Visionaries who harness the power of travel to make a difference

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AFRICAN BUSH CAMPS
Beks Ndlovu

The boundary-breaking founder of an up-and-coming safari lodge company brings travelers closer to the natural beauty of his homeland.

The first elephants Beks Ndlovu ever tracked were the ones he found in his mother's banana grove. The day he saw them—15 in all—Ndlovu, the CEO of Zimbabwe-based African Bush Camps, was 10 years old. "There was a drought that year, and wild animals had begun to creep over from nearby Hwange National Park to ransack gardens in Ndlovu's village near Hwange Town. "My family and I were bunging pots and pans to chase the elephants out of our garden," recalls Ndlovu, 41. "When they left, I followed them for over three miles into the middle of the bush and got within 40 yards of the herd. A mother elephant turned around, and I thought she was going to charge. I remember taking off running until I got home. At that point I thought, 'Wow, this is quite an adventure.'"

Several years later, that first thrilling elephant chase turned into a career. Today, Hwange National Park is the site of Somalisa, the flagship of African Bush Camps' 11-property collection. Founded in 2006, Somalisa gives guests the chance to see the same kinds of elephant herds Ndlovu followed in his youth. Ndlovu's reason for building a camp near his village is clear. He intends to create a mutually beneficial relationship between tourism and the landscape he grew up in. That's why he launched the African Bush Camps Foundation concurrently with his first safari camp. For every night's stay, $10 goes toward community projects, scholarships for 300 children, and building programs and small-business loans for local entrepreneurs. As one of the few black lodge owners in Africa, Ndlovu knows he is a role model. He started at the bottom of the ladder in the safari world, spending his school holidays chopping firewood and extinguishing lanterns. He worked his way up to become a guide for Wilderness Safaris and other companies, and eventually started his own private guiding company. Then he founded African Bush Camps. It was a trial he had to blaze on his own. At the time, he didn't know a single black African who owned a safari company.

This year, African Bush Camps has served more than 1,000 guests at its camps in Zambia, Zimbabwe, and Botswana. "There aren't many black CEOs or safari camp owners, so there's often a double take when I show up," says Ndlovu. "Being able to deliver consistently is what's allowed me to organically grow the business."

Wildlife sightings on an African Bush Camps safari are likely to include elephants, wildebeests, buffalos, giraffes, lions, hyenas, antelopes, and rhinos.
Helen Hill

The tourism expert helped turn South Carolina's largest city into an internationally acclaimed destination.

that Helen Hill, the CEO of the Charleston Area Convention and Visitors Bureau, wants to tell.

"The reality is, we have a lot of history in Charleston that's not pretty," Hill says. "We're not selling a version of the Old South in hoop skirts. We are a real place, and we want to show visitors who we really are."

Contemporary Charleston has several draws: a flourishing food scene with nationally known chefs such as Mike Lata and Sean Brock; swimmable beaches near downtown; boutique shops and hotels that have updated the city's style ante in recent years.

And then there are the city's darker sides, which Hill doesn't shy away from. That might mean walking visitors through Boone Hall Plantation to share with them the daily lives of slaves. Or encouraging them to visit Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church, the site of the 2015 shooting in which nine people were killed by a white supremacist gunman, a tragedy that, Hill affirms, brought the community closer in striving for racial harmony.

Hill's approach is working. Charleston attracts more than 5 million visitors a year. Most tourists used to come from within a six-hour drive, but now, thanks to improved air service, the top source of visitors is New York City. And one thing never changes. Hill says: "We have great people in Charleston. They still stop in the street to give you directions."

Downtown Charleston is a window into colonial America: cobblestone streets, jasmine-scented alleyways, antebellum buildings no taller than the church steeples that dot the city. But that charming veneer is only one piece of the story.

Perhaps it's Jonathan Tisch's lifelong involvement in hospitality that has made him such a champion of it. The CEO and chairman of Loews Hotels & Co. grew up in the Loews Regency in New York City, doing odd jobs alongside the staff. Those days in his family's hotel showed him the power of travel to make the world—and the economy—better, creating jobs, and, perhaps more important, making even more destinations worth visiting.

"The travel and tourism industry is the largest employer in the world, and in our country alone, there are close to 15 million direct and indirect jobs in travel and tourism," Tisch says.

Tisch has made plenty of direct impact on the travel industry through Loews, which now runs 24 hotels across the country. But his indirect impact has been even more profound. In 2016, New York University honored his years of support by putting his name on the Jonathan M. Tisch Center for Hospitality and Tourism, a key incubator for future leaders in the field. He has served as the head of the U.S. Travel Association, a nonprofit group that supports the growth of the U.S. travel industry, and has met with many members of Congress to help them understand how many people's livelihoods depend on travel.

"It all comes back to the humanity of travel," Tisch says. "These men and women have made a decision to work in the largest industry in the world, and we have a responsibility to help them take care of their families and grow their careers. We can do better for them, and we can do more."
Ruben Caldwell, Jou-Yie Chou, Leigh Salem & Brian Smith

The innovative team designs lodgings that tell their own stories and resonate with a creative-class clientele.

Scribner’s Catskill Lodge is one of the most stylish new arrivals in the bucolic mountains of upstate New York. But beyond the 38-room lodge’s sleek wood floors and handmade leather chairs, there are quirksthat evoke the building’s 1960s past: a mirror on the ceiling of one of the bedrooms, an enormous deer head mounted on the wall in Prospect, the lodge’s restaurant. Scribner’s is a prime example of what Studio Tack does so well. The Brooklyn-based design and development group’s nine hotels are the just-right retreats you want to keep in your back pocket for a weekend getaway. Many of them are repurposed buildings in cool destinations (Lake Tahoe; Jackson, Wyoming) and occasionally unexpected ones (Saratoga Springs, New York; the Delaware shore). They’re affordable and intimate, have handsome public spaces, and always tell a story about their locations.

“There’s some sort of significance to all of our projects, whether it’s architectural, cultural, or geographic,” says Jou-Yie Chou, one of Studio Tack’s four partners. “It would be hard to produce anywhere else.” Chou joined forces with Leigh Salem, Brian Smith, and Ruben Caldwell in 2013 to complete their first hotel project, the 16-room Dogfish Inn in Delaware, commissioned by the Dogfish Head brewery as a place for visitors to sleep post-imbibing. Since then, the team has sharpened its approach with each new project, creating lodgings that appeal to a young and urban creative class.

“We’re always trying to dive into what the story is about the people who will be using the place and how it fits with the local vibe,” says Caldwell.
Situated at the base of South Lake Tahoe's Heavenly Mountain, the spare but snappy Coachman, stocked with cozy Woolrich blankets and high-end Frette linens, is a nod to the resort's midcentury roots. The Brentwood Hotel, a former motor lodge in Saratoga Springs, New York, is a 12-room retreat next to a famous horse-racing track. Country-style flourishes such as gilt antique mirrors and vintage oil paintings channel the town's old-world charm.

The Arvil Hotel in Jackson, Wyoming, with its rustic, Shaker-inspired interiors and iron bed frames, might best be labeled "lumberjack chic." The main idea, though, Chou explains, is that guests should feel inspired to escape into their surroundings. "We love for people to go to these properties and have an amazing time, enjoy being there, and use them as a base to go explore the area. That's really what it's all about."

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Abby Falik

The visionary entrepreneur bridges education and travel for students across the nation.

...where they live with host families and apprentice with a wide range of local organizations, such as schools, agricultural cooperatives, and government ministries of education and health. Most students have graduated from high school, have been accepted into college, and are deferring entry for a year. She calls her program a "bridge year," one that can teach kids the rich lessons of travel.

"It's a new on-ramp into college that helps kids develop empathy, creativity, and an entrepreneurial spirit," Falik says. "These are things you can't learn in a classroom."

Since its inception, Global Citizen Year has accepted 600 students, and in 2017, the number of participants jumped from 100 to 150.

"There's a growing recognition that lives are getting longer," Falik says, "and that college is crammed against the front end of a person's life before they have opportunities to explore and figure out who they are and what they're about."

Seven years in, Falik already sees the huge impact Global Citizen Year has made on program alumni such as Aimi Hanna, who spent a year in a rural village in Senegal when she was 18. Within that year, her host sister, who was also 18, was married off to a man she had never met and was halfway through her first pregnancy by the time Hanna returned home. The experience inspired Hanna to become passionate about family planning and sexual health and to pursue a post-college career as a doula.

Falik's long-term vision is to grow her organization to the size and impact of Teach for America or the Peace Corps. In the meantime, Global Citizen Year's biggest hurdle is to make the bridge year a normal and accessible part of the U.S. education system. "I want us to reach a point," Falik says, "where you feel left out if you don't do it."

More than 50 percent of Global Citizen Year's students are people of color, 80 percent receive financial aid, and a third are granted full scholarships.
Glen Fu & Zoey Zuo
The couple founded a travel outfitter that's changing the way Chinese travelers see the world.

In 2003, Glen Fu organized the first-ever extended trip of the travel club at Shanghai University of Finance and Economics: a 48-day journey to Tibet. Only one other student signed up: Zoey Zuo. But it was the start of something.

Wheeler, Fu and Zuo, along with their staff, test all their itineraries before they offer them. They've focused on creating affordable, small-group trips for travelers ages 16 to 45. They started by leading trips within China and found an eager audience: 54Traveler has had 40 percent revenue growth every year since 2007. And as of 2015, when the company finally obtained its government license to organize international trips—a process begun in 2007—is outbound business has doubled annually. Now they visit 18 countries, including Russia, Myanmar, Iran, Jordan, Sri Lanka, and Iceland. In Morocco—54’s most popular destination in 2017—the itinerary includes camel rides deep into the desert, a visit to a local date market, and a meal in a Berber family home. In Jordan, travelers take a city walk with a local in Amman, visit with Bedouins in their tents in Wadi Rum, and experience Petra by moonlight. The trips closer to home are just as eye-opening: One China itinerary takes travelers to a mountain village in Qinghai Province and includes a stay in a Muslim home. Another involves a visit to a remote monastery in the Qilian Mountains, where guests spend time with a monk and learn about his beliefs and daily routines. “Many of our guests come from very big cities, such as Beijing and Shanghai,” Zuo says. “Most of them have never been to such remote areas—they usually don’t even know these kinds of places exist in China.”

Adds Fu: “We like to change how our clients see the world. That’s really what inspires and encourages us to do what we do.”
Azamara Club Cruises

Larry Pimentel

The head of Azamara Club Cruises was a leader in bringing experiences to the fore of his cruise line—and the cruise industry.

A four-hour drive into the Omani desert delivers guests to a Bedouin camp in the middle of nowhere. The Bedouin hosts will cook local dishes using vegetables the guests have never tasted, play instruments they’ve never heard, and spend time with them by a roaring fire and under the stars late into the night. Then guests will sleep in tents amid a sea of undulating sand dunes.

It’s not what you’d expect as part of a typical night on a cruise. But shaking things up is exactly the point, according to Larry Pimentel, the president and CEO of Azamara Club Cruises.

“We specialize in destination immersion. That is our whole reason for existing,” Pimentel says. “Our one major goal is to connect guests to the places they visit.”

In 2010, when Azamara Club Cruises launched, the cruise industry had a reputation for off-the-shelf excursions. Azamara Club Cruises offers smaller ships—two vessels carrying 690 passengers each—that can reach smaller ports, such as Bangkok or Bordeaux. Guests can also stay longer in those ports, where they enjoy exclusive experiences: something as elaborate as an opera performance by a trio of tenors in Livorno, Italy, or as simple as a meal at the hole-in-the-wall that serves the best souvlaki in Athens, Greece.

Pimentel didn’t even think he liked cruising when he joined the industry in 1989, after selling his Hawaii-based tour company to Expedia. “When I first got to the cruise world, my perception was that they were exceptional at delivering food and terrible at delivering the destination,” he says. “They were too focused on material luxury such as fine china and high-thread-count sheets and not focused enough on what the great value in travel was.”

Before joining Azamara in 2009, Pimentel cofounded SeaDream Yacht Club and served as president and CEO of Curad Line. At Azamara Club Cruises, Pimentel has overseen the addition of more than 1,000 new experiences this year alone. Plans for future pre- and post-cruise offerings include a trip on the iconic Venice Simplon-Orient-Express train that travels between London and Venice.

“At the end of the day,” Pimentel says, “we’re not selling cruises. We’re selling experiences that allow guests to evolve and grow.”

Pimentel’s destination-focused formula has attracted a new clientele. About one-fifth of Azamara Club Cruises’ guests have never been on a cruise ship before.