

Ahead of the game

Amy Carter-James may not yet be a household name in the UK, but in Mozambique's Quirimbas National Park she is well known to thousands of people for transforming their lives through tourism. Here, she talks with **Sue Watt**.



benefits to the 16 communities they now work with through Guludo Beach Lodge and their charity, the Nema Foundation. With money raised through shares of their profits, donations and fundraising events, they've helped to install 30 water points ensuring clean water for 15,000 people; provided 8000 malaria nets; and feed 800 meals daily to malnourished schoolchildren, tripling school attendance in the region. This year alone they've given 127 children scholarships to secondary schools, with 24 of them going on to vocational or teacher training colleges, and also supported 110 orphaned and vulnerable children. They have also built two primary schools, established a school farm, and set up a variety of nutrition and healthcare projects, including HIV/AIDS awareness-raising drama projects, a youth AIDS project, and pre- and post-natal care clinics.

That's a pretty impressive roll call for a couple who had neither been to Mozambique before nor had any background or qualifications in tourism, health or the charity sector. What they did have was common sense, passion and commitment.

"We chose Mozambique because: it had huge tourist potential, it's an amazing destination and we were impressed by the government. But there was also extreme poverty – life expectancy was 38 and infant mortality was 1 in 3 – so we could also bring the greatest benefit. We wanted to be on the coast: I studied marine biology so I wanted a marine conservation element, and a beach is a lot easier to sell. Our timing was perfect too, because Quirimbas National Park had just been set up and we got the best spot in the park."

She shows me photographs of the lodge with nine villas overlooking the Indian Ocean, set in the middle of a beautiful, deserted 12km-long white beach. "It's a special place," Amy tells me, "but what really makes it special is the communities. People who stay with us come for the diving or the beach but it's the communities that really blow them away."

Her photos reveal brilliant examples of people working together to improve lives, both at the lodge and in workshops, schools and clinics. But it's not all work.

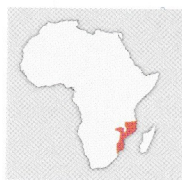


After falling in love with Africa on a gap year in 2004, **Sue Watt** became a freelance travel writer. She is a regular contributor to *Travel Africa* and newspapers such as *The Independent*.

We first met in 2009 at London's World Travel Market, where she'd won the World Responsible Tourism 'Best for Poverty Alleviation' award for work with communities around her lodge in Guludo. Fast-forward a year and she'd picked up two more awards at the Condé Nast Traveller World Saver ceremony: 'Best Small Resort/Lodge' and 'Best for Poverty'. And in May this year she took home the World Travel & Tourism Council's 'Tourism for Tomorrow' award in the category of Community Benefit. Not bad going for someone who, just nine years previously at the grand young age of 22, drove across Mozambique with her husband Neal looking for a location to realise a dream.

Inspired by her gap year volunteering in Kenya, she wanted to exploit tourism in a positive way. "We dreamt about revolutionising the tourism industry, realising the profound impact and potential that tourism has to address poverty and conservation. I suppose we were very arrogant at such a young age!" she laughs.

Whether it was arrogance or simply youthful exuberance, Amy and Neal have since brought huge





Left: Amy Carter-James and her husband Neal have brought huge benefits to 16 communities through work at their Guludo Beach Lodge and through their charity, the Nema Foundation

Opposite page: Just a few of the smiles made possible by the Nema Foundation's work

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One picture shows a bunch of orphaned kids, smiles beaming across chubby faces as they hold up brand new buckets, gifts from the Nema Foundation. “Normally we don’t just give presents away but Eid is the one day when we could; that’s their tradition. We asked the community what the kids would need and they said a bucket so they could wash, and fabric so they can make clothes.”

When I ask Amy which of all Nema’s projects she finds the most rewarding, her eyes start to well up. “There are quite a few emotional ones, like when you see clean water flowing for the first time. I also love the school feeding project; it’s so immediate and direct. You know straight away that a kid’s health is going to improve, they’re going to go to school, maybe even secondary school, and their whole life will be better. I think that’s probably my favourite.”

This softer side of Nema is only made possible by good, hard business sense, and Guludo has proved that a business can thrive commercially whilst rigidly adhering to responsible tourism principles – the lodge enjoyed 60 per cent growth in what was a dire 2009 for most in the industry. But it has not been easy.

“Our education and experience have been amazing. I can’t think of another job where I would have learnt so much, from marketing, sales, construction, about mud even, everything from how to build a school to accounting systems to anti-retroviral drugs and HIV prevention.”

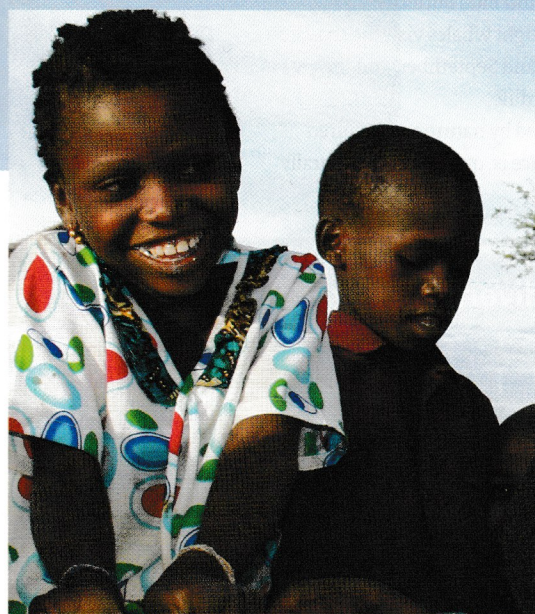
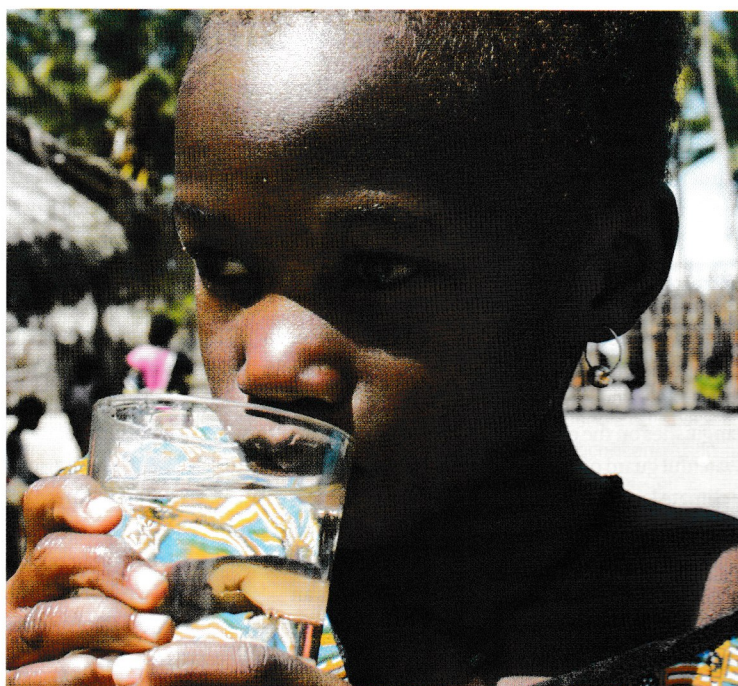
When I ask Amy about Neal’s role and whether she would have gone down this precarious yet rewarding road without him, she smiles. “This sounds really cheesy but Neal is the yin to my yang! Both our skills are very different and together we make a powerful team.” A former professional footballer with Spurs and Arsenal, he is the financial brain behind Guludo and Nema, and also trains the village football team, unsurprisingly unbeaten for several years.

With Neal’s support, Amy has won several awards through her work with Guludo, and I wondered ▷

▷ whether she might now be a bit blasé about collecting them. "It's always emotional and I'll *never* get used to winning awards", she replied. "They've given us a rather large soapbox to shout from about how tourism really can bring profound benefits to people all over the world, and for this we're deeply grateful for each one."

Standing firmly on that soapbox, Neal and Amy are going global, harnessing their experience and their dreams of revolutionising the tourist industry into a consultancy aptly called Thin Cats Thinking, focusing on ethical, sustainable tourism as a viable alternative to business models favoured by fat cats.

"People take the mick a bit, but part of that revolution I mentioned is to clean up the tourism industry," she explains. "We've proved that commercially it makes sense, maximising all possible benefits and running businesses on fair trade principles so decisions aren't based just on a financial bottom line. There's a cultural, environmental and social impact to everything we do."



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Above: 15,000 people have gained access to clean drinking water

Left: Two new primary schools have been built

Below: Tourists come for the beach, but fall for the communities



Thin Cats Thinking is currently working with tourism organisations in Southeast Asia, Sierra Leone and East Africa, and is hoping to help develop social responsibility strategies for both existing and new companies, using the Nema Foundation as a charitable vehicle for their own communities, which will build on the experiences of Mozambique. "You can do so much with so little in Africa - you don't need much money. In fact, Africa is ahead of the game in responsible tourism. There are an awful lot of lessons that can be learned from that."

Finally, I ask what the word 'Nema' actually means. "Oh, it's a lovely word," she replies. "It's difficult to explain but it means that kind of hope that accompanies the end of suffering." With Thin Cats Thinking, and with her energy and passion, Amy is planning to spread Nema, that special hope, not just around Africa but also around the world. And I can't help but wish her well. 🐾

* For more information about Amy, the Nema Foundation or Guludo Lodge, visit www.guludo.com. Details about the work being done by Thin Cats Thinking is available at www.thincats.org.