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## GO > VENTURE

By Stephanie Pearson

### Business of the Bush

DON'T KNOCK MONOPOLIES UNTIL YOU'VE EXPERIENCED WILDERNESS SAFARIS' RAREFIED BUT RESPONSIBLE VISION OF AFRICA

**“EVERYONE, GET IN THE CAR!** Get in the car now!”

Chief isn't a guy to panic—he grew up in the bush and is packing a loaded rifle. But before I can take another sip of gin and tonic, my Botswanan guide grabs the glass from my hand, tosses it into the picnic basket, and practically throws me into the truck. That's when I notice the bull elephant 30 feet away, flapping his ears and ready to charge.

“Sorry, I've closed my bar,” Chief says as he peels toward safety.

I knew Botswana had big animals, but I wasn't prepared to be so quickly immersed in *Mutual of Omaha's Wild Kingdom*. Earlier, on the 45-minute drive from the dusty airfield to Vumbura Plains safari camp, we drove through waves of smoldering heat wafting alternately with the scents of wild sage and the inside of a carnivore's mouth. Sable antelope hid in the grass, yellow-billed oxpeckers ate ticks off giraffes, and baboons goofed off in the sausage trees.

That evening, after a candlelit dinner flowing with South African wines, I head for my villa, with its giant gauze-draped bed, to sleep off my jet lag. But the moon hangs like a cradle low in the sky, and the crickets, frogs, and elephants are whipping up a raucous symphony, as if to say, “Sleep when you're dead, fool! Africa is for living.”

This well-orchestrated bush adventure is brought to you by Wilderness Safaris, southern Africa's largest luxury outfitter. The “Wilderness way” is pretty simple: Partner with local governments, communities, and NGOs to establish luxurious yet sustainable camps in popular wildlife destinations, which in turn provide employment to local communities and protection for natural resources.

Almost every African safari company operates on a similar model;



#### MANICURING THE WILDS

By mixing polished adventure with a solid business plan and infrastructure, Wilderness Safaris is establishing itself as the African gold standard.

the difference with Wilderness is sheer numbers. The 25-year-old company owns more than 51 lodges spread over 6.4 million acres in South Africa, Botswana, Namibia, Zimbabwe, Malawi, and the Seychelles. The most recent additions are five lodges in Zambia, which opened in 2007. With 2,000 employees and net annual sales of \$100 million, it's no stretch to call Wilderness the Starbucks of safari operators.

“Our objective is to preserve the wild places in which we're lucky enough to operate,” CEO Malcolm McCulloch told me from his Johannesburg headquarters. “But we obviously have to make money in order to achieve that objective.”

Wilderness accomplishes this by focusing on the properties and leaving the marketing and sales to a select group of independent booking agents, like Discover Africa or Uncharted Outposts. “If a client calls

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