

# Off the beaten track but out of the woods, thanks to Open Africa

Claire Allison

IN A RECENT seminal book on global economic progress, author Matt Ridley wrote: "Once two individuals find ways to divide labour between them, both are better off. The future for Africa lies in trade."

On his recent week-long trip to the continent, US President Barack Obama said from Tanzania: "We are looking at a new model that's based not just on aid and assistance, but trade and partnership. Ultimately the goal here is for Africa to build Africa for Africans. Our job is to be a partner in that process."

Trade is the essential element of human advancement, co-operation, collaboration, discovery and prosperity. Trading is what makes entrepreneurs, what drives the wheels of society, what creates jobs and gives people a purpose in life. Trade is where people find one another, what connects and liberates them from isolation.

Local non-profit organisation Open

Africa has been encouraging trade in rural areas for almost 20 years. Established in 1995 under the patronage of Nelson Mandela, Open Africa boosts trade to off-the-beaten-track areas to assist rural entrepreneurs in increasing their income and potential to employ more people by building their capacity to trade.

It does this by using tourism, one of the most obvious economic platforms for a continent abundant in natural beauty, and connects traveller markets with existing resources. This is the essence of responsible tourism. Instead of having to battle it out on their own where traffic volumes are thin, vendor participants in Open Africa routes become part of a collection of attractions, drawing wider interest from aspirant travellers.

Apart from promoting trade in remote areas, benefits of connecting small and emerging businesses to markets include the cultivation of an awareness of the financial benefits of conservation, the celebration of indigenous culture and heritage and a reversal of the

trend of urbanisation.

How many times have you seen travellers return from the African countryside radiantly recounting their experiences? In a materialistic world of gloss and gadgets, this reaction equates precisely with the yearning within people to get back in touch with their roots and is what makes the real Africa so uniquely alluring.

Initiating trade usually first requires investment, manufacture, and then the distribution of products. Rural Africa has few opportunities for that. But traveller routes work the other way round, distributing customers who come on their own steam, pay cash for what they buy and experience and then leave the product behind for resale over and over again.

Extreme poverty, 80 percent of which occurs in rural areas in Africa, continues to be an enormous problem. The way its ravages cause people to overgraze their lands, slash and burn forests, encroach on wilderness and poach biodiversity could

destroy the very asset Africa's trading platform is based upon. Translating the continent's biodiversity into a wealth-creator, inspiring its protection as an asset and tourist attraction and encouraging trade and subsequent economic growth to pristine areas is an obvious solution.

"Convincing local communities of this can be challenging but once they understand the importance of conserving this, the potential for tourism in the area and the demand for it by the aspiring entrepreneurs becomes overwhelming," says Open Africa general manager Francois Viljoen.

Rural people have neither the money nor the expertise to advertise their wares. And even if they did, the market for travellers is so widespread and disparate as to make it hard for anyone to reach without the technological assistance that is available through collectivism.

In a survey conducted in January by Open Africa, results showed on average there has been a 128 percent increase over

18 months in the number of people employed by rural tourism entrepreneurs, following extensive support.

It also revealed that the number of participating enterprises with turnovers below R50 000 reduced by 42 percent, while participants with turnovers over R50 000 increased by 20 percent between 2011 and 2013. This survey shows the direct link between Open Africa's work and employment opportunities and income increases.

As Ridley says: "Give local people the power to own, exploit and profit from natural resources in a sustainable way and they will usually preserve and cherish those resources." When it comes to encouraging trade in Africa, both travel and Open Africa fit the bill!

● Allison is the marketing manager of Open Africa, a non-profit organisation that uses tourism to create and sustain jobs by driving trade to rural communities throughout southern Africa. For more information, see [www.openafrica.org](http://www.openafrica.org)

## Vivid and stormy tale aboard the Voorloper in a Cape July

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Brian Ingpen



HALFWAY through July, we still await those blustery north-westers and heavy seas that characterise the "typical" Cape winter. A reader of this column, Roy Muller, recalls his experience as a youngster in the coaster Voorloper during one of those July storms