



Zebra shelter under a giant Acacia tree in the majestic Masai Mara National Reserve.

*A UK COMPANY CREATES CUSTOM-MADE TRIPS FOR ONCE-IN-A-LIFETIME AFRICAN EXPLORATIONS*

Even among the most seasoned globe-trotters, the safari holds a special place as an ultimate travel experience. London-based Journeys by Design has found a way to ratchet up that wow-factor by at least a few notches, creating bespoke trips to Africa. Each one is tailored around clients' travel preferences, interests, and previous excursions, including whether they've ever been to Africa.



(Left and top right) Journeys by Design specializes in once-in-a-lifetime trips, including family-friendly treks. (Bottom right) Cheetahs are regular visitors to the Singita Serengeti Private Reserve, just one of several locale options Journeys provides.

“There’s an evolution of travel to a place, and how you experience that place is very often a reflection of your history with it,” says Will Jones, Journeys by Design’s founder and managing director. When it comes to Africa, Jones explains, exploring the varied wildlife is a must for any first-time visitor. Repeat trips are an opportunity to enjoy other facets of the place, such as art and culture.

Jones spent much of his life on the continent. The son of a United Nations official, he was raised in half a dozen African countries. After earning a degree in environmental science in England, he returned to Africa, first working as a volunteer in Ethiopian National Parks before starting the country’s first ecotourism project and tented camp, Bishangari. He went on to manage a series of luxury wildlife lodges in Kenya, before founding Journeys by Design in 1999.



Journeys by Design is also known for luxe accommodations, such as this beautifully appointed tent at Cottars 1920s Safari Camp in Kenya.

“Africa is raw, elemental, inspiring,” Jones says, explaining why he has centered his life round it. “Africa has something that resonates. It definitely feels like the cradle of man.”

Journeys by Design allows him to remain connected to Africa, and his enthusiasm for the continent is reflected by the company’s exhaustive menu of dozens of possible destinations in twelve countries. “Ideally, we like to have a face-to-face preliminary session with clients,” he says, “talking in broad strokes about all the possible options.” To make this happen, Jones or a colleague will often travel to a client’s home. After all, many trips will crisscross the continent, and encompass a myriad of hotels, lodges, and camps, not to mention multiple flights and a coterie of guides. (Wherever travelers go, Jones recommends a minimum of nine nights, though twelve to fourteen is even better.) For a truly once-in-a-lifetime journey, Jones himself will accompany clients.

But it isn’t just a personal touch that sets Journeys by Design apart from the competition. Thanks to his years of experience on the continent and his wide base of contacts, Jones has become something of a master string-puller, filling requests for clients that sometimes hardly seem possible even to him. Take the English couple so passionate about Ethiopian history, they asked to attend the private burial of former emperor Haile Selassie in 2000, twenty-five years after Selassie’s death following the overthrow of his regime by Marxist rebels. After intensively working his “little black book of contacts,” Jones found himself, along with his clients, among the eight people at the ceremony. The other guests included members of Selassie’s family and Ziggy Marley. Then there was the time he arranged for Tanzanian customs officials to set up office at the private Serengeti camp of clients who wished to shave several hours off their trip to the Seychelles Islands by avoiding a trip through Kilimanjaro. “There was a certain price attached to that,” Jones says, somewhat circumspectly.



As founder Will Jones describes it, "Africa is raw, elemental, inspiring."

Of course, such stories are the exception, not the norm. In fact, Jones says, a growing part of the business comes from families, a development he links directly to the accessibility of pediatric antimalarial drugs. Families, he says, come looking for a trip that will "push boundaries and do it in a way that is safe and comfortable." They want adventure, but they also want to end each day in a comfortable bed.

And while wilderness experiences still dominate, especially for American travelers, Jones notes an increased demand for trips that include time for exploring some of Africa's thousands of miles of coastline, particularly the stunning strip that runs along the Indian Ocean, through countries like Tanzania, including the archipelago of Zanzibar, and Mozambique, as well as the Seychelles.

The best trips, he says, offer a mix of experiences, and Journeys by Design has become adept at creating travels that offer dazzling, kaleidoscopic views of Africa. An itinerary could, for instance, begin in Cape Town for a few nights' stay at Ellerman House, formerly a shipping magnate's mansion, stopping in the winelands for a couple of days of gourmandizing. Next might be Botswana's ecologically rich Okavango Delta, where guests stay in luxury camp Little Mombo (the en suite tents are decked out with mahogany writing desks and leather upholstery), for prime wildlife viewing. Before returning to Johannesburg, why not stop off in Zambia's Victoria Falls, one of the seven natural wonders of the world?



(Left and right) Breathtaking African views and life-changing adventures are complemented by simple but richly designed accommodations. The goal? To offer dazzling, kaleidoscopic views of Africa.

As his clients expect, accommodations on Journeys by Design trips are always top-flight; the company often works with hotels such as those owned by the high-end group Relais & Chateaux. But the greatest luxury, Jones says, is in the company's ability to provide clients a true wilderness experience. "It's about being able to access the remotest, quietest corners of Africa," he says. "Other operators just don't have the wherewithal to do that because they lack the knowledge and the logistical background to pull it off."

The difference, he says, comes in moments like the one he experienced not long ago on a trip with clients to the Masai Mara National Reserve in Kenya. Journeys by Design had set up a private camp there only to discover that the wildebeest migration had arrived two months earlier than usual. Jones and his group were completely surrounded by the rangy antelopes—1.8 million of them to be exact. As Jones puts it, "It was a pretty awesome experience."

*Rebecca Rothbaum is a journalist based in New York and has contributed to several publications, including Gourmet, New York, The New Yorker, and O, The Oprah Magazine.*