

# Working on a dream

**Beks Ndlovu** founded African Bush Camps 15 years ago. To mark the anniversary, we talked to him about his journey and his reflections on tourism in a post-pandemic world. **By Adele Cutler**



BEKS NDLOVU WAS PHOTOGRAPHED FOR TRAVEL AFRICA AT HOME IN CAPE TOWN, BY ERIC GAUSS / DOGS ON THE RUN PHOTOGRAPHY

<EVERYONE HAS A STORY>

## A FIRE IS LIT

Born in a small town near Hwange National Park in Zimbabwe, Beks Ndlovu's first memories of wildlife were of crop-raiding elephants destroying his mother's garden. "We banged on pots and pans hoping the noise would chase them away," he recalled.

His love of nature later developed on trips away from boarding school, spending time with friends in safari camps, camping and fishing. "I loved being outdoors and learning not just about wildlife but also about safari operations," he recalled. "When I left school, I started training as a learner guide."

He qualified just three years later – most guides take five. For the next decade he guided clients, managed camps and took marketing and operations roles to learn the business, before starting his own guiding operation, initially in Zimbabwe and Botswana but later extending across the region.

## THE DREAM

His exposure to environmental issues and the needs of rural communities lead to a realisation that tourism could help, but he recognised that working alone had its limitations: "My impact as an individual would be far less than if I went into it with other people. I wanted to craft a whole journey for people to want to travel from overseas; one which focused on remote areas, under the guidance of the very best naturalists."

The locations would be critical: wild places where he could operate sustainably and responsibly, building mutually beneficial relationships with communities and supporting conservation. "It all goes hand in hand," he said.

## AFRICAN BUSH CAMPS

In 2006, helped by investment from friends, family and clients, Beks seized an opportunity to open a small camp in Hwange, and African Bush Camps was born.

With six tents and two guides, Somalisa was basic. Initially, there were no plans to open more camps, but practical business sense dictated otherwise.

"Zimbabwe was in a bad place politically," he explained. "I knew I needed to spread the risk." Within six months, Beks welcomed his first guests to Linyanti Bush Camp in Botswana.

Today, African Bush Camps (ABC) has 16 camps, spread across Zimbabwe, Botswana and Zambia. Their newest – Khwai Leadwood, in Moremi Game Reserve – opened in May.

Despite the company's growth, Beks insists that it is "still very much a family business, small enough to build our own culture."

## THE FOUNDATION

As Somalisa was being built, Beks was setting up the African Bush Camps Foundation, a non-profit focused on conservation, education and empowerment for communities. This is primarily funded by ABC (which contributes 2.5 per cent of its annual turnover) and direct donations.

Beks quickly earned the trust of the communities. "My heritage and background definitely helped. But we cannot tackle the issues of conservation until we understand the dynamics of the local people," he said. "We don't dictate to communities; we act as facilitators through tourism to achieve their objectives. Without incorporating communities into tourism, we cannot win the fight on conservation."

## THE FUTURE

Africa generates less than five per cent of global tourism revenue, but Beks wants to see this rise into double figures. He believes that "sustainability and regenerative travel will make a deep, meaningful, lasting difference to the areas in which we operate."

Part of his strategy is to encourage a four-night minimum stay, to allow guests to better understand the challenges and richness of wild places. "We want

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to educate guests about our corner of Africa and give them an opportunity to get involved in making this world a better place," he explained. "We want them to be our partners for the long term; to be advocates for Africa."

He is also keen to see greater diversity in those who come on safari, and to expose more young people to tourism: "We have always promoted family travel. We want to create young explorers; the conservationists of the future."

"My hope now is that we all become more responsible in how we live our lives, making conscious changes on behalf of our environment. In Africa, we have under our care some of the vital organs of the world that our future depends on. A contribution to Africa is a contribution to the survival of the planet."

