



Nicole Robinson

segara: Happy Birthday andBeyond! This year, andBeyond has been changing the tourism industry for 30 years thanks to its visions of sustainable tourism. Which main positive things can you draw from the past for the future?

Nicole Robinson, Marketing Director of andBeyond: Everything that we have achieved over the past 30 years is thanks to our business model of sustainable luxury travel based on Care of the Land, Wildlife and People. It is incredible to look back at what was started 30 years ago and to be able to see those conservation and community projects still in operation today. For us, it has helped to clarify the meaning of sustainability as, by definition, sustainability alludes to longevity and can only be tested with time. It is difficult

to claim sustainability over a two to five year time frame. So now we look forward to asking how we might build sustainability-mindedness into all our contexts – be it Africa, Asia or South America. We are encouraged that our African business has shown that traveling can be profitable AND leave our world a better place, and we want to export this philosophy to many more places.

Since 1991, andBeyond's credo has been: Care of the Land, Care of the Wildlife, Care of the People. What were the most moving moments for you personally that you were able to experience in the context of andBeyond's species conservation projects or social initiatives?

I had the privilege of being able to visit andBeyond Phinda Private Game Reserve in 1998, just before I started working for andBeyond. I can recall that our guide was Simon Naylor and that most of one of our game drives was spent tracking a leopard. Today Simon is Phinda's Reserve Manager and last December I joined some of his team as they were following up on one of the rescued pangolins that had been recently released on the reserve. A few days later we found out that the female we had tracked and observed had given birth to a pup, one of the first wild born pups from rescued pangolins. I felt so proud to have witnessed the possibilities that exist when we give nature a chance to restore itself.

During lockdown and travel restrictions, you have been one of the first brands that started with virtual offerings, in this case, virtual safaris for your guests. Did you manage to connect with new potential guests via these new platforms, and will these virtual offerings also stay a part of andBeyond's services even in "new normal" times after the COVID-19 crisis?

The free live safaris were initially developed as a way for us to stay in touch with our guests and to maintain an interest in the topic of safari. We feel that they have helped us enable future guests to dream of coming on safari and previous guests re-live their experiences. The overwhelming response to our interactive content has made us realize the potential of virtual safaris to provide wildlife access to a new audience, with the goal of educating and inspiring them on how they can leave their world a better place. We have carried on with the virtual safaris since our lodges have reopened and are still evaluating exactly how we will keep them going in the future.

The crisis has shown that safari tourism is an important economic sector that benefits both conservation and the communities that depend on it, and thus urgently needs to be preserved. How has

the pandemic changed conservation and sustainability projects at andBeyond?

The economic consequences of the lockdown have been felt extremely in the communities surrounding the game reserves where we operate, as so many people depend in some way or form on tourism. Hundreds of people who earn a living through the tourism sector have been impacted by lost or reduced income. andBeyond has always worked with our community development partner, Africa Foundation, to assist in building capacity in the communities surrounding the reserves where we operate. We have continued to work together throughout the Covid-19 crisis, supporting their campaign to focus on the most drastic needs of the communities - clinic support, water access, food assistance, business support, school PPE, and classrooms. Recognizing the need to keep a flow of income towards such projects, we dedicate a significant percentage of the profits from our virtual experiences towards Covid-related community projects, with the balance going towards conservation initiatives and some to our staff.

Many guests put more and more value on sustainable travel. As pioneer and expert in eco-conscious travel, how would you advise hoteliers who want to act in a more sustainably way?

I feel that one of the most crucial things that you can do in terms of sustainability is, firstly, to measure what you are consuming and, secondly, to have clear and well-defined goals for how you want to reduce your consumption. Sustainability can be overwhelming, and transparency and clear reporting can go a long way towards breaking it down into achievable steps.

Another thing that we have learned, particularly over the Covid period, is that the travel industry can achieve so much more when we work together. I think that we will see a lot more collaboration in the industry in the future, particularly in terms of conservation and community initiatives, as

well as when it comes to sharing knowledge about sustainability.

The Big Five, but also the little wonders of the African savanna attract visitors from all over the world. How important are rare species for travel sales? Do customers come with a kind of bucket list?

Many of Africa's endangered species, such as the rhino and the lion, have become emblematic of the continent but few people realize that they are also important indicator species of the health of an ecosystem. Many people who are initially attracted by the prospect of seeing the famous Big Five quickly become aware of conservation issues once they are on safari. As they spend time on game drive, they also become more conscious of the smaller wonders of the bush. In this way, while we often have many first-time guests coming to us with a wish list of what they would like to see, they often find themselves coming back time and again to experience not only the variety of attractions that Africa can offer but also the warm hospitality of its incredible people.

With 29 lodges mainly in Southern Africa, but also one in South America and soon a new opening in Bhutan, what do andBeyond's future expansion strategies look like and which countries will you focus on over the next years?

The pandemic has put a number of our plans on hold and it's hard to say exactly what the future will hold and when. However, we remain focused on our expansion plans in South America and Asia, as well as on creating more comprehensive lodge circuits in some of the African countries where we already operate. We have a strong desire to export our philosophy of luxury experiential travel that leaves our world a better place through care of the land, wildlife and people.

andBeyond operates and owns beautiful lodges, but also organizes luxury tours in Africa, Asia and South America. What would a trip customized for Nicole Robinson be like and what elements should not be missing?

A customized tour in andBeyond's hands would start with a travel specialist who seeks to understand why I am travelling and who I am travelling with – friends, family or by myself. They would guide me through the best way to navigate the complications of travel post-Covid and would tailor my trip to strike the balance of making the most of my travel time while ensuring that I cover all the experiences on my list. If I were to travel right now, I would choose a destination where I could stay for 7 to 10 days, minimizing the amount of time lost to logistics and maximizing the varied experiences I could choose to do (or not). I would see myself at andBeyond Sossusvlei Desert Lodge or andBeyond Mnemba Island - far away from the world, reconnecting with myself and my loved ones.

Last December, you launched the andBeyond "Dream Board", a digital platform on your website where guests can virtually create their dream trips and start planning their upcoming adventures. Can you already tell what most of your guests are looking for and filter upcoming travel trends?

We are starting to gather some information from the Dream Boards created and definite trends show that safari and wildlife or reconnection with nature and wilderness are most popular. Our properties are small (most of them are around 10 rooms), so they provide the perfect opportunity to get away from the crowds and have the wide-open spaces all to yourself. We are also seeing an increase in longer stays in one place, as well as private travel and exclusive villas. The Galapagos and other islands, the Okavango Delta and the Serengeti are the top five destinations currently.