



Have Jones, Will Travel

One man holds the key to the world's most exclusive African safaris. SOPHY ROBERTS meets him.

Earlier this year, George W. Bush went to Ethiopia on a helicopter safari. His pilot was Ben Simpson – the best in the game, with whom I have flown into the moonscape that comprises Ethiopia's wild Danakil Depression – and his guide was Ralph Bousfield, the charismatic son of the Botswanian crocodile hunter, the late Jack Bousfield. Everyone tries to land this dream-team combination, but only very few have both pilot and guide on speed-dial. Will Jones, who says he didn't book the Bush contingent, was top of my list of possibles. I know from experience he is one among very few agents with the power to secure Bousfield and Simpson in the same crack-team flotilla.

Jones, however, is also someone you've likely never heard of. He founded Journeys by Design – a relatively small UK-based Africa travel outfitter, the size of which belies the fact Jones is the silent weapon to the world's most exclusive African safaris. His trips, ranging from US\$30,000 to US\$500,000-a-week, are familiar to a tight inner circle of regulars. This is because Jones has access to the only people who matter in sub-Saharan travel, from the best helicopter pilots to wild dog researchers, from bush camp operators to leading-edge conservationists, his geographical expertise running from Sudan through to Ethiopia, Tanzania, Kenya, Mozambique, Botswana, Namibia and South Africa. "Africa is where I was born," says Jones, "I can't escape that umbilical connection."

It's a given that Jones, who now has more than 20 years of skin in the safari game, creates complicated itineraries with rifle-shot accuracy, not only in matching the right client to the right room in the right lodge, but the right guide to the right Master of the Universe (a critical relationship on safari). But then Jones assumes nothing. He flies in to see his potential clients, be they based in Singapore or Manhattan, as he did for Ralph and Ricky Lauren. He knows what he is selling, and to whom, before he takes a single dime from anyone.

Jones has done the same for me, on numerous occasions over the last 10 years in my capacity as a journalist (as well as on private trips when I have travelled to Africa with my family). With Jones I've visited the last remaining Bushmen of Tanzania, the Wahadzbe, and taken a dhow through the lost islands of the Quirimbas off the north coast of Mozambique. With my two young sons, we

stayed at a camp in Kenya where each child was assigned a warrior and a machete. They went off to hunt elephant ribs, snakes and fossils; they shot bows and arrows, and watched honey being smoked out of beehives in the trees by Samburu warriors. We went to markets where the tribesmen were beaded and feathered like strutting peacocks, and visited the Turkana Desert, where we watched locals dig deep into dry riverbeds to extract water from the so-called 'singing wells' (named after the chants the semi-pastoralists use to get through the labour under a relentless equatorial sun). In a helicopter, we've landed high on rocky outcrops in the Matthews Range for a sundowner, and whooped with adrenaline as we've dropped off the edge of the Rift Valley, flying over lakes blushed pink with scattering flamingoes. Not once have I passed through Nairobi airport without being whisked through back doors by Jones's 'handlers';

nor have I ever felt ill at ease walking with elephants, horseriding with Cape buffalo or fishing for sailfish. With Jones I recently returned from the most exclusive new safari lodge in Tanzania – Mwiba – where George Clooney reportedly checked out a few days before I checked in. Like Jones, it's not a lodge you will have likely ever heard of. But then with just eight rooms, there's no need for the news to spread far. Between Hollywood and Jones, Mwiba couldn't ask for two more powerful advocates.

Yet you'd never know the influence of this understated Englishman if you went by his outward appearance. I've rarely seen him out of beaten-up khaki, a T-shirt and flip-flops. He travels light, with a small backpack, toothbrush and sat phone. His hair is unkempt, his weathered face bush-whacked by an African sun (even in the desert, he never wears a hat). When he's not travelling, this soft-spoken 43 year-old with a doctor wife and three young children, lives a modest life out of a white stucco home on the English south coast, which is stuffed with striking tribal artefacts. He trained as an environmental scientist, while his father, a consultant for the United Nations, worked out of Nairobi for most of Jones's childhood.

Jones spent his school years in the UK, but wanted to return to Africa to work. After setting up the first eco-lodge, Bishangari, in Ethiopia in 1994, Jones decided he'd do better bringing the wealthy visitor in – and convert them to his belief that tourism can be a force for good – than wait for the visitor to arrive and get the message by osmosis. "Just because you build doesn't mean they will always come," says Jones. "I realised early on in my career that I needed to create a business that gained the trust of people who had the means to give back more to Africa than they were taking out."

What Jones is referring to is his latest initiative, Wild Philanthropy, which has evolved – slowly and deliberately, as is his *modus operandi* – out of his travel company. The

concept is this: wealthy visitors go on a Journeys by Design safari. While Jones's proselytising for a better Africa is by no means the purpose of organising a trip, the client can't help but see for themselves the beauty and crisis affecting the continent's communities and wildlife. If the client falls in love with some small part of it, be it a piece of land in need of long-term protection, or a creature in need of a threatened ecosystem, then Jones will leverage that love affair into an active commitment – a 'strategic investment', as he calls it, which Jones and his colleagues at Wild Philanthropy will expedite, manage and at best help turn into a break-even model where the client can holiday for evermore with a sense of connection and purpose.

"I want people to look at their Africa safari through a completely new lens – to help them travel 'into the land' where the traveller becomes a stakeholder in the continent," Jones explains, "That's why I spend so much time looking at a customer's motivations and core values in the planning stages of their trip; on a second, or third safari I then might arrange for them to meet with local landowners so they start to understand what might be possible in terms of supporting land management in Africa.

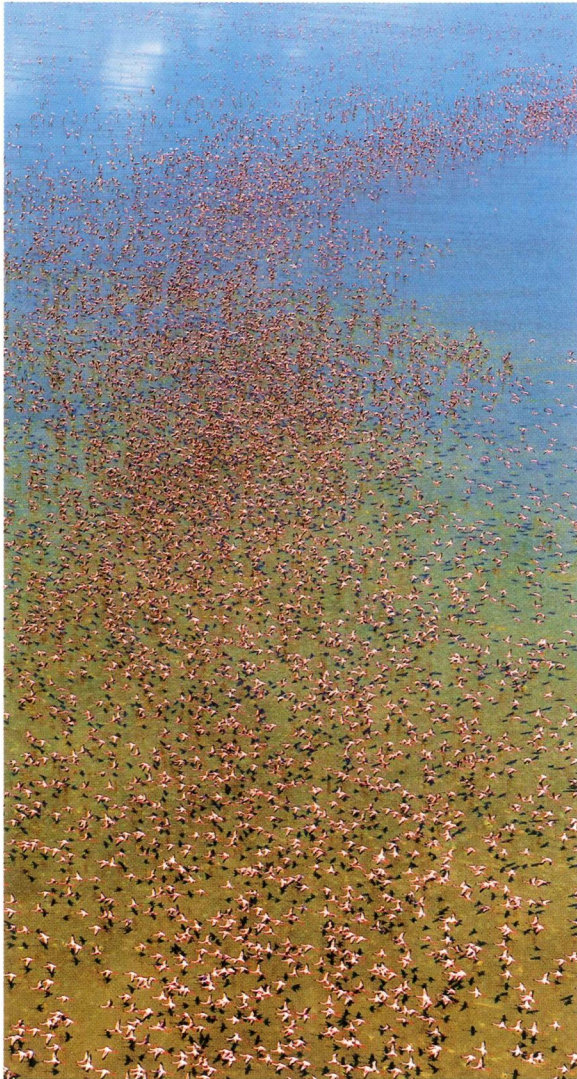
We set up luxury mobile camps in the wilds – this is where nearly all the marginal land use areas are located – which is extreme and immersive. It's not for everybody, and the return on an investment is of course hard to measure. Hence why I use the word 'philanthropy'. A 'donor' has to want to be part of this for more than the real estate."

In March, I travelled with Jones to Northern Kenya, to visit a place he has been telling me about for a number of years: Sera-Melako, which comprises two community group ranches totalling 720,000 hectares of pristine wilderness (Melako is 375,000 hectares, and Sera 345,000). The land has been owned and grazed for centuries by the region's semi-nomadic pastoralists, including the Samburu, Rendille and Borana tribes. The ground has become over-grazed by the domestic herds, while the wildlife has been heavily poached.

At the moment, there is no lodge to speak of, nor any roads. We access Sera-Melako instead by helicopter, flown by the same Ben Simpson who took Bush into Ethiopia. Our guide and fixer is one of East Africa's most iconic safari specialists: Willie Roberts, who owns the gorgeously pretty Sirikoi Lodge in Lewa Downs (where Prince William spent his gap year saving rhino).



Game viewing at Mwiba in Tanzania. *Opposite, Clockwise from left* Flying over flamingos near Mwiba. The author on the balcony at Mwiba. *Previous* Will Jones photographed in the Matthews Range, Northern Kenya. All photos by Ken Kochey.



In Sera-Melako, Roberts has set up a mobile safari unit in advance of our arrival, which we use as our base for exploring the territory over the next 48 hours. It is elegant in its simplicity. Our safari 'cot beds', draped in mosquito nets, are lined up on a dry riverbed. By day, we take to the shade of a natural grove of doum palms; by night, we sleep under the stars. It is raw, visceral and extraordinarily empowering. Expensive cotton sheets, impeccable bush cooking, a refreshing bucket shower – all of these conspire to make me feel like a Queen. And I'm safe; parked up right beside us is the helicopter, which we use to take in the roaming elephant and kopje-scattered landscape. The horizon reaches as far as the eye can see, all the way to Somalia.

Over the headphones in the helicopter, Jones explains his vision for Sera-Melako: to bring in a potential donor on vacation, and if they like it, the

conservancies' operational steward, the Northern Rangelands Trust, or NRT, would partner with that investor in a more permanent eco-tourism product to help rehabilitate the landscape and secure the wildlife. To achieve this, the donor would be guided by Wild Philanthropy and the NRT, with the costs to create the camp, says Jones, relatively small: an estimated US\$400,000, with the potential of a private home for the donor to use with his or her family. On top of this, US\$120,000 a year would be needed to cover the conservancies' operational fees (anti-poaching, wildlife management, community education etc), 90 per cent of which Jones projects would be met by the tourism product. As to the region's USP, I think I can see it; the landscape is exquisite and empty. Later I learn the appeal is far more than this, that the NRT also plans to bring in 20 black rhino to a fenced inner sanctuary of 120 square kilometres.

Around the campfire that night, Roberts, Jones and Simpson hold me in their thrall as they talk me through the issue: the eastern black rhino (*Diceros bicornis michaeli*) is endemic to Kenya where the only significant population of this sub-species remains. In 1970, numbers sat at around 20,000. By 1990 this had dropped to less than 400 individuals – a staggering 98 per cent decline in 20 years.

I don't doubt there is always a backstory to each paradise presented by the tourism industry, that there is far more at stake on the ground than the traveller is ever made to realise. Now I also understand what makes Jones different. He doesn't shy away from exposing the underbelly. He wants to not only educate his clientele about disappearing wilderness, but engage his safari clients with the possible solution. "I want my children, and children's children to see the Africa I knew as a boy," he says simply; "Travel to the continent can no longer just be about the lodge, the Big Five and elegant South African interior design. It needs to be about the acquisition of knowledge, and engagement of the soul. And for those who can afford it, a financial commitment to oil the wheels of change. Africa has too much at stake, and too much on its plate, to do it on its own."

Contact Will Jones through both Journeys by Design (www.journeysbydesign.com) and Wild Philanthropy (www.wildphilanthropy.com).