



Meet a traveller: Elizabeth Gordon, African safari queen

If safaris are the stuff of dreams for many travellers, then Elizabeth Gordon has been living that dream for her entire life.

Born in Kenya, she spent much of her childhood exploring Africa with her mother Marcia, who spent decades building up an encyclopaedic, first-hand knowledge of the continent's best lodges. After Elizabeth had gained hands-on experience of running a high-end camp herself in Namibia, the pair joined forces to found [Extraordinary Journeys](#), a multi-award-winning safari company that creates custom-made tours of Africa and elsewhere.

Lonely Planet asked her what it's like to be part of a pioneering mother-daughter team, where she would go for a money-no-object trip, and how tour operators can play a role in protecting Africa's wildlife.



Over the years, Elizabeth has explored many corners of Africa by water, land and air © Elizabeth Gordon

Where was your last trip?

I went to Kenya to explore the northern territories. We took a helicopter all the way to Lake Turkana. I was also in the Masai Mara and ended with beach time on the island of Lamu, which is one of my favourite getaways. I love combining beach and culture, and Lamu is a very bohemian, off-the-beaten-path experience.

Where is your next trip?

I'm intrigued by this trip to Chad to Zakouma National Park, or Ethiopia to the Omo Valley. I love remote places where most people don't go. I like delving deeper into Africa, like my trip to Lake Turkana. It felt so special to be able to witness a place that few people see. The people who live in these areas are so untouched by our society.

I also love wildlife. Zakouma is so hard to get to and nobody thinks of Chad as a wildlife destination, but Zakouma has great game. And the company I am talking to about the Omo Valley works with the local community to create a unique, authentic experience.



Marcia and the then four-year-old Elizabeth, left, at the train station in Mombasa, Kenya, in 1985 © Elizabeth Gordon

What is your first travel-related memory?

Since my family owned a tour operating company in Kenya, I've travelled my whole life. As a child, I remember shuttling back and forth between Nairobi and Paris with my mum.

However, one of my first real travel-related memories was from the summer my family spent in Taiwan when I was six years old. It was exotic for me. I knew Kenya, but Taiwan was a very different experience. It was the first time I wondered, 'What is this going to be like?' I remember that thought so clearly in the cab on the way to the airport.

Aisle or window seat?

Window seat. I like to lean against the window and look out. I usually fall asleep and nobody wakes me up. I love it.



Elizabeth and Marcia today: would you be brave enough to go into business with your mum? © Elizabeth Gordon

What are the benefits and challenges of working in a mother-daughter team?

Benefits: you get to spend a lot of time with your mom. There's a level of trust that we always have the best interests of the other at heart. It's not just about what's best for her, or best for me, it's about what's best for us. In our case, my mom takes a lot of joy in seeing me succeed. This is a company we

built together; it just feels nice, secure and safe.

Challenges: sometimes, you don't want your mom to be your business partner, you want her to be your mom. And it's hard to hold each other accountable sometimes because it's your mom and you don't want to be mad at your mom, and vice versa.

What, in your experience, tends to surprise your guests most about Africa?

It depends on the country, but guests always think there are going to be bugs and diseases, and Africa's a scary place. Guests are always surprised by how sophisticated the cities are, but, of course, certain parts of Africa are very wild. The people are friendly and the experience when you're in camp is magical. Safari is such a unique trip. Guests are amazed at just how luxurious a tented camp can be. They think they're camping, and then they realise, they're not camping at all...



Helicopter safaris offer a unique perspective on Africa's landscape © Elizabeth Gordon

If money were no object, what is your dream safari itinerary?

Kenya is still my dream trip. I would take a helicopter safari again, but I would spend more time in Lake Turkana. I would also love a walking safari from Ol Malo, situated on the northern edge of the Laikipia Plateau, down to Lewa Conservancy, and then spending time at Lewa. I'd love to do the hike down there. Ethiopia would also be an amazing hiking experience.

Of the destinations 'out of Africa', hiking Ladakh in India is a dream. A non-hiking dream safari is seeing the lemurs in Madagascar.

Of the many experiences offered by Extraordinary Journeys, do you have a personal favourite?

I love the helicopter safaris... Microlights (an aeroplane, capable of flight in the same way as any other) is an exhilarating experience. I obviously love the walking safaris. A really good walking safari is so much fun. I always feel more connected to nature when I'm walking; you just look at things differently. Biking is also a really fun experience.



Elizabeth still gets a thrill from seeing elephants in the wild © Elizabeth Gordon

Can you tell us about your most memorable wildlife encounter?

For me, my most memorable wildlife encounter was the first time I saw an elephant on foot. I was 12 years old and I was surprised by how close we were to them. Elephants are quiet and my heart was pounding so fast to be that close to such a big animal.

If you could see one extinct or even mythical creature, what would it be and why?

I would love to see a Brachiosaurus. I just love their long necks and they seemed like very gentle creatures. They remind me of giraffes. Who wouldn't want to meet one?

How can safari companies support sustainability?

For starters, we need to make it economically viable to protect the wilderness. Thus, we choose to work exclusively with partners on the ground who follow strict guidelines to protect wilderness and work closely with local communities. It's about committing to working with the parks and the local people to ensure these areas are protected in the long run. They can't afford to cut corners, which is why the camps we use aren't cheap.



Extraordinary Journeys works with partners like Tongabezi Safari Lodge, Zambia, which follow strict policies to protect the environment © Tongabezi Safari Lodge

What else can be done to protect Africa's wildlife?

We can make sure local people are invested in protecting Africa's wildlife. This can be achieved by hiring locally, educating the schools in the area and ensuring that it's economically valuable. We need them to feel the need to protect their heritage because if we don't get their buy-in, then we've lost the battle because it's their country.

One of the biggest issues is human-wildlife conflict. We need to protect the land because animals need space and once people move in on the land, it's hard to take it back.

Do you have any travel habits or rituals?

I try to exhaust myself by staying up all night before a flight so I can sleep on the plane.

What has been your most challenging travel experience?

My most challenging travel experience was when my husband ‘forgot’ to organise the end of our trip in Malawi. We didn’t know where to go so we had to hitchhike all the way back to Lilongwe. It really felt like there was only one car per day in the country. Now, I find the experience hilarious. It’s such a good story.



Learning to go with the flow makes travel a lot more fun, says Elizabeth © Elizabeth Gordon

What is your best travel souvenir?

I am usually a very bad souvenir buyer, but my best souvenirs are ragdolls from Malawi that my husband and I bought to give to all our friends who have babies. They’re so cute though, so we’ve kept them all. Now, we have all these little baby dolls on our bed...

What is the best piece of travel advice you’ve received?

When things go wrong, it’s your decision how to react to it. You can’t control things; the only thing you can control is your reaction.

Quick, an asteroid is going to hit the earth in one week! Which is the one travel dream you’d rush to fulfil?

Freediving with dolphins in Mozambique with expert freedivers Hanli Prinsloo and Peter Marshall (and being adopted by them).

What advice would you give a first-time traveller?

Say 'Yes!' and be open to things. Don't try to control everything; just let things happen. Trust me, travel (and life) is more fun that way.

Find out more about Extraordinary Journeys and follow Elizabeth on Instagram @babethogordon.

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