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Leading ladies of Africa

A new breed of female safari guide is succeeding in a macho domain

SUE WATT

Verity Williams, Sabuk Lodge, Laikipia Plateau, Kenya: One of Africa's pioneer female safari guides, Kenyan-born Verity Williams started as secretary to the renowned safari outfitters Ker & Downey in 1962. Twenty years later, she infiltrated the company's very much male-dominated guiding fraternity. "I thought if you can't beat them, join them," she says. "I got my licences and asked Ker & Downey's general manager for some safari guiding work. He said, 'What? You're a woman!' That was my red rag. My big break came when a friend needed another guide. He, I and the clients all survived. The rest is history." Sitting by the fire at her home, Sabuk Lodge in Laikipia, Williams describes her colourful career, from

leading top-of-the-range private camping safaris with up to 25 clients and 40 (mostly male) staff, to working on film locations for *Out of Africa* and *The Constant Gardener*. Today, the Kenyan Professional Safari Guides Association estimates that 300 of Kenya's 4000 guides are women. In Verity's day, the prejudices initially proved challenging. Married to a leading guide, she was regarded by Ker & Downey as her husband's wife rather than a guide in her own right. Some men resented her being their boss. Yet only one client, a woman, was reluctant to have a female guide. Williams's resilience, charm, sense of fun and superb knowledge of the bush soon won the day. Now in her early 70s, Verity guides on private safaris but mostly hosts her guests at Sabuk Lodge, which overlooks the Ewaso Ng'iro River. She works closely with Lobarishereki village and school, and through her connections, guests could be lucky enough to glimpse genuine Samburu culture at events such as a wedding with dancing and jumping displays by warriors.

Elizabeth Natumoi, Koiyaki Guiding School, Naboisho Conservancy, Kenya: Both Samburu and Maasai cultures are slow to change, but in Naboisho Conservancy, bordering the Maasai Mara, there are encouraging signs of progress. There I meet Elizabeth Natumoi, one of four

women in this year's intake at Koiyaki Guiding School, established in 2005 to help young Maasai qualify as guides. "I want to be a role model for other Maasai women," she tells me. Bright, sassy and determined, she will take her exams in August.

'I want to be a role model for other Maasai women'

ELIZABETH NATUMOI
KOIYAKI GUIDING SCHOOL

Deb Tittle, Freelance walking guide, South Luangwa National Park, Zambia: A love of wildlife was triggered by watching *Tarzan* when Tittle was four years old, at home in Stockton-on-Tees, in northeast England. In her 20s, she drove overland trucks for tour companies around Africa. "That's when I saw non-African guides," she says. "I thought, if they can do it, so can I." South Luangwa, famous for walking safaris and night drives, became Tittle's home. After qualifying, she worked for renowned guides Derek Shenton and Robin Pope, establishing fly camps and leading walking safaris for 18 years. "There was initially some resistance. I felt if something went wrong, guides would say, 'What do you expect? She's a woman.' So I had to be good ... I tend to walk in a very proactive way - let's get in there, let's track the stuff. It's not your usual nature walk." Walking between Lion Camp and Nsefu lodges, where I stay in South Luangwa, I waded up to my knees through the croc-infested Luangwa River, spotting lions on one bank and hyenas on the other

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Guiding lights: Aziza Mbwana, main; and, clockwise from above, Malebogo Kgoleng, Denyse Umugwaneza, Verity Williams, Elizabeth Natumoi and Deb Tittle. Tanzanian hippos cool off, right

(admittedly, through binoculars) but, thankfully, no crocs. "This line of people crossing the river is a rare event – crocs wouldn't know how to react," Tittle says, only semi-reassuringly. With an intuitive approach and about 2500 walks under her belt, Tittle has a natural connection with the bush, but her safaris aren't just about flora and fauna. "This job is 90 per cent people, 10 per cent wildlife. I enjoy finding what the hook is for people, tailoring a safari towards that and making it fun." She has trained more than 60 Zambian guides, but few have been women. "Girls here are now into make-up and fashion: they're exposed to the real world. This is too much like their old world," she says. But it is Tittle's world. She will soon open her own camp in South Luangwa.

Aziza Mbwana, andBeyond Ngorongoro Crater Lodge, Ngorongoro Crater Conservation Area, Tanzania: If guides were celebrities, Mbwana would be in the A-list category. As we drive around the spectacular Ngorongoro Crater, almost every driver waves or stops to chat. "Do you know all these guys?" I ask. "No, but they all know me," she smiles. That is hardly surprising. Having developed a fascination with wildlife as a child on family trips through Tanzania, in 2004 Mbwana became the first female ranger employed in East Africa by luxury



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conservation safari company andBeyond. After a grueling selection process involving more than 300 applicants, she started at Lake Manyara Tree Lodge, moving to Ngorongoro Crater Lodge in 2008. Tanzania's safari society seems more of a male bastion than most, with fewer than 10 female guides out of about 2000. "It felt great when I started – everyone was shocked... they'd say you're not supposed to be in the bush, that's not your job, you should be in the office," she says. Now Mbwana is andBeyond's assistant head ranger, probably as much a consequence of her innate ease with people as her resilience, experience and knowledge of wildlife. With two daughters, balancing work and family life is her greatest challenge. Her eldest daughter, aged nine, dreams of following in her mother's guiding footsteps. "She'll have to be persistent," Mbwana says, "but she can do it."

Malebogo Kgoleng, Chobe Game Lodge, Chobe National Park, Botswana: Based at Chobe Game Lodge, Chobe's Angels is believed to be Africa's only all-female guiding team. "In 2004, Botswana had barely half a dozen

female guides," Johan Bruwer, the lodge's general manager, says. "We had one in our team, which guests found fascinating. It was perceived to be a male-dominated environment needing testosterone to handle animal threats or maintain vehicles. But I realised women could be more effective than men: they look after their equipment better; they tend to absorb information more quickly and are better communicators with our guests, because they have to prove themselves. Now Botswana has a thriving guiding community of about 50 women and we have 16 in the Chobe's Angels squad." In 2006, Malebogo Kgoleng, known as Lebo, joined the team. On our game drive around Botswana's busiest park dominated by the inky Chobe River and thousands of elephants, she sits confidently behind the wheel of a 14-seater, 4.2-litre Toyota Landcruiser. "When guests first see me, they say, 'Wow, you're our first lady guide.' The roads in Chobe aren't too bad and the animals are calm. But it's important to know their behaviour, to respect them and give them space. I think we ladies are calm and humble, we take our time. We have the heart to handle all the guests."

Denyse Umugwaneza, Akagera National Park, Rwanda: At the time of Rwanda's brutal genocide in 1994, when 800,000 people lost their lives, Umugwaneza was seven. In school holidays, to escape from the chaos of Kigali, she would visit her aunt, who lived near Akagera National Park. Its wildlife captivated her young imagination. In 2006, she began working as a guide, benefiting from President Kagame's Vision 2020 program aimed at uniting Rwanda: one of its tenets is gender equality. Today, of six guides employed by African Parks (the conservation organisation that manages Akagera), two are female and another two women are freelance. Rwanda's mountain gorilla guides and trackers also have a healthy gender balance relative to other African countries, with 11 women in a 70-strong workforce. Overshadowed by Rwanda's famous gorillas, Akagera isn't yet firmly on the tourist radar. Its wildlife is, however, increasing through determined conservation efforts, with lions and potentially rhino due to be reintroduced shortly. Umugwaneza's enthusiasm and love for Akagera is infectious. Her passion is birds, which is helpful since the park is home to 480 species and its undulating hills, valleys and lakes constitute one of Africa's prettiest parks. "I want to keep learning and gaining new skills and qualifications so that I can work in other parks and countries," says Umugwaneza. When I ask about her male colleagues, she replies: "I've never had any challenges from the men on the team. It wouldn't be a problem if I was promoted above them." Having grown up in such a strong culture of equality, she seems amused I've even asked the question.

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