-zoologist David Whyte at a peaceful retreat at the foot of Mount Kenya. *Five days from \$24,410 per person, sharing; roarafrika.com*



From left: Lazy lionesses block the vehicle of guide Mariet Mashonganyika; African Bush Camps founder Beks Ndlovu; kudu at Somalisa Camp

Leader of the Pack

How the safari company African Bush Camps is taking guiding on the continent to a new level

ON A WET January morning at Somalisa Camp, in Zimbabwe's Hwange National Park, a tall, rangy paramedic named Elvis Tavengwa is instructing about three dozen bush guides on the finer points of first aid. "Come on," he shouts at them, so animated he's almost hovering above the floor. "Your guest is in cardiac arrest. What are you going to do?" The guides, dressed in every imaginable shade of khaki and olive, look at one another, uncertain. "He's dying!" Elvis screams. "Chest compressions! I need chest compressions!" Several guides lurch forward to demonstrate on a dummy.

Each January during the rainy season, African Bush Camps (ABC), perhaps the continent's premier Black-owned safari company, closes all of its lodges in Zimbabwe, Zambia, and Botswana, and convenes its guides for a two-week retrain-

ing program, the most rigorous in the business. In addition to first aid, this gathering of the Zimbabwe guides will include refresher courses in shooting, tracking, stargazing, photography, and more. During my visit, in addition to Elvis's frantic pedagogy, I witness a workshop on the ABC values (authenticity, empowerment, conservation, collaboration, and care), a candid discussion among leadership about how to encourage more junior "learner" guides to take the steps to earn pro certification, and a team-building exercise during which the guides are given 20 pieces of spaghetti, 10 Band-Aids, a piece of string, and a marshmallow and charged with building a free-standing structure in under 20 minutes.

It's really not so different from a Western corporate retreat. Only instead of taking place in a suburban convention center, it's held in a delightfully classic, very remote tented camp in an acacia grove overlooking a water hole with a resident hippo. And as Elvis demonstrates the proper application of a tourniquet, things are happening out there. A waterbuck bounds by, the white circle on its rump bouncing up and down like a toilet seat that got stuck. Beks Ndlovu, the 47-year-old entrepreneur and former guide who founded ABC 18 years ago, summons me over to point out two lionesses prowling the ridgeline above an ancient dry riverbank.

Suddenly, a pack of wild dogs flashes by in hot pursuit of an impala. "You never

know what's going to happen," Beks says as we run off to commandeer a Land Cruiser. We can't find the dogs, only kudu and yellow-billed hornbills. But we do bump into Calvet Nkomo, a veteran guide who has worked at Somalisa since 2013 and is said to know more than anyone about the life histories of the lions in the area. He informs us that the lionesses have made their way into the neighboring Acacia Camp. We exit the Land Cruiser and approach them by foot, watching from behind a fallen log as they loll about, take a few steps, then collapse to the ground again, too stuffed from a recent meal to move. It sure beats a morning coffee break in a drab lobby amid acres of wall-to-wall carpeting.

Beks, a native Zimbabwean, has known this swath of Hwange National Park for more than two decades, since he was guiding for the nearby

Makolo Camp and used to sneak guests into the area. After two years of lobbying the Zimbabwean government, he secured the tender and opened Somalisa in 2006 with an emphasis on premium guiding. A few nights earlier, I'd heard Beks tell its origin story to a group of guests at Khwai Lediba, one of ABC's newest camps, on the edge of the Okavango Delta. "You know that thing they say?" he asked. "If you build it, they will come?" It isn't true. "But the success of his second camp, Linyanti, in Botswana, helped subsidize Somalisa, and today it is the flagship property of a company that employs around 650 people, including the 60 guides Beks refers to as the company's "superpower." "We can have the best hideaway, the best design, the shiniest copper bars," he tells them one morning. "But without you guys and your storytelling, we have nothing."

Many of the guides tell me that these training programs, along with the ability to rotate among the ABC properties and learn new skills, are what brought them to ABC. "You work at various camps and you always hear about a certain company," says Michael Tsoka, who came to Somalisa two years ago. "This was always where I wanted to work." Paul Hobbs, an archaeologist who'd come to give a talk on the →

» dossier

AFRICAN BUSH CAMPS

ESTABLISHED: 2003

AREAS OF OPERATION:
Botswana, Zambia,
Zimbabwe

GOALS: No plastics on site by
2025; no plastics in the
supply chain by 2030; 25%
women guides by 2030
NEXT OPENING: Atzaró
Okavango, Botswana

PHOTOGRAPHS: AFRICAN BUSH CAMPS; HAKAN LUDWIGSON