

INTO AFRICA

A sustainably minded grand tour of the continent.

Virtuoso CEO Matthew Upchurch and his wife, Jessica Upchurch, Virtuoso's sustainability ambassador, headed to Africa recently for more than three weeks of exploration, family time, and wildlife viewing with their sons: Clay, age 14, and Benji, age 10. Here, a look at their four-country, sustainability-focused itinerary – along with insights on the experience from the family and safari insiders.

THEIR HOSTS

WILDERNESS SAFARIS

Owens and operates more than 50 camps throughout Botswana, Kenya, Namibia, Rwanda, Zambia, and Zimbabwe. Founded in 1983.

SINGITA Owns 15 lodges and camps in South Africa, Zimbabwe, and Rwanda. Founded in 1993.

MICATO SAFARIS

Respected family-run safari operator in southern and East Africa. Founded in 1966.

ME TO WE A social enterprise founded in 2009 to provide domestic and international economic opportunities to WE Charity. WE Charity empowers communities to lift themselves out of poverty through a holistic, sustainable international development model called WE Villages in Africa, Asia, and Latin America.



Day 1

SOUTH AFRICA

Arrive in Johannesburg.

Day 2

BOTSWANA

Transfer to Wilderness Safaris' Little Vumbura Camp, located on an island in the lush Okavango Delta. Wilderness Safaris, a bellwether of sustainable tourism, is deeply invested in conserving and restoring African

wilderness and wildlife. Since the late 1980s, the company has operated the Wilderness Wildlife Trust, an organization dedicated to animal conservation, community empowerment, and anti-poaching efforts. Wilderness Safaris also supports the non-profit Children in the Wilderness, which educates African children about caring for their environment. Last year the company contributed an estimated \$14.7 million to conservation through its various projects.

"At Wilderness Safaris, we believe that purpose is the most important element of today's safari experiences. Superb local hospitality, delicious food with a local flair, and beautiful camps built with a light eco-footprint in extraordinary wilderness locations are a given; what we believe in is offering life-changing journeys with a purpose – journeys that inspire our guests and help drive positive change in the world." – *Keith Vincent, CEO, Wilderness Safaris*

The Upchurch family with Micato Safaris' Anna Pinto (at left) and ME to WE staff in Kenya.

Days 3-5

BOTSWANA

Game drives and exploration at Little Vumbura Camp.

"Most people, of course, want to do the 'big five,' but Benji was adamant about seeing the termite mounds. We have so many pictures of him with termite mounds! We came to find out, the termites are critical to the ecosystems of this area. Seeing them brought us back to the idea of the big and the small. The big things – the elephants and the rhinos – all matter, but so do the termites and the insects. In sustainability too, all of our small actions add up to a big impact."

– Jessica Upchurch

"Even being little, you can make a big impact." – Benji Upchurch

Day 5

ZIMBABWE

Transfer to Wilderness Safaris' Linkwasha Camp, on a private concession at the southeastern corner of Hwange National Park.

"One of our favorite guides here, Sam, told us his father was ashamed he wanted to be a guide. But when he arrived home as the first owner of a vehicle in his village, his father was immensely proud. Seeing Sam tear up telling us his story was a moving reminder of the positive impact of travel on the smallest of local economies." – Matthew Upchurch



From top: Zebras at Kruger National Park, Singita Sweni Lodge, and Benji Upchurch at Singita Sweni.

Days 6-8

ZIMBABWE

Game drives and local community experiences at Linkwasha Camp.

"It was really powerful going into the village and seeing how Wilderness Safaris serves its actual needs. They've built a real rapport with the local villages and they have been able to bring young people into tourism." – Jessica

Days 8-11

SOUTH AFRICA

Singita Sweni, Kruger National Park. Singita was founded expressly for the purpose of conserving wildlife. Today, the group helps protect more than 1 million acres throughout Africa and gives back to local communities through education, enterprise development, and environmental training designed to minimize poaching by providing locals with economic opportunities.

"Our guests have exclusive access to some of the most pristine wilderness areas on the continent – a direct result of our 100-year purpose to protect and preserve Africa's wilderness for future generations. Joining hands with our conservation partners in the various regions where we operate, we're able to achieve extraordinary successes in wildlife conservation and community partnerships, which in turn benefits our guests, who experience the wildlife in all its natural glory when they visit our lodges." – Luke Bailes, founder and chairman, Singita





Clockwise from left: Jessica Upchurch at Giraffe Manor, Benji at Singita's cooking school, and Clay and Benji Upchurch with a Maasai warrior.

Days 11-15

SOUTH AFRICA

Singita Boulders Lodge on the banks of the Sand River in the Sabi Sand Game Reserve.

Leopards, lions, rhinos, elephants, and many other species make appearances during game drives from this lodge in the country's northern reaches.

"Every aspect of how we design, build, and operate our lodges is guided by the One Planet Living sustainability framework set out by the UK-based charity and social enterprise Bioregional. This commitment encompasses a range of measures that ensure we tread lightly on the earth and is woven into everything from our staff culture to carefully designed guest experiences, as well as our farm-to-table food, solar power plants, and sustainable supply chains. It's a culture that seeps into every aspect of our operations – from general managers to housekeepers – and goes largely unseen by guests." – *Luke Bailes*

"A big initiative for Singita is their culinary school. Matthew and I are now supporting a student through this school. Philanthropically, we made contributions all along the way on this trip. Our philosophy is that the companies we work with are doing great things that make huge impacts, so we don't need to reinvent the wheel. We can work with people who are already doing the right things to fulfill true needs in the world." – *Jessica*



Day 15

KENYA

Transfer to Nairobi, Kenya, for the Micato Safaris portion of the trip, beginning at Giraffe Manor, where resident Rothschild's

giraffes occasionally pop their heads in first-floor windows. Micato's long-standing commitment to sustainability permeates everything it does, from the company's charitable arm, AmericaShare, to its staff's emphasis on environmental best practices (all safari directors are university-educated wildlife specialists). Micato was one of the first safari companies in Kenya to recycle plastic water bottles and is in the process of switching entirely to glass – and for every safari it sells, it sends a child to primary school.

"During our 50 years in business, we've tried hard to partner with the safari camps and lodges who most share our environmental ethos."

– *Anna Pinto, executive director, Micato Safaris*

Day 16

KENYA

Lunch with sponsored children at Giraffe Manor and a visit to the Sheldrick Wildlife Trust.

"We had lunch with two kids we've sponsored through AmericaShare, Dennis and Elizabeth. We've been sponsoring Dennis for nine years, and he'll graduate from high school this year. It's given him a solid education, plus room and board. One of the joys of this sponsorship is exchanging letters with the kids, as well as seeing Dennis and Clay click in person." – *Jessica*

"Visiting Giraffe Manor was incredible, especially because my father, Jesse, donated the land where the Giraffe Centre is located today. Clay and Benji loved hanging out there with Dennis and Elizabeth. Watching them laughing, getting past their shyness with each other while a giraffe looked over their shoulders – it doesn't get any better!" – *Matthew*

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Clockwise from left: Jessica Upchurch at Giraffe Manor, Clay and Benji Upchurch with a Maasai warrior, Benji at Singita's cooking school, and Singita Boulders Lodge.

Day 17

KENYA

Transfer to the Maasai Mara for ME to WE activities. These included a visit to WE College in the Maasai Mara, which allows students to pursue a postsecondary education; a tour of Bogani Tented Camp and a hike with a Maasai warrior to learn about medicinal herbs; and a visit to Baraka Hospital.

“ME to WE trips create sustainable, positive change in the communities we work with and the opportunity to form genuine, organic connections with community members who we’re honored to call family. They welcome travelers into their homes and lives, inviting them to explore their culture in the most immersive way. ME to WE partner communities have hosted more than 40,000 travelers since 2002. Over the years, the contributions of ME to WE travelers have directly supported WE Charity in establishing two full-service clinics and one hospital in the Narok region of Kenya; the construction of three high schools and one college, with accompanying scholarships, providing education to 11,500 Kenyan students in 24 Maasai Mara communities; and many more projects creating impacts in countries around the world.” – *Roxanne Joyal, CEO, ME to WE*

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From top: Clay Upchurch at Ol Jogi Ranch, the ribbon cutting at the Virtuoso Upchurch Learning Centre, and the family at WE College.



“The existence of Baraka Hospital means that, for the first time in this area, women who are having issues in childbirth have a place to go. They can still do a home birth, which is what a lot of women want, but if there’s a need, they have a place to go. They can get good prenatal care here too.” – *Jessica*

Days 17-22

KENYA

The Micato safari resumes at Ol Jogi Ranch, where photo ops included a family portrait with an elephant.

“My school has a charitable giving program where we can nominate organizations for donations. I love animals, and I was so amazed by the anti-poaching program at Ol Jogi, For Rangers, that when I came home I advocated to get \$3,000 donated to their efforts.” – *Clay Upchurch*

Day 22

KENYA

Transfer to Mukuru in Nairobi for a ribbon-cutting ceremony at the Virtuoso Upchurch Learning Centre.

“My family has long believed that the most powerful tool for sustainable change in Africa is education – not just of our travelers, but within the communities where we travel. That’s why for every safari we sell, through the Micato One for One Commitment, we send a child to school. It’s why our nonprofit foundation, AmericaShare, is dedicated to educational and community outreach. Our friends at Virtuoso, including Matthew and Jessica Upchurch, have played a major role in these efforts through their

funding of a special-needs classroom in Nairobi's Mukuru slum and sponsoring children for boarding school in the Micato-AmericaShare School Sponsorship Programme. Whenever Virtuoso travelers are on safari with Micato, they're doing a great deal to support educational and sustainability efforts in Africa." – Anna Pinto

Presentation of lacrosse equipment at the Harambee Centre.

"We brought a donation of lacrosse equipment over to the Harambee Centre. That was one of the things that Clay really wanted to do. We got to play with the kids there too. We've always found that a ball is a great way for kids to interact out in the world."

– Jessica

Visit to Huru International, a program for which Micato is a major donor. The organization manufactures and distributes reusable sanitary pads to young girls and has helped 165,000 young women stay in school during their periods.

"It's so empowering for these young women to have access to these resources and to feel like they can continue on with their lives." – Jessica

Overnight at Hemingways Nairobi hotel, a 45-suite, plantation-style property in the suburb of Karen.

Day 23

KENYA

Visit with two newly sponsored children (through AmericaShare) before departing for home.

"Taking such valued time together as a family was delightful and memorable. We slowed down, had two-hour lunches, and connected with each other and those around us. It was magical." – Jessica

"Since I was a child, I've felt that Africa is magical, so seeing our boys transformed by the destination was also magical. You leave Africa, but Africa never leaves you."

– Matthew VI