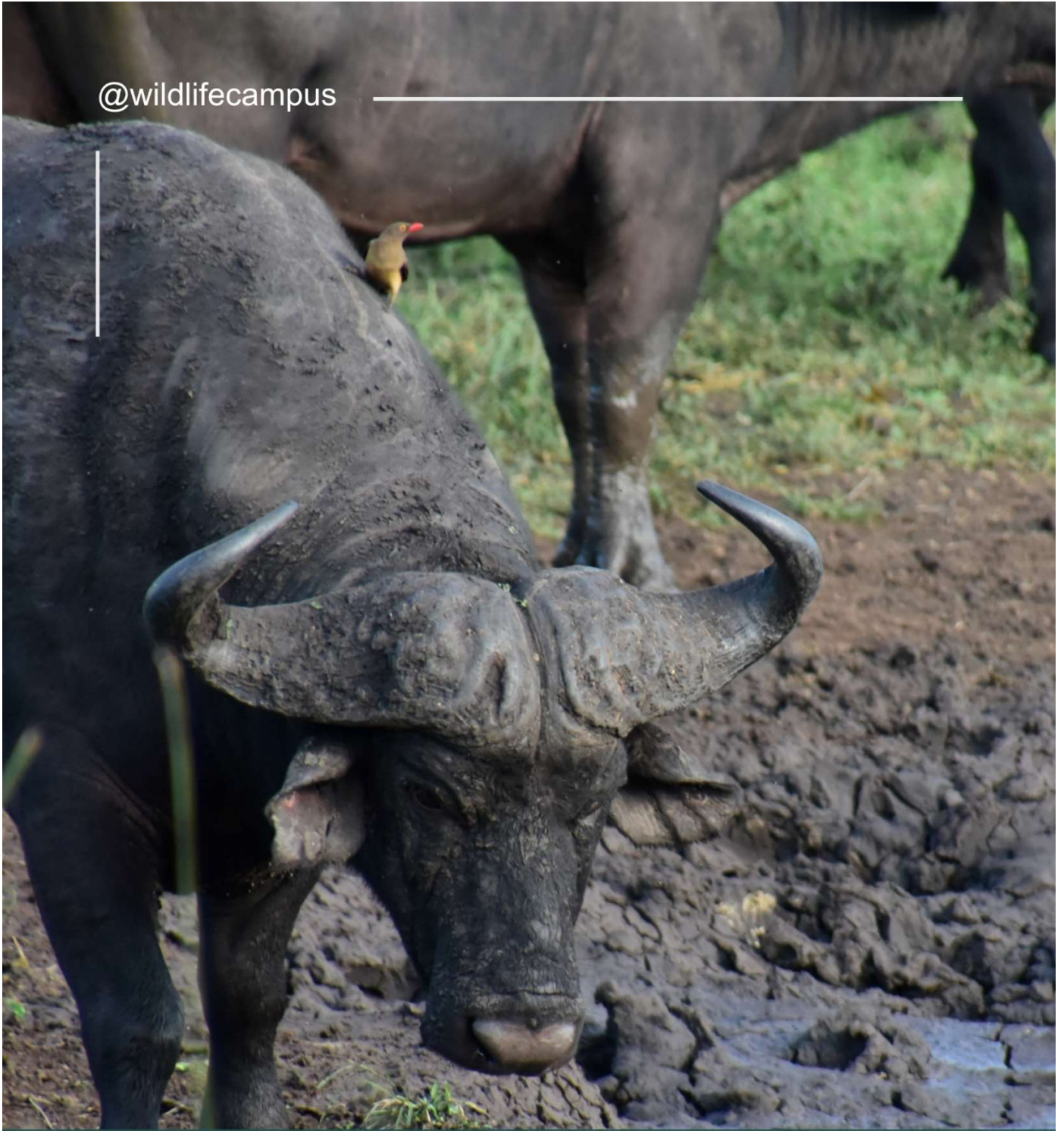


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The guide's guide to guiding

By Garth Thompson



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Introduction to Guiding

Dedication

I dedicate this course to Dave Rushworth, under whom I was apprenticed. I could never have wished to learn from a better naturalist. I have yet to meet anyone with so much time for his fellow man and understanding of all things wild.



by Garth Thompson

Introduction

This course is a tribute to the guides of Africa, past, present, and future. I trust that some of the lessons I have learnt over the years will be of benefit to you and that they will assist in giving the most important person to our industry, the tourist, a better safari experience. Without the tourist, there would be very few national parks and safari companies. You and I would be employed in another profession. It is the tourists who come to us with their desires and expectations. Do we fulfil them?

I sadly confess that, in over 30 years of active guiding, I have broken many rules in the '**principles of guiding**', something of which I am not at all proud. As you read the words of this course, I trust that you will be able to learn from my mistakes and avoid having to follow the same path.

Guiding is much like politics and religion. There are basic principles, but many varied opinions and different viewpoints. I am sure that much could be added to this course with the input of many other learned guides.

Indeed, some may not agree with all that I have written, but the object of this course is to present a few thoughts, ideas, and lessons to those who are starting out in this exciting occupation.

May you enjoy this privileged profession as much as I have. I trust that you will reap the great rewards that it has to offer, in particular those of a closer understanding and connection with wildlife and nature, as well as peace of mind, camaraderie and fulfilment from sharing with our fellow man all that our incredible continent has to offer.

Garth Thompson
Harare, Zimbabwe 2012



Foreword

When I first met Garth in 1982, he was working at Hwange Safari Lodge as a professional guide. It was the first of what was to become my annual safari pilgrimage to Africa, leading groups from the Calgary Zoo travel program.

Garth was young, keen, and energetic: he had all the necessary behavioural traits that would eventually lead to his remarkable success in his field. On that first trip to Zimbabwe, he represented my first contact with a full-time 'professional naturalist guide'. I must say, after enjoying a dozen Zimbabwe safaris utilizing Garth's professional guiding services, he has set a standard that I have used as a measuring stick for nature interpretation all over the world.

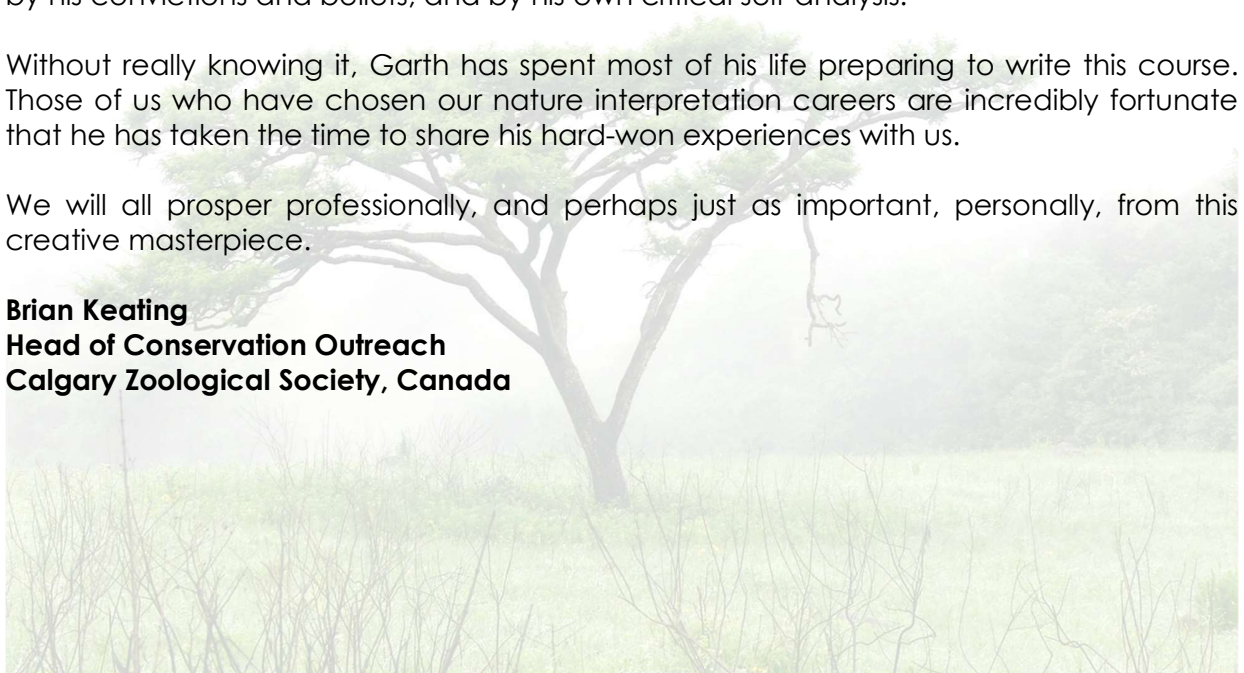
Not only is his plant and animal taxonomic knowledge extensive, but his comprehension of the ecological web and our place in it is profound. Knowledge, however, is a baseline tool that would serve no function had he not honed his own skills to transmit this information. And merely being a good storyteller is not enough, even with the appropriate knowledge base. Garth has a unique gift that has enabled him to weave his sensitivity of his guests' needs with the interpretive opportunities of a wilderness environment. He is continually questioning the complexity of the natural world around him, always challenging his own intellect and that of his peers and guests. Like a construction engineer, he builds upon this foundation of knowledge and utilizes an almost poetic form of storytelling to share his understanding of the natural world with the people around him.

As a naturalist, he is ever keen and enquiring. As a storyteller, he is a master. As an advocate for the natural world, Planet Earth has no better friend. And now as an author, you have no better teacher. Drink in his words, as they are written by one who has lived by his convictions and beliefs, and by his own critical self-analysis.

Without really knowing it, Garth has spent most of his life preparing to write this course. Those of us who have chosen our nature interpretation careers are incredibly fortunate that he has taken the time to share his hard-won experiences with us.

We will all prosper professionally, and perhaps just as important, personally, from this creative masterpiece.

Brian Keating
Head of Conservation Outreach
Calgary Zoological Society, Canada



Preamble

Ever since I can remember, I wanted to be a game ranger. Not an uncommon desire among the young boys I grew up alongside in what was then Rhodesia. We yearned to swap our confined, concrete classroom for the freedom and adventure of the 'Bush University'!

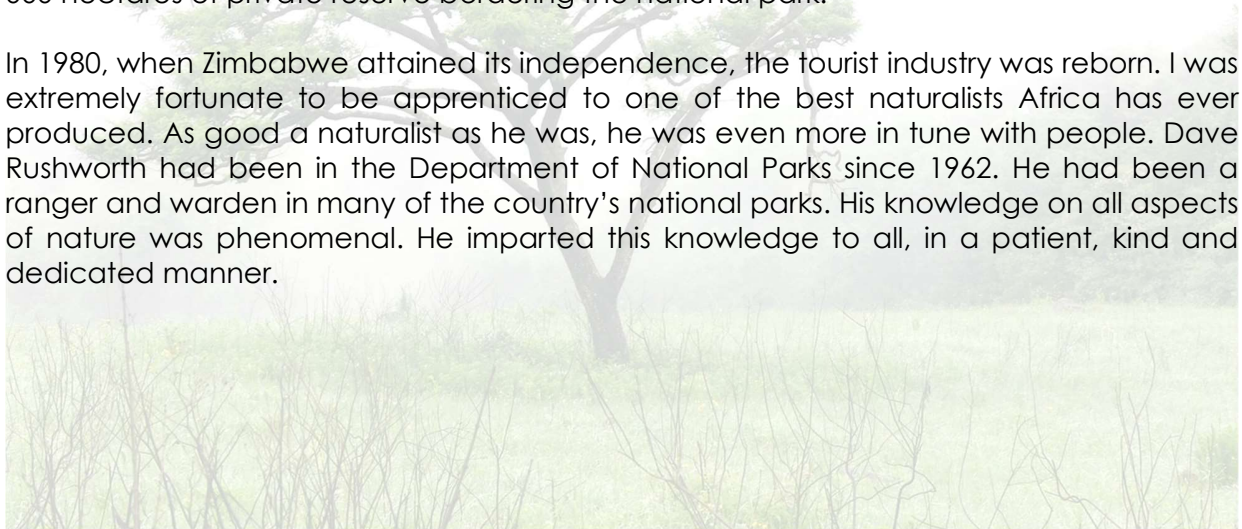
Each year at school when Careers Day came around, I would stand and stare for long periods at the display behind the desk on the Department of National Parks stand. These black and white photos portrayed a band of dedicated men, chasing giraffe across open plains in open short-wheel-base Land Rovers, with the intent to capture and translocate, firing a tranquillizing dart into the rounded rump of a white rhino, teaching wildlife conservation to groups of eager children out in the wild, capturing poachers bent on pillaging our country's national treasures, collecting snares that would inflict pain and suffering on innocent animals, resulting in a torturous death. I collected every pamphlet, brochure, and photocopied sheet available. I took them home and consumed each word with hungry enthusiasm and youthful fantasy!

My brothers and I were very fortunate in that our parents took us camping in the various unspoilt national parks that graced so much of our country. These adventures and the invaluable exposure occurred during most school holidays and over long weekends.

I never realized that my guiding career really started at a young age. I had a yearning desire to explore any new area, wild or tame. I would then share the most scenic parts with family and friends. Growing up in the outer suburbs of what is now Harare, I discovered many little patches of wilderness. When my parents had friends around for afternoon tea over weekends, I was often called upon to take their guests to these various wild places.

So, began a lifetime of guiding people from all corners of the earth. When I had finished my army service, my life-long dream came true: I was employed as the assistant wildlife manager at a lodge adjoining Hwange National Park. The lodge was situated within 30 000 hectares of private reserve bordering the national park.

In 1980, when Zimbabwe attained its independence, the tourist industry was reborn. I was extremely fortunate to be apprenticed to one of the best naturalists Africa has ever produced. As good a naturalist as he was, he was even more in tune with people. Dave Rushworth had been in the Department of National Parks since 1962. He had been a ranger and warden in many of the country's national parks. His knowledge on all aspects of nature was phenomenal. He imparted this knowledge to all, in a patient, kind and dedicated manner.



Dave Rushworth had absolutely no need for money. He was oblivious to time and did not succumb to stress or pressure. He was equally at home with the rich, the poor, old and young alike. He treated all as equals and gave 110 per cent of himself to everyone, all of the time! From Dave, I was fortunate to learn about many aspects of wildlife, but most of all, how to give our guests what they had come on safari for a genuine wildlife experience, and to really feel wanted.

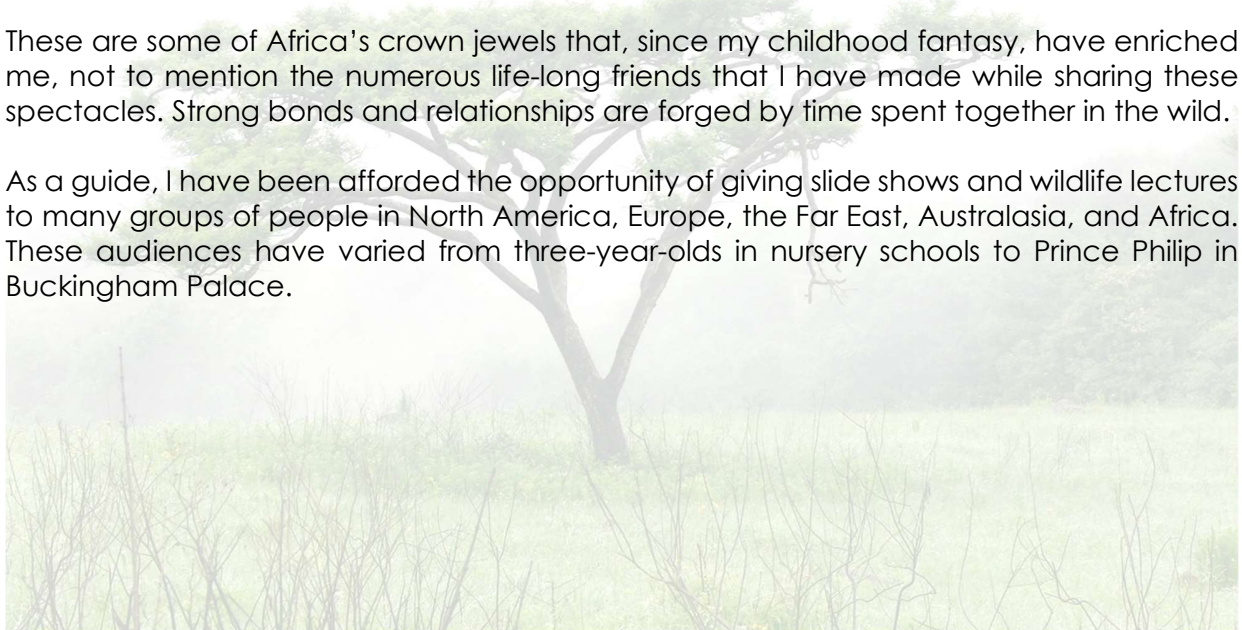
I worked for and learnt from this good man for three years. Dave then departed to manage a park for the king of Swaziland. I was left to step into his huge shoes. A few years later my wife and I were offered a partnership in one of the safari camps bordering Mana Pools National Park in the Zambezi Valley. During the years that we managed our new camp, we also started up a small tour operation to facilitate our bookings. This was to grow and develop into a company arranging itineraries to many of the lodges, camps and safari operations around Zimbabwe and the neighbouring countries. At this time, we started our own canoeing and walking safaris through Mana Pools National Park, a park in which I have had the privilege of sharing incredible scenery and concentrated wildlife with many people of all ages, from many walks of life, nationalities and social standing.

As tour operators, we would annually visit nearly every camp and lodge in Zimbabwe, as well as a number of camps in Botswana, Zambia, and Namibia.

During the last 26 years I have been fortunate to work as a guide in most parks within Zimbabwe, the Okavango Delta in Botswana, the Skeleton Coast and Etosha National parks of Namibia, the Luangwa Valley and Zambezi National Park in Zambia, the Serengeti, Ngorongoro Crater, the Selous and the Mahale Chimpanzee Park in Tanzania, as well as Zanzibar with its cultural history, combined with diving among its rich and diverse underwater gardens. I have climbed to the summit of Africa's highest mountain, Kilimanjaro, seen the wildlife-rich parks of Kenya and been as far afield as the Volcanoes National Park in Rwanda, home to the rare and endangered mountain gorilla.

These are some of Africa's crown jewels that, since my childhood fantasy, have enriched me, not to mention the numerous life-long friends that I have made while sharing these spectacles. Strong bonds and relationships are forged by time spent together in the wild.

As a guide, I have been afforded the opportunity of giving slide shows and wildlife lectures to many groups of people in North America, Europe, the Far East, Australasia, and Africa. These audiences have varied from three-year-olds in nursery schools to Prince Philip in Buckingham Palace.



It has indeed been a privilege to be a guide in Africa. I sincerely hope that those of us who are involved in this profession appreciate how fortunate we are to be paid to experience and share with our fellow men - who come from so many different parts of the world, have varied cultures, and are interesting and diverse personalities - all that Africa has to offer.

To those of you who have dreamed and fantasised about becoming a guide, to show and share the unlimited wonders that our great continent has to offer, I can assure you, it is all possible. You need only the desire to work with people for many hours of your waking day, a positive attitude, an enquiring mind and genuine love and appreciation for all things wild.

One small word of advice: never lose sight of the real reason you are there.



'So that's a guide?'

What is Guiding all About?

Driving good-looking people around in an open safari vehicle, in your sleeveless khaki shirt, showing off your muscular sun-drenched arms and impressing your guests on how close you can get to lions on a kill? Telling hunting stories around the campfire each night after your sixth Scotch? If that is your idea of guiding, not only have you purchased the wrong course, you are also in the wrong profession!

Guiding is essentially about a genuine enjoyment of people and an honest appreciation of, and dedication to, the many faces nature has to offer. It is indeed a privileged occupation. Imagine being paid to take people out into the wilds of Africa, every morning, afternoon, and evening. To sit around the warm, flickering flames of a campfire each evening, savouring the rich smell of wood smoke, while friendships are formed and forged. The people for whom you are interpreting Africa have worked long and hard for months, even years, to come and see what you have to show them in a couple of weeks. They have great expectations of this brief interval of time.

You hold in your hands the opportunity to realise their dreams and fantasies of Africa - or to destroy them. It all depends on one little thing that in fact should play the biggest part in life: Your attitude. It's not their attitude that is relevant - they are paying you for a service and they are on a well-earned holiday.

'Attitude is a little thing which gives you big results'



What is Each Client's History?

Do you know or care? I was very fortunate to learn my greatest lesson in guiding in my third year as a guide. In 1983 a group of sixteen enthusiastic Texans from the Fort Worth Zoo spent four days on safari with us in Hwange National Park before moving on to a number of other parks around Zimbabwe. The group was as mixed and varied as you would expect any group of that size to be. Old and young, fat, and thin, loud, and quiet - you can imagine how many diverse personalities were present.

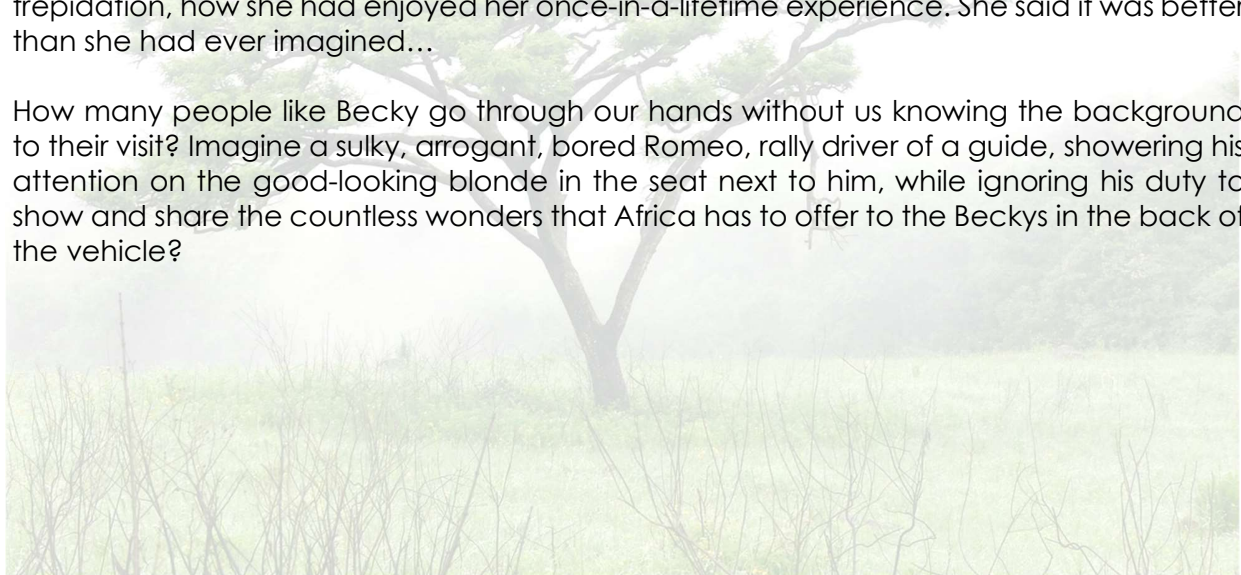
A few months later I went on my first visit to that amazing country, the United States of America. My young eyes were out on stalks for the entire duration of the visit. I went to Fort Worth to give a slide show at the zoo.

The following night the group of sixteen safari 'alumni' got together at someone's home, each person bringing along their ten best slides from their recent African safari. As all relived their various experiences, I marvelled at the delight and joy they showed as each slide came up. It was enthralling to see, some months after I had been with them on safari, how much it had meant to them. I asked myself, had I really pulled out all the stops? I thought I had given of my best, but, what if I hadn't?

Could I have done more to give these appreciative people a better wildlife experience?

After the slide show, we stood around chatting and eating. I began talking to a girl called Becky, a quiet and unobtrusive soul, plump and in her mid-thirties, the type of person who doesn't expect the level of attention that an extrovert, blonde bombshell would. I asked her the standard run-of-the-mill question; 'So, when are you coming back to Africa?' I was expecting the standard reply of 'Oh, I just can't wait!' But Becky replied sadly, 'Never.' I was quite shocked at this unusual reply and asked her why. She went on to tell me that both she and her husband had saved up for five years to send her to Africa! It had been her childhood dream to visit the great wildlife reserves of Africa. I asked, with a little trepidation, how she had enjoyed her once-in-a-lifetime experience. She said it was better than she had ever imagined...

How many people like Becky go through our hands without us knowing the background to their visit? Imagine a sulky, arrogant, bored Romeo, rally driver of a guide, showering his attention on the good-looking blonde in the seat next to him, while ignoring his duty to show and share the countless wonders that Africa has to offer to the Beckys in the back of the vehicle?



More Food for Thought

Some years ago, I was having lunch with friends who had been on a number of canoeing and walking safaris with our company. We were discussing how expensive safaris had become. Charles said they had planned to buy and install a satellite dish and decoder that year but had decided instead to use the money to come on yet another canoe trip, from which they believed their two daughters would receive a richer experience.

On the way home I thought to myself, 'Here is a family that would rather spend their savings on canoeing with us for five days than buy a satellite system that would give them more than a hundred different TV channels, and would last them for many years!' It made me realize what value, importance, and priority a wildlife experience holds for people. Imagine giving them a mediocre safari!

In the mid-1980s a radiologist sold her deep freeze to pay for staying at our safari camp in the Zambezi Valley. I only found this out some time later and once again felt so privileged to be able to share all that a safari can offer with someone who had made such a personal sacrifice. Little did we know at the time that she would eventually give up her career as a radiologist and come to work in tourism as a travel consultant. Thanks to her enthusiasm and dedication to wildlife, combined with an understanding of a client's desires and aspirations, she eventually ended up as the managing director of a highly successful tour operator.

Today, she is a prominent personality in the tourist industry of southern and central Africa. How much the travel industry owes to that deep freeze!



Wildlife Junkies

Over the years we have come to know a number of interesting characters who can ill afford a safari to Africa, yet they save up for two to three years to come out for their wildlife 'fix'. For some, it is the most important event in their lives. Back in the large cities from which they hail, whenever the opportunity arises, they talk, dream, read and watch Africa on video and TV.



'Safari Junkie'

- Do we as guides realize the importance and responsibility of our work?
- Do we take what we do for granted?
- Are we as enthusiastic as we were when we struggled to land our first job in the tourist industry?

Create the Magic

As guides, we hold in our hands the opportunity to make or break the dreams and fantasies that people have of Africa. For many, some of the first words they uttered in life were 'jumbo', 'hippo' and 'zebra'. As children, they grew up on books depicting the animals of Africa. During the 50s and 60s, they were exposed to Tarzan films and the Daktari series.



In recent times, the public has enjoyed well-produced wildlife documentaries that have taken years to film by patient and dedicated photographers and naturalists. They have read famous and romantic novels set in Africa and listened to the colourful and enthusiastic stories of friends and colleagues who have just returned from an African safari. Visitors to Africa certainly have high expectations; but don't we all have high expectations of our hard-earned holidays?

Look at all the promises in the glossy brochures, which lure visitors to our exciting continent. As a guide, the onus is now on you to create the magic.

What is Guiding all About?

Guiding is far more about people than animals. You may spend ten hours a day looking at four-legged animals, but you will spend between fifteen and eighteen hours daily with the two-legged ones. There are very few professions where you spend so much time with the same people. On canoeing, walking or mobile camping safaris, you are with your guests every waking hour, which is normally from dawn till around ten at night. Most of these safaris are five days or longer.

During this time, you are their guide, teacher, protector, friend, doctor, storyteller, cook and dish-washer.

I am often asked, 'You must hate taking out all those foreigners and being with people for so much of the time?' But look at it another way. As a guide, you see the best side of humanity. Firstly, you work in the biggest and most beautiful office in the world.

Secondly, your guests are on holiday. They are out for a good time.

They want fun, laughter, and safe adventure. They are also on foreign turf. That aggressive chief executive from Manhattan is out of his depth - he hasn't a clue how to track a rhino, or where to try and find your resident leopard. People who have high-ranking positions in society are often feared or idolised by the minions around them. In a wilderness situation, however, their platinum credit card can't protect them from a charging lion. That's why they hired you.



'Platinum credit card'

In modern society, people are worried about image, their looks, brand of clothes, jewellery, how they present themselves, what car they drive, where they live, what schools their children go to, which ski resort they frequent, which cocktail party is the right one to be seen at, with whom not to be associated. Yet, when these same people are out on safari, they drop all the social barriers and pretences they need to survive in their jungle. They meet other guests in the various safari camps who come from totally different social, financial, political, and cultural backgrounds. Life-long friendships are often formed. What draws these social opposites together? The answer lies in the beauty and simplicity of untouched nature. If you had a little hand in it, too, imagine how rewarding it would feel.

When about to take some high-ranking businessmen out on safari in the past, I had been forewarned by their staff that I would be in for a hard time, because of their reputation for being fussy, aggressive, sullen, impatient, restless and difficult to please. But once the 'ogres' arrived, they turned out to be quite the opposite. When invited to visit them back in their ivory towers, eyebrows were raised by the staff, as the top executive gave an ecstatic welcome to a khaki-clad, rankless imposter!

Guiding is such a privileged profession: your 'office' is a massive park, teeming with so many colourful and interesting forms of wildlife. In turn, your park is a theatre, an amazing open-air amphitheatre, where the props are real living trees, clouds, rivers, and mountains. The orchestra comprises the combined melody made up from the sounds of the wind, bird song, gurgling rivers, a lion's roar, a hippo's snort, the eerie yodel of a black backed jackal. The animals are the actors, their beauty and actions speaking their parts.

You are the presenter, with endless opportunities to share an ever-changing and unwritten show with your fellow man. Your guests from all corners of the globe and from all walks of life, are the mobile audience.



'Your theatre'

What Have They Come to See?

My family and I had never skied until the year of writing this course. What did we want out of a skiing holiday? Simple: lots of snow to ski on! We weren't too worried about the accommodation or standard of food. They would be added bonuses if the skiing was good. Most people on a once-in-a-lifetime holiday to Africa want to be able to go back and say they saw a lot of wildlife, mostly big! Birds, plants, insects, exclusivity, etc. are an added bonus. This raw fact may not fit into your perception of what you have to offer the guests with your immense bush knowledge. Sadly, it is a fact that applies to most first-time visitors.

Many visitors who have the money and desire to come back to Africa a second time will then be interested and specialise in the smaller animals, birds and plants, but they will still enjoy watching a big bull elephant stand on its hind legs to reach up into the browse line of an acacia tree, or a herd of five hundred buffalo in an extended line, their beady, bloodshot eyes peering over wet black noses at the intrusion to their daily grazing. No matter how many times one has been to Africa, who doesn't still enjoy the thrill of a lion kill, the squabbling growls erupting from around the carcass, the smell of an opened gut, the blood-stained faces of scruffy cubs?



'They came to see'

If we had gone skiing and there was not enough snow to ski on, but had a brilliant ski instructor who explained to us how the Alps were formed, what their geological makeup was, educated us on all the different pines and firs, took us to the best restaurants in the village, related the long and interesting history of the village, we would have made a friend and may have been impressed at his wide knowledge and enthusiasm for his job, but we would not have fulfilled our yearning desire to ski.

When we returned home and all our friends enquired how our skiing holiday went, we would have said, 'Well, we met a very knowledgeable ski instructor who taught us so much; he was such a nice guy'. 'But did you ski?', would be the constant question. 'No, not really, there was hardly any snow to ski on,' would be the deflated reply! Remember that visitors come to Africa for maximum wildlife experiences. If they didn't, they would visit the safari parks in their own countries.



The 'Walking Encyclopaedia'

Try not to impress your guests with how 'extremely knowledgeable' you are without showing them the 'snow,' about which they have fantasised and dreamed during the months prior to leaving for this wildlife-rich continent. Leak out your knowledge at the appropriate times in the right quantities. The guests want to 'ski' on maximum 'snow' for as long as physically possible. They hunger to see more and more wildlife. While you may have become bored with seeing your millionth impala, they may have never laid eyes on such a graceful creature, whose lithe body with its acrobatic leaps represents the ballerina of the bush.

So, try to and look at everything through the eyes of a keen and enthusiastic first-timer.



Stop and spend at least ten minutes with their first impala herd. After your eager passengers have fired off half a roll of film on these perfectly formed animals, their index fingers will have stopped twitching and they will have calmed down and become receptive as you point out the difference in the sexes and the scent glands on the hind legs. You can then explain in simple English about their breeding, rutting, extended gestation and foetus retention in times of drought, feeding habits, rumination, great leaping abilities, etc. Only half of what you say will be retained, but it is relaxing for your guests to sit and watch and appreciate the animal while you unobtrusively educate them on what will later become a 'common' animal.

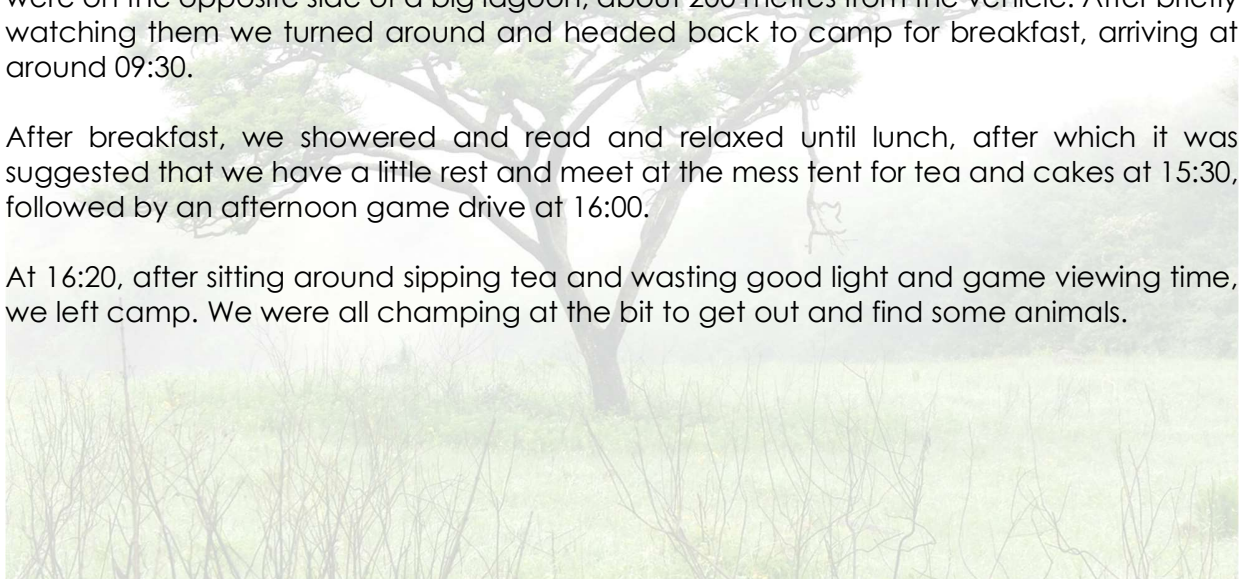
Never tire of spending time with any animal, no matter how common it may be or how many times your guests have visited Africa. These Africa 'junkies' come back time and again for their African 'fix' because the first time you took them on safari you 'spent time' slowly introducing them to all the members and secrets of the animal community in your park or country. Through this slow and gentle introduction using the correct blend of information, sightings, and excitement, you will have them hooked on the earth's most incredible addiction.

I was a guest on a safari into the Okavango Delta. Some of the members in our group had never been to Africa before. Imagine their eager expectations of what they might see as we entered the Moremi Game Reserve, an animal warehouse filled with such a variety of different species of mammals, birds, and trees. We arrived at our camp after dark on the first evening. Early the next morning we set off with our guide, whom we hoped would show us the exciting wares that this massive wildlife shop window had to offer.

Our guide was a young zoology graduate from Oxford University. As we drove from camp, we stopped every hundred metres so that he could point out various animals' footprints, dung, and birds. He described the full lifecycle and habits of various insects and spiders. He gave us a botany lesson on some of the interesting trees, grasses, and aquatic plants. After about two hours we encountered our first mammals, a small herd of red lechwe. They were on the opposite side of a big lagoon, about 200 metres from the vehicle. After briefly watching them we turned around and headed back to camp for breakfast, arriving at around 09:30.

After breakfast, we showered and read and relaxed until lunch, after which it was suggested that we have a little rest and meet at the mess tent for tea and cakes at 15:30, followed by an afternoon game drive at 16:00.

At 16:20, after sitting around sipping tea and wasting good light and game viewing time, we left camp. We were all champing at the bit to get out and find some animals.



A few hundred metres down the road we left the vehicle and walked over to a baobab tree for an interesting 15-minute lecture on this amazing botanical landmark. Then we drove another two kilometres, rounded a small scrubby acacia tree, and there, set up beside a large lagoon was a drinks table, with all the imaginable beverages displayed on it, a silver ice bucket, crystal glasses, etc. There was a small campfire burning, surrounded by a ring of canvas chairs. It was still about 45 minutes before sunset.

Our charming guide offered us drinks and then produced a large map of the Okavango Delta and its surrounding area. He glanced at his assistant guide and said, 'Where shall we start? Ten thousand or one hundred thousand years ago?'

For the remainder of the afternoon, we were given the most detailed lecture on how the Okavango Delta was formed. When it was dark, we had another drink and drove back to camp with the spotlight on, all of us desperately hoping we would see more than just the baboons we had disturbed when we walked up to the baobab tree earlier on. We were fortunate in seeing the small resident herd of impala that lived close to camp.

Although our guide had impressed us with the great extent of his knowledge, we, the guests, clients, tourists, wildlife enthusiasts, photographers, call us what you like, had only seen a herd of lechwe from a distance, a frightened troop of baboons and a family of impala illuminated by the spotlight, all day! Surely, we could have had the lecture on the geological history of the delta while we lounged around camp from 09:30 till 16:20? It was our first day of game viewing and everyone was yearning to see a variety of interesting and exciting animals.

Think about the Australians in our group who had never been to Africa before, and how much they wanted to see an elephant, buffalo, or lion.

All the interesting lectures on spiders, plants and insects should have been reserved for later on the seven-day safari, after satisfying the desire to see the masses of mammals that live in Moremi Game Reserve.

Afternoon safari activities can be so productive for wildlife sightings; the light is perfect for photography. We were all anticipating an active afternoon's game drive.

In the fast-moving society of the First World, people have very little time to relax and enjoy their environment. Time is extremely precious to people, so don't waste it trying to impress someone with how knowledgeable you are! Imagine your first days skiing, how keen you would be to get out there and give it a go.

How would you feel if your ski instructor spent the whole day giving you lectures on the geological formation of the Alps? Your guests have come for the 'snow'.

Let them ski!

How Much Does a Day Cost?

Have you ever thought about what goes into the cost of a day on safari?

Before we get into the 'all-inclusive' daily rate of the safari operation that you represent, or the airfare and air charters to get to your park, let's look at the personal sacrifice that most guests make before going on a safari holiday. Most First World countries offer between two and five weeks' leave per annum to their hard-working citizens. Americans are rarely given more than two weeks' leave per year, and in a number of executive positions, it is frowned upon to take both weeks consecutively.



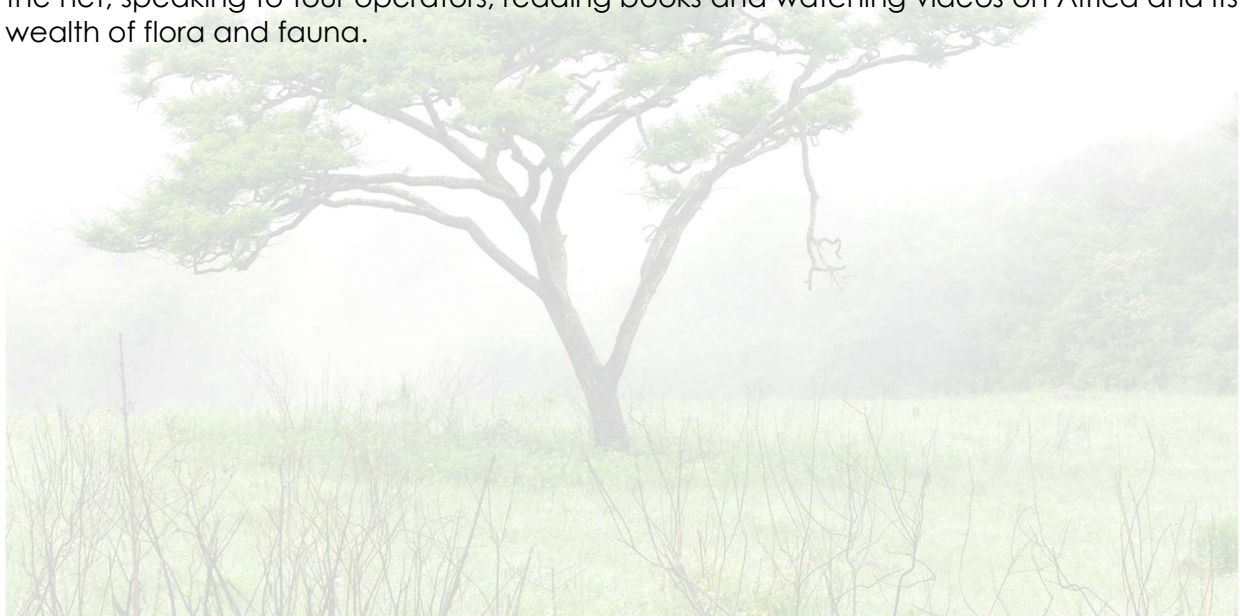
'Sorry no wheel spanner'

To be as unbiased as possible, the following equation is formulated for a client earning four weeks' leave a year:

- Let's say that the average safari client earns the equivalent of US\$5 000 a month.
- Of the 12 months during each year, he or she works for 11 months to earn one month's leave.
- Let us presume that person works a 5-day week.
- He or she, therefore, works for 220 days of the 11 months. This represents 20 working days each month. Earning \$5 000 per month divided by 20 working days equates to a daily income of \$250.
- Our visitors have worked long and stressful days to earn their leave.
- From the above example, it is easy to ascertain that they have worked 11 days to earn 1 day's leave.
- If they earn \$250 per day and have worked for 11 days to receive one well-earned day's leave, this precious day is equal to \$2 750!

The point I am trying to make is that if you waste a day's safari or part thereof because you were disinterested, burnt out, or disorganized; if you didn't take your radio when you left camp on your game drive; if you forgot to check your vehicle and all its equipment, and you had a flat tyre and no wheel spanner with which to change it, or you ran out of fuel, took a risk and got horribly stuck, (the list is endless), you would have cost your guests part of a day of a holiday they worked long and hard to earn.

On top of the \$2 750 per day, we have not even considered the daily cost of staying in your camp. Let's say the average daily rate of an African safari camp is \$325 per person per day. Don't forget the additional costs such as airfares, travel insurance, safari clothes, equipment, film, house and pet minders, many hours spent researching the safari, surfing the net, speaking to tour operators, reading books and watching videos on Africa and its wealth of flora and fauna.





'Who pays your salary?'

Every visitor to Africa is going to place a different value on the daily cost of his or her safari. Even if you were to refund them all the money lost from a bad day, you could never refund the loss in terms of eagerness, anticipation, and time for each safari outing. The measure of disappointment is incalculable, while the time lost is priceless and irreplaceable.

Most people are easy going and understanding when things don't go according to plan. However, there are many unplanned events that Africa can throw at you from every conceivable angle. Try your level best to ensure that the cause of the wasted time and opportunity was not because of your negligence. Try to realize all the dreams and desires of the visitors with the incredible things our continent has available.

Aspiration/Inspiration

A number of years ago, I arranged a safari for a couple who were getting married at the beginning of the safari. This is the guest feedback that you should aspire to.

Dear Garth,

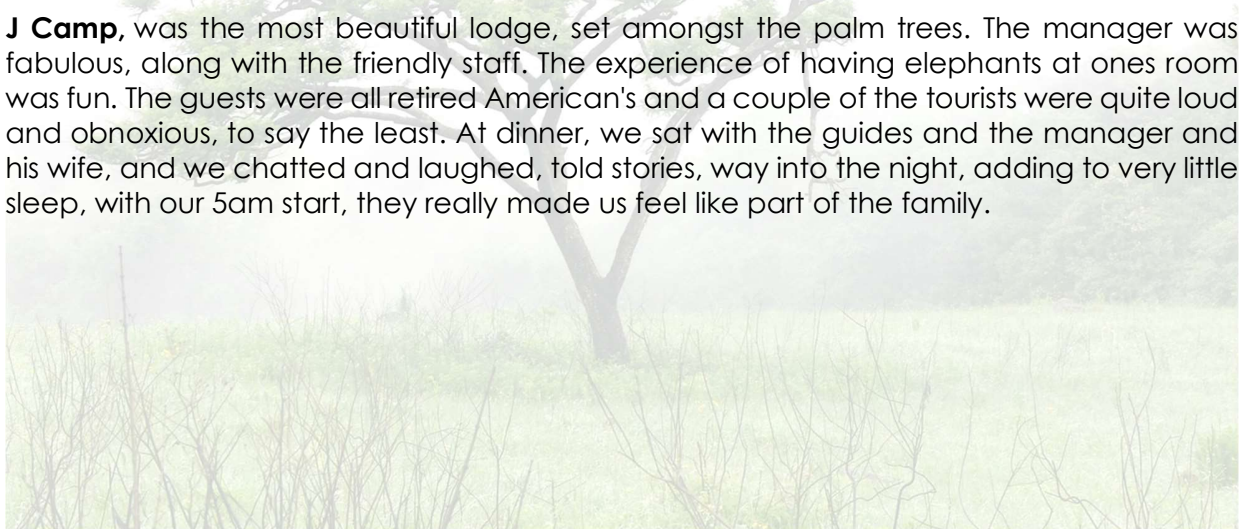
We had the most fantastic safari. Joe is over the moon about the whole trip, and especially the wedding, and can't stop looking at his video and reliving the safaris. I can't even get through a night sleep without waking up at 5 am thinking about going out into the bush. I am really missing Africa and wasn't ready to come back to Los Angeles and the rat race here.

All the travel arrangements went really well. All the people that did the "meet and greet," and got us to our destinations on time, were great. A job so well done - they could learn a thing or two here in the States.

S Camp is beautiful, and their employees are fantastic, it couldn't have been better, Mandy, who manages S Camp, was the most amazing person, she was like having a great friend, substitute sister, wedding planner, etc., all wrapped up in one. S Camp should be very proud to have a girl like Mandy working for them. As for their local employees, what a team, such wonderful people and they all seemed to enjoy the wedding. You should have seen them all dressed up so beautifully and colourful. The wedding was fantastic, along with the spectacular location and the singing - wow, Moses who married us, was such a sweet man, with a beautiful smiley face, and I loved having our guide drive me to the location and be with me every step of the way (like a big brother looking out for me). AND I can't forget the three bull elephants who turned up at the end of the wedding ceremony... Joe was spellbound by the entire day; it was so magical.

Lazarus, our guide, our companion, was very special, along with Clement (his spotter), we had the most amazing time with both of them. He was such a great guide too,

J Camp, was the most beautiful lodge, set amongst the palm trees. The manager was fabulous, along with the friendly staff. The experience of having elephants at ones room was fun. The guests were all retired American's and a couple of the tourists were quite loud and obnoxious, to say the least. At dinner, we sat with the guides and the manager and his wife, and we chatted and laughed, told stories, way into the night, adding to very little sleep, with our 5am start, they really made us feel like part of the family.



I absolutely loved Botswana, the Delta is so beautiful, with its palms and white sand, water lilies, and numerous animals, especially in **M Camp**. We got on with Nick the manager like old friends and I laughed so hard, for three days, along with being totally spoilt by his attention to detail, to spoil us, he even came out on a drive with us and one day set up a surprise picnic, with Pimm's, just for me. Everything I could think of, he did, it was like he read one's mind. I could have stayed for longer there, it was fun. The only sad thing was, not having a private driver/guide, as the tourists and guide drove me a little crazy, as it was more like going out on a Disneyland adventure ride. He was trying so hard to entertain, rather than do serious tracking and guiding- so, I think I must have annoyed him a few times, especially when I saw lion tracks that looked new, and he said I had mistaken them for zebra (yeah right) and humiliated me in front of the tourists, only to come across two large lions on the road a few minutes later!

I found the older (established) guides that had been at a place for a long time, thought themselves a little like celebrities and seemed to think they had to entertain, rather than tell interesting facts about the bush and seemed to talk to you like you were a complete idiot about animals. Also, he was on the radio all the time, relying on other guides to find the animals, which was distracting and not showing any tracking skills. I would love to go back there with a private guide and do some serious photography, as it was useless this time, due to the driver and other tourists, who want to move all the time.

There were so many animals and beautiful landscapes, and great light. It was also a shame that we had to get back to the lodge by 7 pm (park rules), as this was the time of 'action' for the cats. The guide kept to a schedule and dialogue that got really repetitive and more like a safari park tour, plus script! Thank goodness Nick the Manager was great fun, as we spent far too much time back at the lodge, when I wanted to be out in the bush.

D Camp, I loved it there. It was so exciting, even though we didn't see an actual kill, but an attempt of one. The people were not just the regular tourists either, they all had a wealth of knowledge and love of Africa and had all been many times before. It was one of my favourite places, where being with and talking to, knowledgeable people were concerned. I was a learning junky and I loved Francois, who was managing the camp. Also, the driver/guides totally understood photographers, and how to approach animals for the maximum photographic experience and we could stay out as long as we wanted to and totally understood the desire to wait a few hours with the lions until they were ready to move. I felt more free and more connected to Africa's rhythm, and loved the photographic experience. I could have stayed a week.

K Camp was lovely, but too many retired American tourists, with too much idol chitchat!!!! So our guide and some of the staff, totally understood that I didn't want to talk about 'where I come from, or what I do for a living' etc., so they were fun and buffered me, and sat with me during dinner, which was great and I got to learn a lot about the way of life of the local tribes of Botswana, it was fascinating, they are great story tellers.



The next day, we were driving along the sandy river bed, on the way to see a couple of lions up river (which had been radioed in) and all of a sudden they came, hundreds of them (elephants, not lions) out of the trees - you should have seen the dust storm they created. Our guide couldn't believe it either, and as he rightly say, "this is an African moment — huh Joe?"

All we could do was sit in our safari vehicle and wait, as over 300 elephants come charging down to the river, all around us, after being out in the Kalahari and totally dehydrated. It was the most amazing sight. Our guide was lovely and most obliging; he would go out anytime we wanted, even after dinner, at 10pm when we could hear a lion roar very close to camp. We also got to spend a couple of hours following a leopard, united with her adult daughter, as they played in the long grass and jumped onto termite mounds in the morning sun, it was a beautiful experience. We had to radio in the sighting, (lodge policy) for other tourist to see the leopards, and they came at once, and chased after them, to make sure the tourists got a good view ... I thought this was more like harassment than viewing and it really upset the leopards.

One thing I didn't like was that tourists would rush around to see as many animals as possible and would often disturb the animal(s) to do so, just for a quick photo then leave, when we would spend hours finding them and staying with them and observing the behaviour and letting them get used to our presence. Eventually, many of the animals would come up our vehicle.

All in all, South Africa and Botswana were fantastic, due to its scenery, the lodges, the people, the animals, Mostly the guides worked hard to find animals, some relied too much on the radio and talked all the time. Some were just great trackers. All could do with some experience with positioning the vehicle for maximum photographic experience, except for the guy at D Camp (who was good). If you have a private car and driver/guide, they should have a better understanding of photography and be more prepared to stay out long hours and not just automatically start driving back to camp at the set times (like 11 am or 7 pm), they need to ask are you ready to go back now. Some are like clockwork with their schedules and they should be more flexible, especially for that price. You would suddenly find yourself back at camp, and Joe and I wanted to stay out all day, whatever it takes, and with our bad weather, often the sun only came out for a few hours at 3 pm, but they didn't want to go out until 4:30m, by which time the sun was low, the clouds were covering the sun and light was gone. I know they say the animals come out at dawn and dusk, but there are always zebra, gnu, giraffe, etc., out and about.

Thank you so much again, take care, Nina.

The Author

Garth Thompson was born and raised in Zimbabwe. His three children are fifth-generation Zimbabweans. He has played a prominent role in the region's tourist trade for over 30 years, being one of the pioneers of Zimbabwe's fledgeling tourism industry since its independence in 1980.



Starting out as a wildlife guide at the age of 21 in Hwange National Park, he went on to own and operate safari operations in Mana Pools National Park in the Zambezi Valley. During this time, assisted by his wife Mel, they opened a tour operation, aimed initially at marketing and booking their safaris. This company went on to become a prominent supplier of guests to many camps and lodges in Zimbabwe and its neighbouring countries.

He was nominated as the Tourism Personality of 1988.

Garth has guided in most parks in Zimbabwe, Botswana, Tanzania, Kenya, and Namibia and to a lesser extent in Rwanda, Uganda, Mozambique, and Zambia. His favourite safaris are on foot and by canoe in the Zambezi Valley, which is where he conducts the majority of his safaris. He enjoys a following of long-standing guests, who safari with him on a regular basis. Most have become lifelong friends.

For any additional information and ideas, you may have on guiding he welcomes contact at e-mail address: gartht@mweb.co.zw