

# Hospitality

## The Africa Experience

An Interview with Deborah Calmeyer,  
Chief Executive Officer, ROAR AFRICA



Deb Calmeyer on a safari vehicle observing wildlife in the African bush with a guide and guest

**EDITORS' NOTE** Deborah Calmeyer's desire to share her passion for Africa only grew when she moved to New York City and found that mediocre African travel itineraries seemed to surpass unsuspecting travelers expectations. Her desire to have people experience Africa the way she knew it and loved it drove her to create ROAR AFRICA. Her impeccable taste, style, and ability to match a client's travel DNA to the appropriate experiences compliments her intimate insider knowledge and unique access.



Deborah Calmeyer

**COMPANY BRIEF** ROAR AFRICA ([www.roar-africa.com](http://www.roar-africa.com)) is a concierge travel company born out of four centuries of African lineage and exploration. Her French Huguenot family arrived on the continent in 1688 to inaugurate their farm with the early settlers as they explored vineculture near Franschhoek in the now exalted winelands of South Africa. Based in Manhattan, ROAR AFRICA today is led by its founder, the Zimbabwe-born CEO, Deborah Calmeyer, still devout to Africa as an 11th generation explorer. Since the founding of ROAR AFRICA in 2005, she has offered discerning guests their own African dream. ROAR AFRICA has a loyal portfolio of guests that have become like family. They include celebrities, movie stars, politicians, captains of industry, and astute travelers – guests who have an appreciation for authenticity, and the rarified African dream.

### What made you feel the time was right for ROAR AFRICA?

I don't think it was necessarily about the "perfect time" to start. It was more a realization that I came from an extraordinary place that so many people knew little about. I felt that if they knew more, it would exceed all of their expectations. I had seen this when planning a few friends' trips. It frustrated me that people in America thought Africa wasn't accessible or affordable. I thought we could build a bridge of confidence to everyone's benefit, because Africa also needs the visitors to support local businesses, communities, conservation, and the environment.

In 2005, I had no idea I would be running a travel company full time, but I had a grasp on travel needs and the U.S. market, and what Africa has to offer. We launched the business as

a hobby and did four trips – all unique and customized, and delivered by us personally. In 2012, we did 70 trips, from couples to over 20 people for multigenerational celebrations.

We grew our team on the ground in South Africa with operational staff, guides, and specialists so that our clients could work with one company throughout. This is the bridge of confidence I mentioned earlier; it is different from other companies who hand the reins over to a ground operator, usually without their clients' knowledge.

Clients meet with me in person or over the phone, and then it's all about designing every detail to their specific likes, their budget, and their timeline, and it's about hosting them ourselves.

The business has grown predominantly through word-of-mouth and the incredible connections I have made. There is a culture of networking and helping women succeed in New York and the United States in general, to which I owe a great deal of our success.

### Are you targeting a top niche market or is it broader?

It's broader, but what it is regardless of budget is high-touch. It's all about our client's budget and timeline, and the best experience we can create for them. Some people value price; others unique experiences, and the access our network provides. We're experts in the latter, which by definition requires some investment. What's interesting is that some of the most famous "high-end" travel operators are effectively bulk operations: luxury, but less personal and actually more expensive than ROAR AFRICA. We will remain small and intimate.

### What is the most important aspect of each trip?

It depends on the person. Authenticity is key whatever the experience that strikes the most intimate chord with each individual. Some of the most sophisticated travelers tell me, "I never knew travel could be like this..."

Most people are coming for the safari experience. Or they think they are and then they discover all sorts of surprises, and for this reason our flexibility is also an important aspect. South Africa is a big surprise, especially Cape Town. People don't want a city experience. I have to explain that this sophisticated gem is a geographic wonderland that takes your breath away at every turn. There is no pounding the

streets, looking at buildings or shops like you would in another city. This is also an outdoor playground. Our Central Park is the 3,000-foot Table Mountain, and it offers history, culture, design, and incredible food – there is something for everyone.

### Is there a point where it will become difficult to maintain the high-touch service?

There are many tour operators but we have built a reputation for this kind of service specifically, and it is in our DNA. Every trip we do is different, and has to give the best it can for the traveler's budget.

### How much time does one need to allocate for an African adventure?

You should start with 10 days minimum because it's a long way to travel. If you spend four nights in Cape Town, two nights in the winelands, and three nights on safari, you'll have a fabulous first taste of southern Africa. There is so much more there and in East Africa, which is why we have the same guests returning year after year. There is something about Africa that really touches your soul – it takes you back to the beginning. People should be aware that their proposed once-in-a-lifetime safari might turn into a bit of a habit.

### Are you surprised by the success of this venture?

I am surprised and delighted. I am grateful for the incredible team we have, our partners, the support we've received, and frankly for the quality of the product – Africa and its people. I honestly believe Africa has some of the best hospitality in the world.

What I didn't expect is just how rewarding it would be to experience each guest's enthusiasm after so many delivered trips. Watching their expectations exceeded and witnessing them re-discover who they are is priceless. Seeing what a positive impact responsible tourism has on the ground is the most rewarding of all. This is what will ultimately define our success.

### Besides the business aspect, is it also about how lives can be changed?

Absolutely. The lives of our guests, those they visit, and our own lives. What we offer are adventures of the spirit, and they will change the way you look at the world. If we succeed, you will leave Africa a different person, and you will also have had positive impact on the lives of those you visited – human and animal. Careful choice of lodges and partners on the ground helps us maximize the positive impact. ●