

Travel Editor's Choice

Maniago

NO ORDINARY PEOPLE

It is well known that a company's greatest asset is its people. The perfect example is Maniago, The Destination Management Company. At its helm are directors Annabella Francescon and Duncan Muriuki, who exemplify everything Maniago represents. Both are warm and friendly with a passion for travel and Kenya. Despite the pressures and demands of running one of Africa's premier travel companies, Annabella and Duncan adopt a very hands-on approach. They liaise personally with clients, ascertaining their specific requirements and wishes. Based in Nairobi, Maniago offer tailor-made luxury safaris, providing clients with a unique taste of East Africa's natural wonders, from its breathtaking scenery and teeming wildlife, to its rich culture and hospitable people.

Annabella and Duncan first met in 1990 through their involvement with the travel company A&K. "We always had a very good working relationship," says Duncan. "We had very similar business ideals and principles, so teaming up was so natural." Annabella went into partnership with A&K, setting up A&K Travel Ltd in 1993, before buying out their shares in 1998 and renaming the company Maniago after the Italian town her family originated from. Duncan, who joined Maniago two years later, was born on the slopes of Mt Kenya and grew up with ambitions of working in the industry. "I always loved to travel and joining a travel company was in my dreams. It was a way to live my dreams as I worked." His dreams were fulfilled when he joined A&K as a management trainee after leaving university.

Annabella, too, was born in Kenya, but ended up in the travel industry via a very different route. After graduating as an English teacher from Cambridge University in England, she was invited to teach English to a group of Italian travel agents who were visiting London. Her involvement with the group ignited a passion for travel, which eventually led her to San Diego to study hotel and tour management. Since its formation, Maniago has established a reputation for providing clients with a unique adventure. It's something Duncan attributes to. "Its owner managed management style, with everything customized," Annabella agrees, adding, "We offer clients a special experience, not just a tour." With no off-the-shelf packages, "Everything is custom made after careful interaction with the customer," explains Duncan.

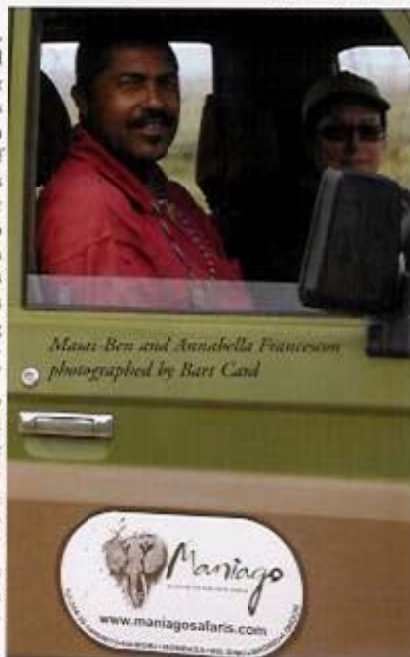
Dealing closely with clients is essential for Annabella and Duncan. "This is the exciting bit. We like to see the client's way of looking at things," enthuses Duncan. "The planning stage of the itinerary is fun, when the client has different ideas and needs to marry their idea with ours. The actual safari, too, is exciting as you watch them overwhelmed by the experience." Annabella stresses what's important for her, "Seeing them enjoy their trip, or knowing that our client agents are happy with our services." Annabella and Duncan have ambitious plans for the future. Duncan hopes Maniago will become "the opinion shaper for deluxe travel to Africa," and "synonymous with the best travel experience in Africa," while Annabella wants their company, "To be known as the best organisation if one wants the most excellent safari," as well as to, "Further develop our product by having the best camps in the region."

Annabella and Duncan are as passionate about Maniago as they are about their native Kenya. With its wonderfully diverse landscape, that ranges from forests, savannahs and mountains, to deserts, lakes and beaches, Kenya offers visitors a wealth of different environments. In addition, Annabella boasts of, "The beautiful and friendly people, a fascinating and diverse culture, excellent service and food, nature at its very best, the most incredible wildlife experience."

Their deep love of Kenya has led Annabella and Duncan to establish the Angels Of Hope Foundation. Created to "give back to our society and our environment," Angels Of Hope supports the Kianyaga Children's Home for Kenyan orphans, and the David Sheldrick Wildlife Trust, which helps the country's many orphaned elephants return to the wild. "Life has been good to me," admits Annabella on the Foundation's website (www.angelsofhope.co.ke), "it is now time to give back to society through the children of Africa and to nature through the most emblematic animal of Africa; namely the elephant."

The infectious enthusiasm Annabella and Duncan bring to Maniago is echoed by the company's highly experienced staff which are all "hand picked for their particular skills." This attention to detail, along with a determination to share their enthusiasm for Kenya with their clients, is important to Annabella and Duncan. Both are anxious that clients come away from their trip with something more than amazing photographs.

For Duncan it's, "lifetime friends and memories." The fact that many clients still remain in touch with Maniago's staff on a social basis years after their safari is testimony to him having his wish fulfilled. Annabella's hope is that clients will leave having enjoyed an "experience of a lifetime," and "the wish to return again and again to continue with new experiences that both Maniago and our destination offer." Judging by Maniago's success, Annabella too has realized her hopes. **LF**



*Masai Ben and Annabella Francescon
photographed by Bari Card*