

African Queen

Cherri Briggs has built a business on making life in the bush exceedingly comfortable for travelers. **by Dena Kaye**



The African bush touches something essential in the spirit that's dormant when you are leading a civilized life," says Cherri Briggs, founder of Explore, Inc., which operates superb custom tours of the continent. "If the planet is a living being, then Africa is its heart." A fearless adventurer, Briggs grew up on an out-of-the-way cattle ranch in Nevada, where she shot

rattlesnakes with a .22 for fun. Christmas vacations, however, were spent at the Ambassador Hotel in Santa Barbara, cocooned in air-conditioning and crisp white sheets. "I am still hooked on extremes," she says, "so I love to give people the experience of visiting one of the most remote places in style."

A graduate of UCLA, where she studied psychological anthropology, Briggs founded Explore in 1992. Her clients have included the Harvard Museum of Natural History, the Smithsonian Institution, the American Museum of

Cherri Briggs, above, leads clients to such places as the Moroccan desert and Singita's exquisite Sweni Lodge, below.



Natural History and private individuals. As a veteran of many Explore adventures, I trust her impeccable taste and ability to organize a trip that suits me and, more important, that expands my vistas. Two hallmarks of Briggs's trips are the contrast and variety within each itinerary and the quality of the guides. My Explore guide in Morocco, Mohamed Zahidi, even managed to have the *International Herald Tribune* delivered to my tent in the Sahara.

What is Africa's hold on you?

"Africa is simply more alive than most places. You feel an intensity that comes from the people and the wilderness. There is a real element of danger as opposed to something imposed on you by culture, like a scary movie. Americans live too much in their heads, their bank accounts and television. In Africa, nature is still in charge, and no one leaves without feeling it. Even the most structured executive feels awed and reduced to innocence by the sight of a pride of lions hunting in the moonlight."

What separates your company from others that book Africa?

"First, for the past thirteen years, I have been based there; and for nine months a year, I travel around Africa, obsessed with finding new places and making sure the old ones are still great. Most of the African travel business has been bought up by huge companies that have affiliate camps. We like small owner-run camps, which have much more character and give you genuine personal attention. Second, we do 100 percent custom itineraries. If you send only 300 guests a year, as we do, it's possible. For example, if a place

In an Explorer's Expert Opinion

FAVORITE SPOTS TO WOW THE SEEN-IT-ALL CLIENT

"For wild Africa and game viewing,

remote parts of Tanzania, like the Ruaha, Katavi and Mahale national parks; you can see lesser kudu in Ruaha and chimps in Mahale. Zambia, because it is less developed and has the wildlife-rich Busanga Plains, the stunning lower Zambezi River and North Luangwa National Park. In Mozambique you have Niassa Reserve, among the largest areas of untouched wilderness in Africa, and Bazaruto Archipelago, with white sand beaches, diving and great hotels—and you can ride horses in the ocean. And then there is Niger's Ténéré desert, with pink sand dunes, and Tigidit Cliffs, which have rock paintings from prehistoric cultures and fossils."

FAVORITE LUXE HOTELS "Mena House Oberoi, in Cairo; Singita Lebombo Lodge, in South Africa; and Ellerman House, in Cape Town. But I also love a luxury mobile camp far from everyone."

FAVORITE SHOPPING PLACES "In Johannesburg, Art Africa has wonderful things made in the townships. The African Trading Store, in Singita Lebombo, is the most beautiful store I've seen in Africa. I love the markets in Marrakech and Cairo, the silver jewelry and swords in Niger, the python skins and ancient Bedouin wedding headdresses in the souk in Khartoum. Jewelry and textiles, like work by the Venda people of South Africa, are presents that pack easily."

"We are in touch with people on the ground in the countries where we operate. We get information that is not generated by the media. In Niger, for instance, we travel with two army guys with AK-47s on top of the car—not because of terrorism, just because of the bandits. And our guys probably know the bandits, because they were all in the army together. You have to know and go with the locals."

What would be a great honeymoon or a first-time trip to Africa?

"Go to Kenya or Tanzania, where you can see the animals and migration; then to the Seychelles for romance, over-the-top hotels

is spectacular but no one goes there, we create a way to go in comfort. The Eden-like Okavango Delta, in Botswana, is a far more pristine experience in your own private mobile camp—with tents, tent bathrooms and your own staff—than in a fixed camp. Third, guides can make or break a trip, and now we even have scientists leading some of our special trips, like Katy Payne, who is an expert on elephant communication."

Which areas in Africa are your specialties?

"Everything in Africa that is not in political turmoil, making it unpleasant or unsafe to travel there. In the north we organize trips in Mali, Morocco, Ethiopia, Egypt and Niger. We are the only American tour operator in the Sudan; we visit the Sudanese pyramids. For people who want to be pampered and are interested in fine hotels, the standards in South Africa are the best on the continent if not in the world. The emphasis is on comfort as opposed to wilderness, but you still see plenty of animals. For 'real' Africa, we go to Botswana, Zambia, Namibia or the remote parts of Tanzania."

How do you deal with people's fears of terrorism?

and white sand beaches; or to Zanzibar to sail in your own private dhow, the traditional Arab sailboat. South Africa also has cushy lodging and great animals, and you can combine those with beaches, plus Cape Town for sophisticated city life."

Which destination do you think is most underrated?

"Morocco. It is relatively affordable, an easy flight from New York, friendly, and you have extreme diversity. In one day you could be in the rose gardens in Marrakech, then go up to the High Atlas Mountains, and after that you could spend the night in a tented camp in the Sahara."

What is your favorite "non-animal" trip?

"I love Niger, with the Tuareg nomads—the Blue Men of the Desert. They are among the last really nomadic people in the Sahara; theirs is a vanishing culture. In January or February, we sponsor a traditional camel festival and a huge feast there."

Do you have any rituals when you are on the continent?

"Drinking Champagne when the sun goes down."

What was your most magical moment?

"I was driving alone in an open Land Rover in a remote part of the Okavango Delta. Suddenly I found myself surrounded by a breeding herd of 200 to 300 nervous elephants. This can be very dangerous. I turned off the motor. A young mom and baby right next to my car were flapping their ears, and the matriarchs were trumpeting. Bad signs. So I talked to them quietly, told them how pretty the babies were, and I sang songs. They reacted to my tone of voice and chilled out in about fifteen minutes and just got used to me. I watched them for a few hours. Then I was allowed to leave."

What are up-and-coming destinations?

"There are two recent additions to our agenda. Gabon, in west-central Africa, may be the continent's most beautiful country. It has thirteen new national parks with great game watching: gorillas, chimps, elephants walking on the beach. Libya, which Americans can now visit, has Roman ruins along the coast, and cliffs, dunes, rock art and Bedouin culture down south." ❖

Contact Explore at 888-596-6377; www.exploreafrica.net.

Packing for an Adventure: Tips From a Pro

NON-CLOTHING ESSENTIALS "I take a Surefire flashlight, Swarovski binoculars, polarized sunglasses and the prescription antibiotic Cipro. If I'm going somewhere

remote, I take a Motorola satellite phone, and if it's really remote, a GPS (Global Positioning System) so I can tell the helicopter exactly where to land by making a simple phone call."

WARDROBE ADVICE "Be practical; take very little. All you really need is a Mountain Hardwear jacket, a sweater, a tank top, a long-sleeved shirt, a few T-shirts, two pairs of shorts, a pair of pants, good shoes, sunscreen, a bathing suit and a hat that won't blow off. If I pack fancy clothes, I never wear them."

FAVORITE KIND OF SUITCASE "I always use a soft bag with pockets on the sides that help divide things like underwear and dirty clothes. Good zippers are critical. Eagle Creek makes great bags, and Kipling bags are inexpensive, good-looking and strong."