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A New Kid on the Safari Block Harkens Back to Old Ways

TOUR OPERATOR | DAVID COGSWELL | FEBRUARY 24, 2017



PHOTO: A Botswana Leopard. (Photo via Flickr/Mathias)

Natural Selection is a new safari company, but its constituent parts are not new.

"While we're a brand new company, we are old guides," said Peter Allison, on a trip to promote the safari operator in America. "I'm the baby of the group because I've only been taking safaris for 23 years."

Colin Bell, one of the founders of **Natural Selection**, is a historical figure in the world of safaris. He was a co-founder of two major existing safari operators: Wilderness Safaris, and Great Plains Safaris.

"Colin Bell co-founded Wilderness Safaris in 1983," said Allison. "He had been guiding for some time before that. I don't think anyone would deny that he kickstarted tourism into Botswana and the Okavango Delta, which is now one of the most sought after and visited destinations in Africa."

Botswana is now so popular that its safari lodges are booked to capacity much of the time.

"The Botswana government has deliberately restricted number of people that can come in so they don't end up with that situation in which you have more vehicles than animals, as in some safari destinations. The restrictions are something I am personally a big supporter of, but it does mean that the costs are higher."

Natural Selection is operating a number of wilderness properties in Botswana and is developing land in Namibia and South Africa, as well as in other less frequented destinations in Africa.

"We are planning on going further afield as well," said Allison, "starting with some expeditions initially, and then eventually perhaps acquiring or leasing land in other parts of Africa that are less touched by far."

The company is exploring new frontiers with quirky single-departure trips, such as an upcoming mountain bike expedition along elephant trails between Chobe National Park and the Okavango Delta in Botswana.

"We're going to have some of these one-off kinds of special interest trips to show that safaris can occur in many different places, unexpected places," said Allison. "We're doing some trips to Zakouma National Park in Chad and we're also looking at a place called Dzanga Bai in the Central African Republic. If we can generate enough interest in these places then maybe somewhere down the line we can create something more permanent there."

A Commitment to Conservation

Whatever the company pulls in from its various activities, it gives a chunk right off the top to conservation. "Everybody talks about conservation," said Allison. "We literally put our money where our mouths are by giving 1 percent of turnover to conservation."

That is 1 percent off the top whether the company makes money or not. Perhaps surprisingly, the new company's investors are okay with that.

"We've actually got investors who've come on board knowing we're going to do that," said Allison. "I think that's very heartening that there are people in the financial world who don't mind us doing that."

"Often our conservation efforts will be in places we operate, Botswana, Namibia and so forth. At other times, they might not be. For example: Right now, there is a poaching crisis in Tanzania. So, we might put some of that money into helping those elephants because that is Africa's problem. We can't get territorial about that."

Back to Origins

Natural Selection is taking a U-turn from the trend toward ever more luxurious safaris and growing concerns over creature comforts in the wilds.

"One thing we are striving to do is to disengage from the threadcount war that's been going on since the late 90s in which companies have started competing less on wildlife and more on what I think are actually mundane luxuries," said Allison.

"It has excluded a lot of people who want to come to Africa to look at wildlife. What we're looking to do is to shift focus from inside the room to outside the room again. The first thing is to get the best guides. It's a global thing, but particularly on safari, the guide makes the trip. You've got to have a top-notch person showing you around."

The company must gauge its services to an experienced clientele, many of whom have traveled on a number of safaris before.

"We've gotten to the stage where we've got people who are not there for their first trip or second trip, it's their 10th or 11th safari," said Allison. "It's great to be able to offer something new. So we're saying if you want to have that siesta between morning and afternoon activities, great. But we're looking at showing a lot more points of fascination. It must be something you can do in the heat of the day and something very simple."

One of the mid-day activities is setting camera traps that snap pictures when they are tripped by an animal passing in the night.

"I love giving the guests camera traps and saying, 'Now you set these up where you think animals will walk through this evening.' It's fun for them and it's amazing with kids. You don't tell them where to put it, but you point out things like animal trails and say animals may go by because they walk here regularly. That's all fed very gently, so it gets them thinking about animal behavior, and it even changes how they behave on game drive. They know they will see animal pathways across the bush and they learn to look down on them just like safari guides do."

Another mid-day activity is a session with Bushmen demonstrating how they talk with clicks.

"What we're doing now is saying to people at brunch, 'Who would like to speak in clicks?' Everybody asks for the authentic cultural experience, what is better than sitting with Bushmen who are laughing at your pathetic pronunciation?"

"These people aren't teachers, they haven't even been to conventional school themselves. It's just a case of you pointing at things and saying, 'What's your word for that?' What I enjoy about it most is that after that you see people recognizing the Bushmen working around the camp, and then they start thinking, this guy raking the path, what's his story? That really gets them involved more in the local aspect and stops the staff from being so invisible."

Forget Your Troubles

At a time when global politics has taken a tense turn, the African experience can be especially rewarding as a counter-environment to the world in which most of us reside with our problems. For Allison, being employed in that alternative environment is the best of all possible worlds.

"There's a very negative sentiment in world at the moment," said Allison, "and one of nice things about being with **Natural Selection** is that I get to work with people who are positive and are not looking to save the world but are looking to save their corner of it. And I think that is actually a lot more effective than getting yourself wound up trying to do more than you can reasonably achieve."