

COMPILED BY KIERAN LEGG

- ❑ The Wild Side of Your Business
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His signature bush-luxe camps give guests the freedom to truly experience the outdoors.

# B

## Experience Matters

All that gofer-ing turned out to be seriously good schooling for what was to come, and Beks worked his way up from trainee to qualified guide to camp manager to manager of three safari operations. He had gathered an intimate understanding of how every aspect of safari camps run, from choosing the site for a camp to building and maintaining one, to interacting with guests, marketing at trade shows, and eventually managing teams and working with systems. Seven years after leaving school, having worked at some of Southern Africa's most prestigious camps and making a name for himself as a respected guide, Beks set up his own private guiding business. "I recognised that Africa was a big continent – and I didn't want to be stuck in one geographical area," he explains. "I also wanted to get involved in going out and attracting the clientele and crafting my own journeys."

## Find the Gap

While leading private guided safaris, Beks was exposed to a wide range of camps across the continent and he noticed that most safari camps didn't offer guides the sort of freedom and experiences he wanted his guests to enjoy. "After five or six years I thought, what I'd really love to do is set up my own camp – an iconic camp that would attract other safari guides who are equally as passionate – and they would be my first support base."

So, in 2006 Beks secured a concession in Hwange National Park and built Somalisa, a camp with views across the savannah. "I did it with very little money," he says. "We cleared out our home in Bulawayo and basically set it up again in the bush."

Although rudimentary compared to what it is now, the camp still had its own charm. Beks has always had an eye for design and loves to collect antiques – it's his personal style that has helped to shape the signature bush-luxe ambience that his camps are now known for.

Not only was Somalisa a magnificent space to be in: through his own experiences Beks knew exactly how to make his camp the top choice for independent guides travelling with clients. "I was able to give my former peers the

Beks Ndlovu opened his first camp in 2006, when Zimbabwe was writhing in economic turmoil, and has now established 15 luxury camps in eight parks in three countries. And whenever he can take time away from work, he goes on safari.

His success, in part, is due to his ability to think laterally and make strategic decisions. But a large part of it comes down to Beks's people skills and creativity.

That was how it all started out, really. When Beks was

a teenager some of his older friends went to work in safari lodges and, suffering from serious FOMO, Beks volunteered at camps in Hwange during his school holidays.

"You know the term 'gofer'?" Well," he laughs, "that was me." Beks was the guy who fetched the firewood. The one who pumped the water and kept the donkey boiler going. He was the one who carried water to guest tents for their bucket showers; then he started to do the wake-up calls by delivering tea and coffee. After a while, Beks was the one polishing the Land Cruiser and packing the drinks box. "And if I was lucky," he recalls, "I'd end up on a game drive, sitting beside the guide and learning from him as we went."

By the time he completed high school, job offers were rolling in. Beks went from wearing khakis and veldskoens at boarding school to wearing khakis and veldskoens in the bush. "I'd gained insight into the life of a safari camp and realised that it was possible for me to have a career in the safari industry."



Beks learnt everything he knows about running a camp while on the job.

By **Narina Exelby**

Photographs: **Narina Exelby and Mark Everleigh**

# Wild Card

WHEN BEKS NDLOVU WAS A SIX-YEAR-OLD BOY LIVING ON THE FRINGE OF HWANGE, ZIMBABWE'S LARGEST NATIONAL PARK, THE IDEA OF GOING ON A SAFARI HAD NEVER ENTERED HIS IMAGINATION. "SAFARI" WAS FOR WHITE PEOPLE, HE THOUGHT. FAST FORWARD 37 YEARS, AND BEKS IS THE FOUNDER AND CEO OF ONE OF THE FASTEST-GROWING LUXURY SAFARI COMPANIES IN SOUTHERN AFRICA.



## Beks's Business Advice

### Have A Unique Selling Point

When you start a business, be sure to have a unique position. If you do exactly what someone else is doing, you've got an uphill battle.

### Interrogate Your Values

When you're looking for an investor, question the reasons they want to be a part of your business. Be up front with everything you intend doing.

### Recognise The Challenges Early

Recognise and respond to economic challenges as early as possible – before you have to make tough financial decisions quickly.

### Find Mentors

Align yourself with "godfathers" you can call on when the chips are down. You will always encounter problems – make sure you have people you trust, whom you can call on for advice.

### Watch Your Headcount

Yes, you need people to build an empire, but remember that they will cost you. Just keep an eye on it.

### Be Flexible

Be open to how your business can evolve. What works now may work for only a period of time – it doesn't need to be forever.

### Appreciate Your People

Look after your clients and you'll always have more. Look after your staff, and they will come along on the journey with you.

those planes meant that we could offer incentives and discounted rates to our guests. It's helped us move people between properties and having that revenue from the camps is a tool that allows us to be flexible."

### Take Others With You

In June this year, 14 years after opening Somalisa, African Bush Camps is hoping to open its 15th camp in August. It's been a wild ride, but not one that Beks has done alone.

Mentors have played an important part in his personal growth, and have been invaluable in helping ABC succeed. "I have never been shy of calling people and asking for help or getting perspectives on different situations," says Beks. "I've not had the time to go on courses because I've been too busy growing ABC and being involved in every aspect of the business. My education has come from spending time with mentors and learning from a very practical perspective."

Community has also played a fundamental role. From the very beginning, African Bush Camps has been committed to supporting the communities in which they operate, and the African Bush Camps Foundation was established when ABC began. Taking that commitment to community further, each camp is staffed predominantly by people from the areas surrounding the camps, and entirely by people from that country. "We've really walked the talk in making sure that we take everybody else with us, from our staff to our communities, and that we share and enjoy the success as we've gone along."

It's important not only to find the right people, Beks maintains, but keep them, too. ABC now employs more than 600 people – many of whom are, like Beks did, climbing the ranks. "We do a lot of internal training to keep people motivated and inspired. We recognise and celebrate those who do well, and we give people the opportunity to step up. We grow and celebrate role models and mentors – people who share a collective vision and passion – and it's through these homegrown successes that we're building our own culture." There's an old African proverb that resonates deeply with Beks: if you want to go fast, go alone; if you want to go far, take others with you. "I've done fast," he says. "The business is established and we're now in this for the long run. I'm committed to making sure that no-one gets left behind."

diving in. I still trust my gut instinct, but I don't go on gut alone. I use whatever I've got available to make an informed decision. The gut is important, but it's not enough."

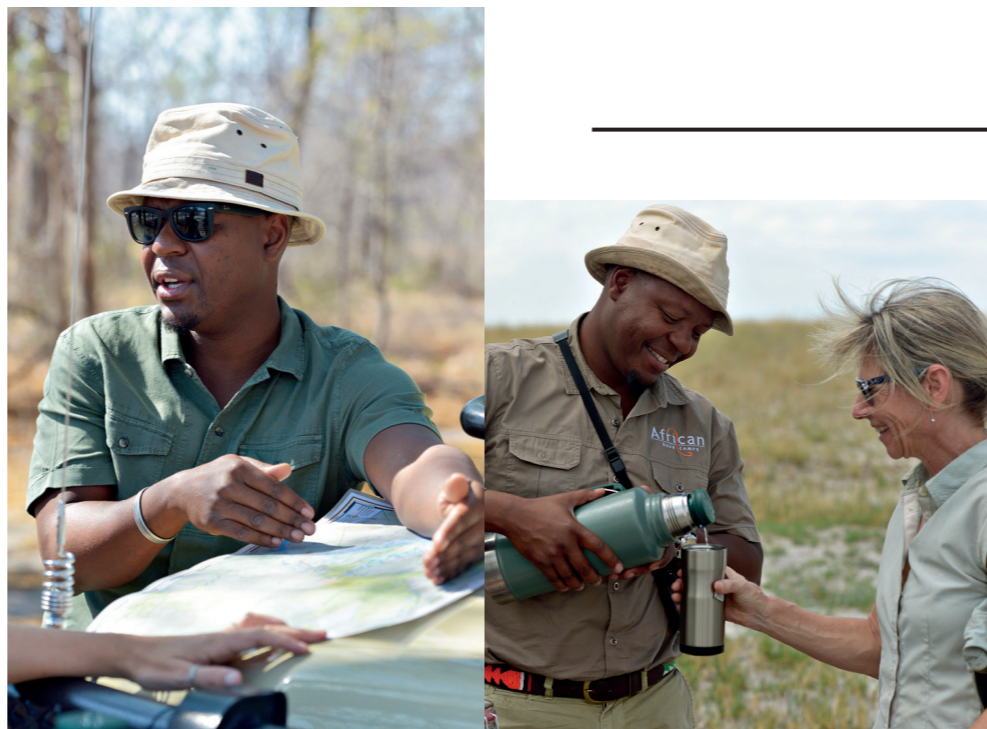
### Think Laterally

When Beks took on a new investor in 2013 – someone deeply committed to investing in the people and conservation in Zimbabwe – African Bush Camps was propelled to the next level. Some of the seven camps expanded while others were refurbished, establishing each camp in the portfolio as a true luxury safari destination.

"At that time," says Beks, "I realised that it would make a very big difference to our business if we created a circuit: a whole journey that allowed people to experience different parts of Southern Africa on one safari – and they would travel only with us."

ABC's seven camps were in four parks – two in Zimbabwe and two in Botswana – and so what Beks needed was an aeroplane to move guests between them. Budget, however, didn't stretch far enough to buy one and Beks couldn't convince any of the charter companies to sell him seats on theirs. So, Beks started a charter company. He established Safari Logistics by leasing one plane and guaranteeing its owners a certain number of flying hours per month. That proved successful, so he leased another, then another. Safari Logistics now leases six planes, with access to more should they need them.

The logistics business was loss-making for five years – something Beks was prepared to write off as a marketing expense. "Having



ADDITIONAL PHOTOGRAPHY: COURTESY OF AFRICAN BUSH CAMPS



Beks has 15 camps across Southern Africa.

platform they needed to shine. I gave them a vehicle, and they had the freedom to use the camp as their own, and to a rhythm that suited their style," he says.

### Think Strategy

When Somalisa opened in August 2006, Zimbabwe's tourism industry was rock bottom, but Beks had already made a plan. Even before Somalisa was complete he was looking for a camp location in Botswana, where the safari industry was booming. When he found an unused photographic safari area, he leased a portion and "quickly knocked up a camp". Linyanti opened 10 months after Somalisa and, just as Beks had hoped, it helped to keep the Zimbabwe camp afloat.

"Opening Linyanti basically propelled me into the marketplace," says Beks. "I had already established my name as a guide and with a second camp in a successful country, people in the tourism industry trusted me – if they wanted to travel Zimbabwe, they knew they could do so with me."

In 2009 Beks invited two well-known guides "with serious passion and large client bases" to invest in his business, which by then was called African Bush Camps (ABC). Having the partners and the extra capital meant Beks could expand the ABC portfolio by building another two camps. The investor-guides ran

those properties, which freed Beks up to focus on other areas – and by 2012 African Bush Camps had established seven luxury camps in Zimbabwe and Botswana. Was Beks moving too fast? "ABC grew quickly – but it felt natural and organic because we developed the right places at the right time in order to make everything work," he reasons. "It was like putting the pieces of a puzzle together."

### Don't Go On Gut Alone

In 2010, in his quest to grow his business even further, Beks took on a major investor. "He showed all the signs of being aligned with my vision but," Beks admits, "in retrospect I didn't take enough time to assess him properly. Also, I should have structured his investment differently."

Three years into the partnership things soured. "Our visions and values just weren't aligned," says Beks. "He'd lost interest but wanted more control, and I wasn't prepared to give him that." What followed were two painful years and exorbitant legal fees. "I had to build serious resilience," Beks recalls. "I also learnt valuable lessons. I've learnt to be a lot more diligent with documentation – take the emotions out, and assess the situation properly before