

TRANSFORMATIVE TRAVEL

I chatted recently with Mark Lakin Esq, philanthropist, world traveller, professional travel photographer and co-founder and director of Epic Road, a New York-based luxury travel design company, that creates bespoke holidays, safaris and honeymoons in Africa and the Arctic that combine the planet's great adventures with thought-provoking experiences related to humanitarian and conservation initiatives. While Epic Road's clients primarily go on vacation to relax and have fun, it is most often the exceptional, mind-expansive journeys that inspire, captivate and thrill them.

In pursuit of happiness and meaning

For Mark, his travels were a personal awakening. "I am a corporate lawyer by training, schooled at New York University, and practised law at one of the most prominent law firms in New York City for eight years." While practising law he travelled extensively for leisure in his capacity as a global citizen and a travel photographer, "I saw Tanzania's Great Migration by hot air balloon and sat next to mountain gorillas in Rwanda's volcanoes. I was warmly welcomed by families into their homes amid a genocide in the Democratic Republic of Congo and played soccer with orphans living in child-headed households in South Africa. I went on a daily bow and

arrow hunt for food with a nomadic click speaking tribe and hiked a mountain range with the Masai. While in these counties I was exposed to inexplicable beauty, culture, tradition, architecture and biodiversity. It was magic. As any traveller that scratches below the surface though, I was also exposed to incredible hardship, poaching, habitat loss, poverty, disease and suffering. After travelling so much and seeing what I had seen, I wanted to make my mark on the world. I eventually left law to pursue my three loves: travel, philanthropy and photography."

For his good friend and business partner, Marc Chafiiian, starting a luxury experiential travel company together allowed him to pursue his dream of finding new ways for tourism to work for the benefit of the planet. Today, Marc's vision of bringing wildlife conservation, climate change and marine conservation to the forefront of all travellers' consciousness is being realised through the company's global humanitarian and conservation initiatives. His favourite destinations include the beaches of northern Mozambique, Faru Faru Lodge in Tanzania, the High Atlas Mountains of Morocco, Svalbard, the Okavango Delta, Montauk and the mountains surrounding Salta in Argentina. His passion for adventure travel and conservation meshes perfectly with the company's ethos: to inspire travellers with transformational experiences that captivate, excite and raise awareness.

His favourite travel experiences include geo-tagging, measuring and recording giant leatherback turtles as they lay eggs in the sand, sailing a traditional dhow in Mozambique, studying lion genealogy in the game rich plains of the Serengeti, tagging sharks in the name of conservation, dog sledding, measuring glacial retreat on the rugged glaciers of the Polar Circle and diving with bumphead parrotfish in the Indian Ocean.



A young Himba boy in the Namib Desert who has just been given an MPOWERD light from an Epic Road traveller and now has light at night for the first time



Jeffrey A. Kottler, PhD, said of transformative travel that there is, "no other human activity that has greater potential to alter your perceptions or the ways you choose your life."

– Kottler, 1998, p. 14

Transformative Travel

This was the first time I had heard the term transformative travel and I asked Mark what the concept means to him personally, and what it was that led him and his partner to build their travel business around the idea of transformative experiences. Was the decision driven through personal experiences, or were they merely looking for a unique differentiator in a busy market.

"My co-founder Marc Chafiiian and I found that we could take luxury trips all around the world but when it came to that truly memorable experience, participating in a bow and arrow hunt with a tribe, shark tagging, rhino micro-chipping, or a soccer ball drop at an orphanage, we always needed to coordinate that aspect of the trip ourselves," said Mark. "We felt that these experiences were the most special and memorable part of our journey and it was so hard to find this seemingly elusive piece and we didn't understand why. Necessity being the mother of invention, we set up shop focusing on a genre of travel that simply wasn't being offered."

The emboldened directors of Epic Road felt that while there were many companies out there that catered to those individuals with the luxury of time who could for example build a playground, there was nothing that catered to those with the luxury of money, individuals with notable networks and specialised educations, that allowed them to take the luxury holidays they wanted to take but at the same time exposed them to a range of humanitarian and conservation initiatives. "We focus on the inspiration and transformation of our clients on the trip rather than only the good being done on the ground at that time. We want to be the rock in the pond that sets off the ripple effect for life. We felt then and still feel now, that if we can expose the influential to a range of humanitarian and conservation initiatives, they have a spectacular ability to affect those issues. We offer five star vacations with a soul." At Epic Road, Mark and his partner pair luxury and adventure with meaningful educational and philanthropic experiences led by conservationists, scientists and reputable charities. While on safari, you can visit a local orphanage, break bread with a local tribe or visit micro-finance projects. While exploring glaciers, you can trek with a climate change scientist and learn on-site about glacial retreat. It is our hope that through exposure to the planet's great treasures, our travellers will truly appreciate their majesty and value their preservation and conservation.

Photos: © Mark Lakin Photography

The Experiences

Epic Road is for passionate travellers seeking immersive, inspirational and authentic travel with special access to the world's great treasures, whether they are honeymooners, families, corporates doing team building or incentive travel, and charities seeking to connect donors and board members to their programmes. "To date we have sent clients on bow and arrow hunts with the Hadzabe, a nomadic click speaking tribe in Tanzania, gorilla tracking in Rwanda, and micro-chipping rhinos in South Africa, as well as to see polar bears emerge from their dens with their newborn cubs in the Arctic. Some have visited Southern Ethiopia to see the great lost tribes like the Mursi who wear seven inch lip plates in their bottom lips.

I asked Mark what the organisations that the clients visit get out of the transformative travel experience and he shared that they always make a donation in exchange for the experience. The donation can be money or a donation in kind, such as Luci lights or soccer balls and it is often both. The big upside for the organisations is that if a donor is truly moved by the experience, they can and do make significant donations that can fund entire projects and initiatives.

When it comes to identifying and selecting the projects with which Epic Road partners for the transformative experiences, Mark says there are two important factors, namely, the quality (integrity and efficiency) of the organisation and then the experience itself must be a unique and inspiring (rather than sad or depressing), connective, immersive, exciting, adventurous, eye-opening experience that makes the learning seamless, active and fun. "We address all sorts of causes all over the board but our clients view must be through a cutting edge organisation addressing the issue in an effective manner with an experience that is special in its own right."

Mark says that, in South Africa in particular, there are a number of luxury lodges participating in conservation initiatives and attempting to uplift the communities in which they operate. Some of the more exciting and effective initiatives currently in place include those happening at Singita, Wilderness Safaris and at andBeyond, as well as Great Plains' Rhino relocation programme.

NON-PROFIT ORGANISATIONS AND PARTNERS

Goods for Good – www.goods4good.org

CouldYou – www.couldyou.org

The Bodhi Tree Foundation – www.thebodhitreefoundation.org

S.A.FE – www.saveafricaselephants.com

Kingsley Holgate – www.kingsleyholgate.net

The Lonely Road Foundation – www.thelonelyroad.org

United Against Malaria – unitedagainstmalaria.org

MPOWERD (Luci Lights) – www.mpowerd.com

Branson Centre for Entrepreneurship – www.bransoncentre.org

Virgin Unite – www.virginunite.com

Worldwide Helpers – www.worldwidehelpers.org

African Leadership Institute – www.alinstitute.org





A shift in the right direction

I was curious to find out if Mark has noticed a change in traveller behaviour over his extensive years of travel. He confirmed that he has, that people now want to travel deeply, "It used to be about never leaving the hotel, now it's about spending as much time as possible out of the hotel and interacting with the local populations, animals and landscapes. People want to travel further and deeper, and luxury is no longer about just thread counts and single malt scotches but rather about special experiences and access to the local and unique aspects of a destination."

Of Epic Road's clients and their experiences, Mark says they receive incredibly positive feedback, "We follow up and get detailed feedback via a call, meeting or e-mail from almost every client. They are without exception deeply moved and very often catalysed into action. They donate, they fundraise, they tweet, Facebook, and Instagram, constantly raising awareness within their sphere of influence. Remember we are a rock in a pond and that ripple effect will go on and on. We may never know the true extent of the impact of a single transformative travel experience."

He recalls a particular Goods for Good donor trip, which he led personally, facilitating donor engagement as a board member. One donor made a \$25,000 donation to seed a chicken farm business in a community, the proceeds of which support orphan care. She used her daughter's bat-mitzvah to fund the donation in order to engage her children and community. She is returning soon to Africa to see the business in action and to also do a solar light drop, and to enjoy a luxury safari, visit Victoria Falls and Likoma Island. She is not coming alone, she is bringing nine children between the ages of five through sixteen, two sets of parents and two sets of grandparents, who all now share the immersion and the lesson with her and will grow together as a family over shared values. There is much talk about sustainability these days, so I asked Mark how he sees the travel and tourism industry impacting on the long-term transformation of human behaviour which is needed to realise global sustainable development outcomes. He replied, "Through immersion comes awareness and through awareness comes transformation. The internet is how you touch many people at a shallow level. Travel is how you touch a selection of those people at a deeper level."

Photos: © Mark Lakin Photography



EPIC ROAD

Some of the transformative adventures offered by Epic Road include:

Rhino Microchip

Luci Solar Light Drop

Elephant Conservation

David Sheldrick Wildlife Trust

Exposure to Endangered Species

Bow and Arrow Hunt

Childhood Education

For more information visit www.epicroad.com

For more information on Mark Lakin Photography visit www.marklakin.com

Corporate Transformational Experiences

I have to be honest, I was feeling quite inspired hearing about the impact that Epic Road's experiences were having on individuals and it got me thinking about the bigger picture. I asked Mark whether he thought there was scope for corporates to engage with their teams in transformative travel experiences. Surely if long term global sustainability is to succeed, then more sustainability ambassadors are needed. With the number of companies worldwide who conference on a regular basis, wouldn't this be an excellent way for executives to enlighten themselves and their team and make the conference experience a more meaningful, real team building experience? His response was a resounding yes, "Team building around global humanitarian and environmental causes is such a natural fit and a great PR moment for corporates looking to show their commitment to humanitarian and conservation initiatives everywhere. It would create internal good for a company and provide external good for the world. We must engage the corporates. Even for incentive travel, there is an opportunity to reward a high performing employee with an incentive vacation, but with a rewarding experience of a solar light drop included in the experience."

Philanthropy

Mark doesn't just talk the talk. He leads poverty immersion experiences for CouldYou, with the help of various Archbishop Tutu Fellows, (the flagship programme of the African Leadership Institute). CouldYou is a non-profit organisation that takes six wealthy Americans of influence per quarter to Mozambique and immerses them in extreme poverty so they may understand where their abilities and networks intersect with the needs of the world. Mark explains, "Essentially we take those with a lot to leverage, and through immersion and life coaching help them to figure out how they as individuals can make a difference in the world." Mark

REAL LUXURY INSIDE

Luxury and lifestyle at the highest standards. Exclusive stories and photography spreads. Take yourself on a fascinating journey.



also sits on the board of Goods for Good and organisation which partners with local community-based organisations to seed and manage local businesses, the proceeds of which have resulted in the education of 75,000 orphans in Malawi and helped them forge a better life for generations to come. He consequently spends a lot of time in Malawi monitoring their progress and photographing their children and programmes for their news blasts.

He also serves on the Board of the Bodhi Tree Foundation, a non-profit organisation that enables travellers and the travel industry to support people in need, protect cultural heritage and conserve our planet's biodiversity. The S.A.F.E. Campaign, a new initiative from The Bodhi Tree Foundation, is dedicated to galvanising and uniting the tourism industry to help end the dramatic rise in poaching of Africa's elephants. He has consulted for United Against Malaria in a fundraising capacity and travelled with modern day explorer Kingsley Holgate to the far corners of Africa to distribute mosquito nets to pregnant mothers and mothers with children under the age of five, educating them on how to avoid contracting this terrible disease.

In light of his involvement with these humanitarian organisations, I had to ask which Epic Road Initiative was closest to his heart. "If I had to pick just one, then it would have to be childhood education. The Luci Solar Light drops that our clients participate in, enable children to study after the sun has set. The rhino micro-chipping and elephant conservation initiatives are also very important to me."

Photography

Mark is an experienced travel photographer who has exhibited world-wide, from the roof of the Time Warner Center, to the townships of South Africa. He focuses on social cause fine art photography, to raise awareness about conservation and humanitarian issues around the world. Epic Road operates out of his stylish gallery in the most exclusive part of Manhattan's West Village. ■ Lindsay Grubb

Photos: © Mark Lakin Photography

CÔTE D'AZUR | COURCHEVEL | DUBAI | GENÈVE | MUNICH | **PARIS** | ST. MORITZ | SOUTH AFRICA | VIENNA | ZURICH

www.publishinggroupdeluxe.com