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SHERWIN BANDA

PRESIDENT AFRICAN TRAVEL, INC.

by **Matthew Wexler**



Photos: African Travel, Inc.

Darkness gives way to the sun rising across the savanna. There's a chill in the air, but the crisp breeze will soon give way to the midday heat. A rustle can be heard, and then it appears: a mass of horns and stalwart strides reveals a crash of rhinos. Your Big Five is complete.

This dream-turned-reality is the vision of Sherwin Banda, president of **African Travel, Inc. (www.africantravelinc.com)**, who leads an international staff to offer once-in-a-lifetime experiences across the African continent. With more than 40 years of experience as a US-based tour operator, the company has set the bar (and surpassed it), offering exclusive access to some of the world's most pristine and untouched habitats. Industry experts have also taken notice. Earlier this year African Travel, Inc. won "Best Vacation Packager, Africa" by travAlliancemedial, the equivalent to the Academy Awards for the travel industry.

Curating, packaging, selling, and implementing luxury experiences across 14 countries demands resilient attention to detail, a skill that Banda has cultivated from nearly 20 years in the international hospitality industry.

Born and raised in Cape Town, South Africa, Banda worked in retail while still in university, lending his smooth voice and charming personality to in-store promotions and voiceovers. The general manager from a hotel across the street noticed the young's man talent and asked if he'd ever considered working in hotels. And the rest, as they say, is history. Banda's career has taken him around the world, but his impact during his tenure at Cape Town's legendary Table Bay Hotel laid the foundation for his role at African Travel, Inc.

As general manager, Banda helped revitalize the property, resulting in a 60 percent revenue growth while still retaining the authentic South African experience for guests. In less than three years, he also reduced the hotel's carbon footprint by 40 percent,

exemplifying his longstanding commitment to protecting wildlife, ecosystems, and local communities. It was also during this time that he developed a deeper understanding of African Travel, Inc. as a supplier. However, Banda and his husband had recently started a family and felt it was time to return to the US.

Brett Tollman, CEO of The Travel Corporation (African Travel Inc.'s parent company) got word of Banda's availability when the position became available. "It's phenomenal to still be connected to my Africa roots and based in the US," says Banda of his dream job. His passion and expertise guides his dedicated team of one of America's longest-established safari operators focusing exclusively on the African continent. "Others might sell Africa as part of a portfolio, but when you hear us say we know Africa—hell, yes!" Banda exclaims.

There is an Africa for everyone in terms of travel style, budget, and interests," says Banda, stressing that one of the most important factors is how to match the right experience with the right client. "Many people have not ventured into Africa. They might have this idea that it's a place that can't match their desires...but nothing could be further from the truth."

Banda stresses the reliability and history of African Travel, Inc., a company that was launched specifically to address the needs of US travelers. Under The Travel Corporation umbrella, the company employs more than 2,500 team members in South Africa alone, offering five-star service every step of the way. And for LGBTQ travelers, service is everything.

A recent report by Community Marketing & Insights, a research leader in LGBTQ travel trends, indicates that LGBTQ Americans are active travelers, with 77 percent reporting a valid passport (compared to 36 percent of the general population according to the State Department). While some might jump to conclusions about the kinds of experiences being sought (Pride, anyone?), data reveals that destinations known for their scenic or natural beauty came out on top (60 percent). Even so, many queer travelers have safety concerns. Banda gets it.

"As President of African Travel, Inc., and identifying as black, gay, and Jewish, I'm very sensitive professionally and personally to the needs of our clients," shares Banda. "Every destination has been personally vetted, and we will only work with partners who have an ethos that is in line with ours, organizations that have a strategy or training regarding

inclusion and sensitivity, including the training of our own guides as well as on-the-ground training with our partners."

Banda is proud to acknowledge his birth country's progressive constitution, brought to life by Nelson Mandela, who spoke these indelible words at his 1994 presidential inauguration: "We enter into a covenant that we shall build the society in which all South Africans...will be able to walk tall, without any fear in their hearts, assured of their inalienable right to human dignity, a rainbow nation at peace with itself and the world."

South Africa is a benchmark but Banda acknowledges the importance of cultural sensitivity when traveling throughout the conti-

nent. LGBTQ rights might not be in the constitution of countries like Tanzania, Kenya, or Botswana, but safari lodges and camps vetted by African Travel, Inc. are geared toward inclusiveness. Progress is slowly being made. Just last year, a transgender man in Botswana won a court case that allowed him to change official documents to reflect his gender identity. The win was described as a "monumental victory" by Southern African Litigation Centre lawyer Tashwill Esterhuizen.

African Travel Inc. is also deeply invested in giving back to local communities and preserving the delicate ecosystems enjoyed by its clients. Banda understands this



ME to WE Experience Traveler with Mama



Virunga Lodge View, Rwanda

Shamwari Guest Experience



Mahali Mzuri Maasai Tribe



necessity firsthand, having been raised by a mother who never graduated high school because she had to work to help support the family after her father's death. His own "humble background" resonates as he sees the impact made by the company's philanthropic efforts.

Travelers seeking an immersive experience can include a "ME to WE" itinerary as part of their adventures, such as four days in Kenya that include working alongside Maasai and Kipsigi community members to build a new school; visiting an authentic Kenyan market, medical clinic, and medicinal garden; and a sunrise hike in the Maasai Mara.

The TreadRight Foundation (a joint venture between the Travel Corporation and its family of brands) has helped support more than 50 sustainable tourism projects worldwide, many of which are in Africa. These include rhino anti-poaching with the Wilderness Foundation; the preservation of Bushmans Kloof Rock Art in South Africa's Cederberg Mountains, some of which dates back more than 10,000 years; and conservation efforts for the African Penguin colony at Boulders Beach. These efforts align with the evolution that Banda has seen in US travelers to Africa.

"I moved to the US in 2003 and was blown away, having come from Africa and Europe, at

the differences in travel styles,” reflects Banda. “At that time the economy was doing well here, and there was an almost conspicuous consumption of indulgence. Then the [stock] market crashed in 2008 and people became more resourceful, asking themselves, ‘What can I get for the lowest cost and highest level of satisfaction?’ As the market has continued to recover, people are looking to be transformed. They want a sense of meaning and a travel style that aligns with their interests and values. More and more, travelers are looking for moments of truth and engagement beyond the traditional travel experience.”

Banda has his personal favorites and expresses deep enthusiasm for the land of a thousand hills: Rwanda. Most experiences can be found in the country’s northwestern Volcanoes National Park, which is known for gorilla trekking and 100 species of orchids. It is also a place of healing, following the devastating genocide by the Hutu government against the Tutsi people. The Kigali Genocide Memorial offers a haunting reflection as Banda describes it, with bi-partisan humanitarian efforts to honor the past while ensuring that such atrocities never occur again.

To experience Rwanda’s natural wonders, Banda recommends Bisate, which he describes as a “bio-diversity gem that supports the environment’s reforestation and rehabilitation.” Bisate also offers intimate access to the region’s gorilla population, “so close you can feel their heartbeat,” he shares. “When you look at the eyes of the gorilla it’s as if you’re looking into the eyes of another human soul. There are few places in the world where you will feel such awe and wonder.” Six en-suite forest villas nestled in an eroded volcano offer picturesque views, providing a luxurious home base after a day of gorilla or golden monkey trekking.

Head south to Zimbabwe to discover one of Banda’s other favorite picks, which he considers an up-and-coming destination for US travelers seeking untouched parts of the savanna. **Victoria Falls River Lodge**, the first private game lodge to be built in Zambezi National Park, offers luxury tented or treehouse suites, each featuring private decks and plunge pools. But for the real plunge, guests should experience Victoria Falls, the world’s largest waterfall and one of the Seven Natural Wonder. Described by locals as *Mosi-oa-Tunya*, or “the smoke that thunders,” Banda says the cacophony is awe-inspiring and unforgettable. Each journey



Victoria Falls Helicopter Ride



Mana Pools National Park, Zimbabwe

holds a special place in his heart. “I could talk about so many different places for so many different reasons, but it’s all about the personal connection I’ve had with each.”

Approximately 80 percent of African Travel Inc.’s experiences are tailor-made packages utilizing the insights of an in-house safari specialist, but for more budget-friendly luxury, consider a vacation package with fixed departure dates. Travel is still entirely independent, with customized on-the-ground experiences with the benefit of group travel savings

for airfare and accommodations. For those who want to leave all the planning to the experts, guided vacations offer the opportunity to be part of an intimate group with like-minded travelers.

In spite of his well-worn passport, Banda’s first love is South Africa. “It a diverse country and there’s so much to do beyond safari. For Americans, it feels like a first-world country in terms of infrastructure while still being able to experience so many different languages and tribal cultures. It truly is a rainbow nation.” ■