



Ndlovu's tip for entrepreneurs:

"People come to Africa because they want to learn about different cultures so we ask staff to come out of their shells and interact with guests. By doing so, conversations with guests become so much more meaningful."

Beks Ndlovu
CEO, African Bush Camps, Cape Town

Beks Ndlovu is walking down a narrow hippo path. "There are animals moving through here," he says with a smile, pointing to a pair of eyes blinking in our direction from the treeline. "Can you see that giraffe looking at us?" he adds, slipping back into his former career as a safari guide. The founder and CEO of African Bush Camps (ABC) is in Botswana's Okavango Delta, where he's set to build his 17th safari lodge. ABC's newest site wasn't easy to obtain but the land was well worth the wait. All around, there's nutritious grass for animals to feed, trees to shade the tents where guests will stay and water channels for game-viewing in *mokoro* (dugout canoes).

By now, Ndlovu knows exactly what to look for. The 45-year-old has spent the past 15 years opening lodges in and around national parks and reserves in Botswana, Zambia and his native Zimbabwe. "Coming from within the industry is one of my biggest advantages," he says.

Ndlovu grew up in Lupane, a small village where animals were a legitimate danger: elephants raided crops and one charged at him when he was 10. He started working as a guide and later founded his own guiding company via stints in hospitality at home and abroad. The Cape Town resident vividly recalls the moment he decided to set up a small, 12-bed camp of his own. "I was on a game drive with guests and heard a camp manager shouting at another guide over the radio that he was going to be late because one of his guests had a spa treatment booked."

Experiences with wildlife cannot be scheduled and, in Ndlovu's mind, a massage shouldn't come at the expense of an electrifying encounter with a cheetah. "I thought, 'I have to change the narrative.'" He decided to switch the focus of modern safaris away from high-end amenities, such as private pools and Egyptian-cotton sheets, and back to the bush he knew as a young guide. "Luxury for me is about having one of Africa's naturalists help you to understand the dynamics of the natural world," he says.

But that is not to say that African Bush Camps are a low-budget option. Guests at Khwai Leadwood, which opened on the edge of Botswana's Moremi Game Reserve in 2020, enjoy a sleek camp with six tented rooms shaded by leadwood trees, and an inviting plunge pool, which almost rolls into the river. Ndlovu admits that his original idea — to build a single camp in Zimbabwe — was naive. Scale is important in the safari industry because tourists

tend to move from one park to the next, often across multiple countries. Having a group of lodges allows ABC to create more meaningful journeys for guests, retain custom and avoid partnering with other companies who might not share the same vision.

Expansion was made possible with the support of clients with whom Ndlovu had previously guided and gone on to build long-standing relationships with, and investors introduced by friends. Some ABC shareholders are wealthy Africans who are working overseas but want to give something back to the continent. Others have wanted to make a quick buck. One financier tried to flip the business and then almost bankrupted the company by recalling loans. He has since been bought out. "His values didn't align with mine," says Ndlovu.

Shareholders in ABC must buy into the company ethos and balance financial profit with a small environmental footprint. Investing in solar kits and waste-management systems that recycle water is expensive and ABC has taken a leaf out of Patagonia's book by giving 2.5 per cent of its gross turnover to community projects and conservation.

Further expansion is unlikely as the business focuses on its conservation work and its company culture. "One of the differentiating factors of ABC

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is that it's not a corporate machine; there's a face behind the product," says Ndlovu, who claims to know almost all of his 600 employees by name. Staff are visibly delighted to see the boss arrive; one shakes the boss's hand as though he were greeting an old friend. Ndlovu wants to provide more managerial opportunities for local people and his star is rising in the safari industry, in which it is still rare to find black owners.

On a game drive the next day, a guide from another safari company passes and asks whether Ndlovu, who is casually sitting barefoot in the back seat, is, "Mr Beks from African Bush Camps". He smiles at the compliment; everyone wants to work for him. Ndlovu then signals for our guide to take a different route to see a tree he loves — an ideal spot for a coffee and a chance to see some elephants. Ndlovu is the CEO but at heart he's still a safari guide. — MHO

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