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THE NEW adventure CLASS

For the truly intrepid thrill seekers, ain't no mountain high enough. **Joseph Hooper** reports on the new adventurers and the men and women who can take them safely—and in style—to the farthest corners of Planet Earth.

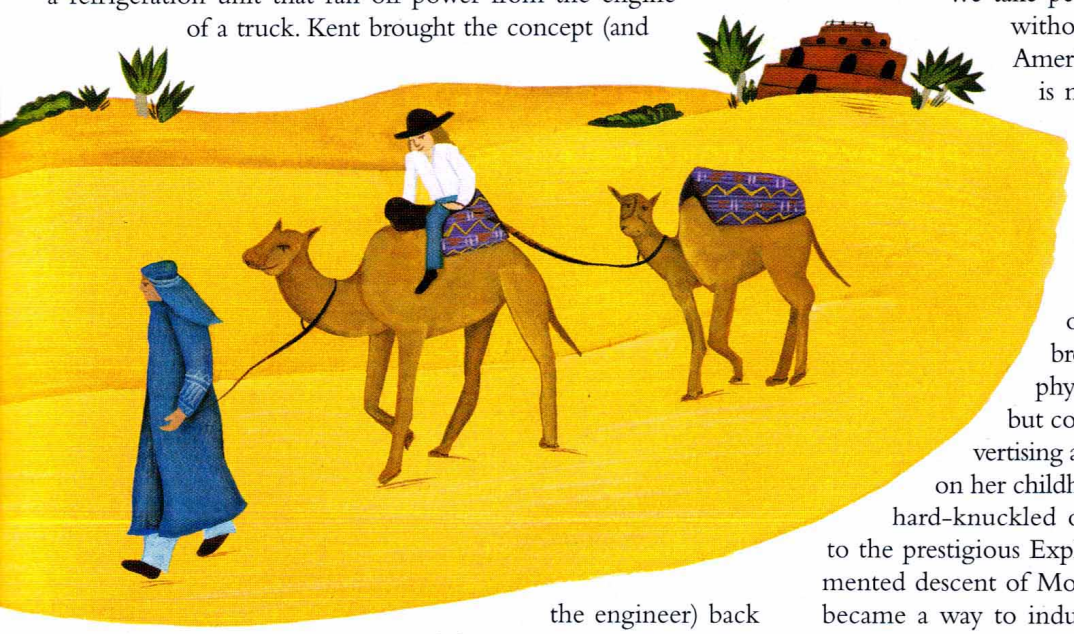
In 1990, ten years after Jane Williams and her husband, Walter, transplanted themselves from London to his family ranch in Patagonia, Walter died in a farming accident. Williams was left to oversee a working estancia of 15,000 acres in the vast South American wilderness, with 700 cows, 20 chickens, and a fledgling tourist business that she hoped would support her and her two young children. So she turned herself into a horsewoman—exploring the bone-dry grasslands, the forests of rare monkey-puzzle evergreens, the caves and lakes hidden in the Andean foothills, learning everything by trial and error—and over the years she grew to be a specialist in adventure travel. Now her Huechahue ranch, 120 miles northeast of Bariloche, Argentina, has become one of the most sought-after destinations for riding enthusiasts looking for a rugged and spectacular world to explore on horseback. For the length of their stay, guests become honorary family members, lending a hand on the ranch and staying in their own cabins in the estancia's garden. They set out with Williams on brisk all-day rides through her expansive property (a visit to roosting condors is a highlight) or on the three- or five-day horse treks through vertiginous 6,000-foot mountain passes in nearby Lanin National Park. For the novice adventurer, the experience is a soul-stirring change of rhythm and scenery.

This is the state of customized high-end adventure travel today, as Williams and many others have created it. Some travel professionals credit a well-heeled and sophisticated baby boomer generation with starting the vogue of physically active and often expensively customized vacations—far removed from the "if it's Tuesday, it must be Belgium" bus tours or mass-market Caribbean cruises. What is indisputable is that what was once a niche market catering to hunters, fishermen, and mountain climbers has grown into a family-friendly, $220 billion-a-year industry, according to the Travel Industry Association of America. And this growth extends to the highest end of travelers. American Express Platinum Travel Service has reported in recent years a marked increase in bookings of adventure- and culture-oriented trips to Antarctica, South America, New Zealand, and India. Epic man vs. nature struggle has been replaced by a more democratic ideal: adventure for everyone, undergirded with a safety net of cell phones and satellite Global Positioning Systems.

To get a feel for how solid the pillars of first-class adventure travel are, you need go no further than Fifth Avenue in Manhattan, to the offices of Sven-Olof Lindblad, 53, a second-generation pioneer in the field. Lindblad Expeditions offers cruises to places like Antarctica and the Galápagos. But Sven Lindblad will be the first to tell you that it is not like 1956, when his father, the late

Swedish travel impresario Lars-Eric Lindblad, chartered an Argentine navy vessel and set sail with a bunch of tourists for Antarctica. "I realized I wasn't going to discover the world," he says. "My father kind of ruined that." Lindblad does have a certain nostalgia for the old days with dad ("we used to do these idiotic things like having people stranded in the Falklands, not being able to get them back to the ship"), but now he takes pride in his highly professional operation. The excitement of doing something first has been replaced with the satisfaction of delivering what he calls a more "honed" product. Lindblad now conducts 30 boat trips a year for between 12 and 110 people at a time, led by a flotilla of naturalists and historians. "Nowadays, I don't expect to kill people," Lindblad says drolly. "How we avoided it twenty-five years ago is beyond me."

If Lindblad and his ilk owe a spiritual debt to the great polar and Himalayan expeditions of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the warm-weather side of the business has its roots in the big-game African safari that flourished in the shade of British colonialism. Geoffrey Kent, 61, the CEO of Abercrombie & Kent, grew up in Kenya and happily takes credit for lifting the safari out of the bloody-minded Hemingway era. The breakthrough, he says, occurred when he was serving as an officer in the British army in Libya in the '60s. Anticipating the needs of a general who liked his pampering ("any fool can be uncomfortable, Geoffrey," the general told him), Kent directed a clever engineer to rig up a refrigeration unit that ran off power from the engine of a truck. Kent brought the concept (and the engineer) back with him to Kenya and launched a mobile safari business, with refrigeration, allowing tourists to dine sumptuously without need of freshly killed meat. "I wanted to allow people to explore their Walter Mitty selves," Kent says, "but with cut-glass crystal and Dom Perignon in the bucket, and with the soup being served in time for the hippo's last snort. I'm only half-joking."



Indeed. Kent's Africa proved to be a market winner, and Abercrombie & Kent (the "Abercrombie" is made-up; it sounds tony and lands the company on the first page of the phone directory) is now the colossus of high-end adventure travel, with headquarters in London and Oak Brook, Illinois, forty-five offices around the globe, and a fat catalogue of trips to a hundred different countries. Nearly half the company's business is in customizing trips to the tastes of the client, be it Jimmy Buffett or Jimmy Carter. And A&K has been known to pull out the stops. There was, for instance, the expedition six years ago to the Serengeti Plain in Tanzania. "It was with Prince Charles and the boys [William and Harry]," Kent explains. "We did a walking tour with the Masai. The noted anthropologist Richard Leakey came with us to describe the footprints of man."

Abercrombie & Kent's success has helped breed a new generation of competitors, the best of whom have emulated its exacting attention to clients' wants and needs, but not necessarily in such grand style. For them, quality is not determined so much by material luxury (although that doesn't hurt) but instead by the ability to match the right client with the right adventure, be it "soft"—living like a British lord in the bush—or "hard"—roughing it if necessary in order to experience wilderness or indigenous culture in a way that few Westerners are privileged to do.

"HEARING A LION SWISH ITS TAIL AGAINST YOUR TENT GIVES YOU SOMETHING GENUINE TO WORRY ABOUT," SAYS EXPLORE'S CHERRI BRIGGS.

"We take people as close to the wilderness as we can without freaking them out," says Cherri Briggs, American impresario behind Explore, Inc. "There is no question that people like to be pushed out of their comfort zone—and we have never had complaints or lawsuits." The 46-year-old blonde adventurer founded her company, which offers guided trips throughout Africa, Australia, and New Zealand, after being pushed out of her own comfort zone 13 years ago, when she broke her neck in a car accident. She emerged physically intact after a year of convalescence, but couldn't return to her successful career in advertising and film production. Instead, she made good on her childhood dream of becoming an explorer of the hard-knuckled old school. (Briggs earned her admission to the prestigious Explorers Club by completing the first documented descent of Mozambique's Lugenda River.) Explore, Inc. became a way to indulge her own wanderlust and to give her clients a taste of something primal and beautiful—the best way, she figures, to win over people of means to the cause of preserving Africa (to date, she says, her clients have contributed about half a million dollars to conservationist causes). "You have these corporately owned luxury camps popping up all over, especially southern Africa," she says. "It is a great product, but the experience is

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of the Kuna Indians, but only about ten percent of the islands—many of which are no bigger than a putting green—are inhabited. I was met at the airport on Achutupu (which has since closed; visitors now fly into Ailigandí) by Yari De La Ossa, an attractive young Kuna woman who runs the Dolphin Island Lodge on nearby Uaguitupu. It's a quick ride over in an open boat and it only took me a few minutes to settle into one of the resort's nine thatched-roof huts. I threw open the doors, looked out at the glassy sea ten feet off my back porch, and immediately decided that I was overdue for some snorkeling. De La Ossa called a boatman and we sped off to a nearby coral reef. Drifting through the underworld, as green and relaxing as an apple martini, I gazed at a bashful anemone and rubbernecked at passing schools of parrotfish and angelfish.

With about 70,000 members, the Kuna are Panama's second-largest and best-organized tribe. They originally lived throughout Darién, but because of conflicts with the Spanish they gradually migrated to the San Blás islands, where they were able to live in relative autonomy. In the early 20th century, the Panamanian government attempted to take control of the Kuna's land and met strong resistance. In 1925, the tribe staged a successful rebellion and won nation-within-a-nation status, which remains in effect today.

Signs of the Kuna's pride in heritage were everywhere as I walked down the unpaved streets of Ailigandí, a densely populated island where portraits of Kuna revolutionary leaders decorate the town hall. Women adorned their faces with a black line that ran from their foreheads to the tip of their noses. Many wore bands of beads around their ankles and wrists and short-sleeved blouses with *molas*, a colorful reverse-appliqué textile, which the Kuna have made for centuries.

I stopped by a school that teaches girls to stitch molas and boys to carve calabashes. There I found one of the "white Indians" that adventurer Richard Marsh had been looking for—that is, an albino boy. The Kuna have the highest incidence of albinism in the world. In 1924, Marsh dressed up a few albino Kuna in Western clothes and took them on a tour of the United States. They may have been an oddity in New York, but the Kuna regard albinos as gifted "children of the moon," and many of them become community leaders.

Along with traditional outfits, I also saw kids in baggy jeans, a young man with rouged cheeks and earrings, and lots of people—young and old—playing basketball. As in my TriBeCa, New York, neighborhood, Kuna teenagers in the San Blás worship NBA players, and many have names like Barkley, Iverson, and Magic.

There are only a few simple hotels in the San Blás (the tribe is so protective of its sovereignty that it is reluctant to take on outside business partners). One of the main industries here is coconuts, and the islands produce around 30 million a year. Despite the fact that the crops are grown and harvested by many independent farmers, the chiefs won't allow growers to undercut one another, so each coconut sold by the Kuna costs the same amount.

The tribal elders worry constantly about cultural encroachment. Miguel Lopez, the 78-year-old *sahila*, or chief, of Ailigandí, told me that he rued the arrival of the washing machine "because now the women don't go down to shore together to talk." Placido Garcia, an elderly *nele*, or healer, on the island of Achutupu, showed me baskets of fragrant leaves that he prescribes to his patients. He still has plenty of customers, he said, but "all of my colleagues are my age. And I don't have an apprentice."

Local wags call the custom-keepers in the San Blás the "Kuna Taliban," but nobody argues that the tribe's politically astute leaders have created a model for native people around the globe. By the time I'd reached the San Blás, I'd given up on the asinine idea of finding a culture untainted by the modern world. In the Kuna, I'd found something better: a people who take what they like from the *wagas* (foreigners) without letting these same people completely overrun their traditions.

On my last night—after a perfect lobster dinner at the Dolphin Island Lodge—Yari De La Ossa invited me to her 30th birthday party. We all gathered in a dirt-floor, thatched-roof shelter without walls. The women wore dressy evening molas, and the men sported trucker caps. They served chips and Old Milwaukee beer. Yari's brother, who was proud of his music collection, slipped an Eminem CD into his boom box. It wasn't what I would have put on, but the Kuna wanted to see me dance. So I took a few steps, trying to remember how Slim Shady looked in the video. I'm sure I looked as ridiculous as the explorer Richard Marsh spinning around his Victrola in front of the Emberá back in 1924. But the Kuna were amused. ■

The New Adventure Class

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completely canned." Instead, Briggs' lodge-based trips make use of small, privately owned camps; on the mobile safaris, clients sleep in luxury tents on the ground, not on elevated platforms out of harm's way. "I know what it's like to hear a lion swish its tail against the side of a tent," she says. "You think you're going to die. It gives you something genuine to worry about, as opposed to the stock market. It really puts you in touch with the natural world. You, too, are food."

Briggs hastens to add that she's never lost a client or had one hurt (and that includes the late actor Jack Lemmon and his wife). Explore, Inc. manages to pack in experiences that are distinctly off the beaten safari path—on one trip you canoe down the Lower Zambezi River, dodging elephants along the way—without taking undue risks. Most of the time. "Ninety percent of our trips operate at the highest level of what is considered safe and normal on safari," says Briggs. For clients who are drawn to that other ten percent, she says, "we're happy to take them to the edge." Living nine months of the year in Africa, shuttling between safari and her home base in Maun, Botswana, she feels confident tackling something ambitious like a trek in the Republic of Niger to the Saharan land of the Tuareg tribe, the so-called Blue Men of the Desert (their indigo robes stain their skin). "It's like going to the moon," she says. "It's just a sea of white dunes, then you see a mountain with huge slabs of blue marble in it, or a camel caravan goes by." At $10,000 for a 17-day trip, beauty and a measure of danger and discomfort don't come cheap. "Sand, pup tents, and eating goats," is how Briggs describes it. "And it can be edgy. We've got two guides with AK-47s on the roof of our 4x4 to deal with bandits. Our guys were in the Tuareg rebellion. Of course, so were the bandits."

There is "hard" safari and there's "hard" polar adventure, too. That means dispensing with the sleek Lindblad vessels and opting instead for a classic human sled haul to the North or the South Pole. (Sled dogs are banned in the Antarctic lest they spread disease to the penguin population, and dogsled trips are rarely practicable in the Arctic.) Pen Hadow, 42, a.k.a. "Polar Pen," is the dean of commercial polar guides. In the course of some 25 polar expeditions, he's had his