

TRUTH IN TRAVEL

CONDÉ NAST

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# Traveler

DOLOMITES • OKINAWA • PARIS • TANZANIA • VIENNA • MEXICO CITY





Our group at  
&Beyond's  
Serengeti Under  
Canvas camp,  
where dinners  
are often served  
alfresco.

# The Experience Makers

-2015-

Sometimes even the well-traveled call on the pros for help—editor in chief **Pilar Guzmán's** expertly crafted East African safari is proof of the power of a great travel specialist. Whether your dream trip involves horseback riding in Argentina or the best *kaiseki* in Kyoto, these are the experience makers we trust to put together the perfect journey.

**W**illem,” our guide Matthew Laizer at the Singita Grumeti game reserve whispered, while closing his hand as if to pull taffy. My eight-year-old son responded instantly by sitting down and quieting his twitchy limbs. We had discovered early in our nine-day journey from the Serengeti Plains in Tanzania to the Maasai Mara in Kenya that a guide gauges an animal's receptivity to close observation through near imperceptible clues—a depression in the grass, a confrontational gaze. And with much the same acuity, we had begun to decode the nuances of our guide's expression, pace, and hand gestures. ¶ “I didn't like the way he was looking at Willem,” Laizer explained. Willem had stood up suddenly to take a photo, catching a young male lion's attention—and, it seems, disrupting an unspoken covenant of safari protocol. In the days before, we had come close enough to touch prides of 14 and 20 lions varying in age, gender, and state of hunger throughout Singita's pristine 350,000-acre concession without inciting even the flick of an ear. This particular “teen,” according to Laizer, might have mistaken Willem for a baby wildebeest. “I feel this lion has a bit of an attitude,” he said matter-of-factly. “Even the lioness in the same pride doesn't trust him with her littlest cubs. See how she keeps turning around?” The animals, accustomed to being observed, view the vehicle and its passengers as a single entity. Once humans exceed its fragile perimeter, they, like any other moving mammal, become recognizable as prey. (Not surprisingly, when I looked back at Willem, he had moved to the center seat, where he would sit on his hands for the remainder of the drive.) ¶ We had arranged to go on safari with another family over our sons' spring break. I wish I could say that I had planned the entire itinerary by trolling blogs and social feeds and cobbling together tidbits from my most well-traveled friends, as I have for so many other trips in my life. Or that it was easy for me to



relinquish control to an expert. But the truth is, there are some trips that we simply can't—or shouldn't—plan on our own, and a safari is one of them. Especially with an eight-year-old in tow. Thankfully, Cheri Briggs of Explore has relationships with local operators and governments and deep knowledge of this part of East Africa. She made our nine-day, two-country, five-lodge, three-charter-flight adventure not only possible but seamless. (The only thing she blanched at was that our vacation wasn't longer.) Briggs was one of the few people I spoke with who didn't think eight was too young for this kind of trip.

There are obvious reasons for taking your child to East Africa (total nature immersion; exposure to a wildly different culture), but it is the unscripted life lessons that linger. Feeling the sting of insignificance—rare in this age of narcissism—while observing the migration of 1.5 million wildebeests. Digesting the necessary cruelty of the hyena kill. Making sense of the near inconsolable sadness you feel after spending a carefree afternoon playing soccer with kids your own age in a local school, and realizing that most of them were running around shoeless. Instilling unteachable virtues, such as patience, that aren't really a choice but rather the price of admission for this level of proximity to wild animals. Up before dawn and still roaming after dark, we logged 12 hours a day in trucks, at times waiting long stretches for a mother cheetah to signal to her two cubs that the coast was clear and that it was safe for them to eat. Rather than fill the void with social media's continuous self-reference, children and adults alike sat still without the repeat validation of the smartphone swipe.

At &Beyond's Serengeti Under Canvas, a dreamy semi-permanent tented camp in Serengeti National Park that moves with the



**Clockwise from left:** Willem and a friend bird-watching near &Beyond's Serengeti Under Canvas camp; spotting cheetahs on a game drive; dining in the shade of an acacia tree.

migratory herds, we were lucky enough to spend our first two days with an expert wildlife guide, Anthony Kivuyo, and the company's regional director, Niall Anderson. Both are passionate birders, and showed us how to track and identify birds with names like blacksmith lapwing and yellow-throated sandgrouse, and in so doing helped deemphasize the primacy of the Big Five. I came to feel that a great guide is like the coach who convinces your kid that defense is as important as offense, that it's not just about the big cats but about the hundreds of plumed species which require careful observation. (My son, months after our trip, still draws pictures of the secretary bird and the superb starling alongside an elephant, and all, I might add, at the same scale.)

**B**ut it's the four-inch keloid scar on the back of our guide Laizer's neck that Willem still tells his friends about. A Maasai warrior turned guide and conservationist, Laizer filled some of the wait time (we watched a young bumbling male cheetah, still under his mother's tutelage, try to track a Thomson's gazelle) with the details of his life. In this case, he described a botched lion slaying when he was 15, at the time a boy's rite of passage in the Maasai tradition, as well as his ongoing campaign to help educate the girls in his community and protect them against genital mutilation. Laizer's dual citizenship within Western and Maasai cultures, a constant wrestling



between modernity and tradition, was fodder for much discussion. Once, returning home after a long stretch at Singita, he was physically—and embarrassingly—unable to swallow his father’s traditional cow’s blood offering. My son still asks me, “How many days does it take Matthew to get to his village from Singita?” Three. Almost a full day on a bus, followed by two days on foot, traversing the wild so he can visit with relatives along the way.

On our last night, as I lay awake in the dark with my son in our airy canvas tent at Mara Plains Camp, sited on a densely forested bend in a river in the Olare Motorogi Conservancy, I thought about all we’d packed into just over a week, thanks in no small part to easy plane transfers and expert planning. With grunting hippos and hissing cats providing a sound track by turns lulling and haunting, I realized that true adventure lies in that butterfly-bellied dream state where beauty and just-outside-your-comfort-zone fear intersect. ♦

## The Pros We Use

Because when you outsource the logistics, the only thing *you* have to worry about is ... absolutely nothing.

### Africa

#### EAST AFRICA Linda Friedman Custom Safaris

Friedman has three decades of bespoke safari experience, arranging visits to local Maasai villages and booking top-flight camps like Angama Mara.

#### William Jones

*Journeys by Design*  
His adventure trips take in Africa’s extreme corners, like Ethiopia and northern Kenya.

#### Ian Proctor

*Ultimate Africa Safaris*  
Proctor spends three months a year reviewing safari camps around Africa to make sure they’re up to snuff for clients.

#### Nina Wennersten and Daniel Saperstein Hippo Creek Safaris

This family company tailors trips to specific interests, with private feedings in animal orphanages and stargazing at remote bush camps.

#### FAMILY SAFARIS Cherri Briggs

*Explore*  
Part explorer, part family shrink, Briggs spends half the year researching camps across the continent to determine which are best for families and just grownups.

#### Ryan Hilton

*AuthentEscapes*  
This former family guide sniffs out family-friendly lodges and kids-only game drives across Africa.

#### SOUTHERN AFRICA Julian Harrison

*Premier Tours*  
An expert in game movement, Harrison knows

which times of year are best for maximizing wildlife spotting opportunities.

#### Mark Nolting

*Africa Adventure Company*  
Nolting has literally written the book on the optimal times of year to see the Great Serengeti migration in Tanzania: His game guide is now in its sixth edition.

#### Phoebe B. Weinberg

*Greatways Travel*  
Weinberg not only knows the safari camp to go to but the exact room to book.

#### TUNISIA

#### Jerry Sorkin TunisUSA

Has 20-plus years of North Africa experience, closely tracks the security situation, and connects guests to leading diplomats, politicians, and academics.

### Asia

#### BURMA

#### Tyler Dillon

*Butterfield & Robinson*  
Dillon gets travelers beyond the typical tourist sites to places like Pyathatgyi Temple and Kuthodaw Pagoda.

#### CENTRAL ASIA

#### Jonny Bealby

*Wild Frontiers*  
Can arrange yurt sleepovers in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, and trips to see dinosaur footprints in Turkmenistan.

#### Zulya Rajabova

*Silk Road Treasure Tours*  
An Uzbek native, she can arrange overnights with nomadic families, knows which local festivals are worth a visit, and has a network of excellent guides.

**“GONE ARE THE DAYS THAT YOU CAN JUST SHOW UP—UNLESS YOU LIKE STANDING IN LINES.”**

—DISNEY SPECIALIST  
SUSAN KELLY

#### CHINA

#### David Allardice

*Eastern Journeys*  
Plans visits to major cities and to emerging regions like Shanxi and Yunnan.

#### Gerald Hatherly

*Abercrombie & Kent*  
With a particular expertise in Chinese art/archaeology, he can gain access to private collections across China.

#### Mei Zhang

*WildChina*  
Unique-access tours through her homeland have included champagne picnics on the Great Wall and dinners with artist Ai Weiwei at his home.

#### HIMALAYAS

#### Sanjay Saxena

*Destination Himalaya*  
This former mountain guide designs action-packed trekking itineraries through India, Nepal, and Tibet and also plans trips to Sri Lanka.

#### INDIA

#### Lucy Davison

*Banyan Tours*  
With eight offices across India, she crafts experiences that less-connected agents can’t, like a private dinner in a royal palace.

