

On safari with an African legend

BRIAN Crisp joins luxury travel company Abercrombie and Kent's founder to listen to tales of the Kenyan wilderness while camping.

By Brian Crisp

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Geoffrey Kent is a real storyteller. Picture: Brian Crisp *Source:National Features*

GEOFFREY Kent is a storyteller. If you ask a question, prepare to be taken on a journey of twists and turns. He rarely answers with a yes, or no.

There is always an anecdote to illustrate, add colour to, or bring to life a story.

And he likes a yarn.

And there's nowhere better to hear those stories than sitting in one of his luxury camps while on safari in his native land of Kenya.

Kent is very much the heart and soul of Abercrombie & Kent - the upmarket travel company that this year celebrated its 50th anniversary.

There is no Abercrombie. Geoffrey made him up to get to the front of the Yellow Pages listings. He's also often used Abercrombie as the scapegoat when someone needed to be blamed for things that have gone wrong. That rarely happens these days - A&K, as it is commonly known, is one of the most reliable brands in travel.

Kent is now in his early 70s, although he dresses and acts much younger. He is fit and fashion-conscious. He appears perfectly groomed, from his styled ginger hair to his white leather designer

shoes. I first met Kent at the Muthaiga Club in Nairobi. He was hosting a lunch for about 40 clients who were on safari in Kenya as part of a special trip organised to celebrate A&K's 50th anniversary.

Kent took time to meet and chat with every one of his guests during that lunch. He thanked them, fed them and entertained them with a 50-minute history lesson about his company.

The Muthaiga Club opened on New Year's Eve in 1913 and was the meeting place for Kenya's white high society members. It features often in the Meryl Streep-Robert Redford movie *Out of Africa*.

Even today, it belongs to another time. The crisp blue and white staff uniforms contrast with the waiters' dark skin. An American man I was travelling with was chided for not taking his hat off when he entered the club. We were warned that we were not allowed to take any photos. What happens in the club stays in the club.

As a young boy, Kent was expelled from private school in Nairobi and sent, by his father, to the UK to join the armed forces. Being from Kenya put him at the bottom of the food chain at Sandhurst.

"The Brits treated me as the colonial from Kenya," he recalls. "I had to find a way to make a name for myself and I did -as a polo player. That raised my position in the armed forces' hierarchy."

He returned home when the Brits handed Kenya back to the locals and his family was forced off their farm.

Kent hatched a lot of his early ideas for the travel business in the Muthaiga Club. It was where the hunters of Kenya would gather, and drink. These men, at the time, were the superstars of the country. Kent rattles off their names as if he were talking about football phenoms Pele, Maradona and Beckham.

The hunting market was congested. And he knew that he was a young buck who would struggle to compete.

So, he decided to hunt, but in a different way. His point of difference would not only be luxury safari but his guests would "shoot with a camera, not with a gun".

After an evening enjoying Kent's hospitality, I headed off with him to one of his mobile luxury safari camps, this one on the Lewa Wilderness in northern Kenya. It was a 40-minute flight from Nairobi in an 11-seater 208B Cessna Caravan plane.

Thankfully there was a fence around the airport to keep out the animals, but as the plane took off there was nothing to protect us from the wall of dark storm clouds.

Kenya is king when it comes to animals. And on the drive from the airport to camp it could not have been more evident. We saw elephant, zebra, ostrich, giraffe and rhino on the 30-minute drive, and we hadn't really even ventured off what could be called the main road.

The luxury camp had a dozen individual tents plus two communal tents for dining and relaxing. My tent, actually a tent inside a tent, had a queen bed, sink, proper toilet and outside shower. My eager butler volunteered that he would heat water for the shower whenever I wanted to bathe.

He also turned my bed down at night, put a couple of hot-water bottles between the sheets, carefully arranged my mozzie net and, in a very civilised touch, brought me Kenyan coffee (some of the best in the world) and biscuits each morning before my safari.

This is the way camping should be.

In the dining room as we sat around an eight-seater table, clinking crystal glasses and eating a three-course meal inspired by local produce on china plates, Kent continued sharing his life's adventures.

He doesn't brag. But he does mix with stars, royalty and the most successful businessmen on the planet. He calls Sting and Trudie friends and was the captain of Prince Charles' polo team.

History will show him to be a visionary, an opportunist, and someone who never left anything to chance - or to other people. He is impulsive and believes we should all spend more because "if we don't, we only end up leaving it to our heirs".

These days, Kent lives in Monaco with his third wife, a stunning Brazilian (he proudly showed me photos) in her late 20s. In his day Kent was arguably one of the best polo players in the world.

He won the US Open twice, the US Gold Cup and the World Cup. During the '70s he was one of the faces of luxury watch-making company Rolex - the other two were golf legend Arnold Palmer and French ski racer Jean-Claude Killy.

He tells stories of being held hostage in the Sudan and being freed only after paying a \$250,000 ransom, and of importing ice cream trucks and portaloos into Saudi Arabia.

"I made a fortune. It was so hot. I had Bedford trucks serving soft-serve on every corner - there were queues of people stretched down the streets."

When he travels on holiday he heads to the Maldives or the Isla Simca, off Panama. He lists his favourite cities as Rio, London and Sydney.

His clients are mainly Americans (60 per cent), but he is adamant that in 10 years the Chinese will replace them as his biggest business opportunity.

"But you have to do it their way, not how you want to do it," he says.

He blogs and tweets as he travels the world and often uses phrases such as "A&K looks for things that have never been done before" and "we were the first to do it".

So, what exactly makes the A&K difference?

For me, it is the personal touches. The holiday experience is a meeting of your ideas and A&K's expertise. Nothing is rigid and formatted.

Our safari experience was not pre-ordained. The guide Cosmas Maluki was happy to oblige the group's every wish. He told us what was the best practice and then let us decide if that was how we would proceed. But that's Africa really - anything is possible.

A storm hit our campsite on the last night we were in Lewa. The tents stayed dry and I was safe, warm and cosy in my bed. The next morning, though, cat prints were found in the mud outside the tents. Thank heavens for inside tent toilets.

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