

## **Kibwezi Lewis: Death of Kenya tourism pioneer**



### **Compiled by Cyprian Fernandes**

In a nutshell, the death notice for Lewis De Souza of Nairobi says it all quite succinctly: Lewis, Chairman of Visit Africa Ltd, a leading bespoke, luxury safari tour operator passed away peacefully on April 23, 2019 (his funeral and cremation are set for April 27). He is survived by his wife Antoinette and daughter Heather. Lewis was passionate about all things Kenyan and the perfect ambassador, always promoting Kenya's nature conservancies and breathtaking landscapes. A warm, kind, generous and hospitable man, he will be greatly missed by his family, friends, employees and visitors alike.

Kenyans who knew him and thousands of visitors who got to know him through his safari outfit are in mourning for this jovial, happy-go-lucky but astute businessman. He was also a brave man, battling cancer for a long time. His daughter Heather said recently: “My dad has always been a happy jovial joker ... he is in no pain considering his illness.”

However, it is to his greatest credit that when 95% of friends and members of the Goan community along with other South Indians were making the exodus to the UK, Canada and the US, Lewis never gave leaving Kenya a thought. He once told me: “I will die a Kenyan. I don’t want to freeze my butt in some foreign country. Everything and everyone I love is here.” He just loved his birth country too much to leave.

Why Kibwezi? His father managed a sisal plantation in Kibwezi. Lewis and his dad used to invite his St Teresa’s Boys School classmates for camping holidays. He later moved to the Dr Ribeiro Goan School in Parklands. I knew him at St Teresa’s and he never changed. He always had a permanent smile on his face, a joke up his sleeve and buckets of generosity. Needless to say, Lewis was everybody’s friend.

He wrote not so long ago: “I was born in Nairobi and raised on the fringes of Kenya’s Tsavo West National Park (fondly called the “the heart of wildlife” by wildlife lovers) in Kibwezi. As a result of this early introduction to wildlife, I have been a keen wildlife enthusiast. Nevertheless, my earlier interest was as a “destroyer of wildlife” through sports. But ever since I got into tourism in 1968, after my formal education and a working stint in my family’s business, I opened my heart to conservation, believing then as I do now that sensitive tourism is the best way to enjoy the marvels of nature with which the world is endowed

“Not only does sustainable tourism reward your heart with a feeling of being part and parcel of such a beautiful natural world, but it ensures that future generations too will have the chance to experience the same. To paraphrase an African saying, we must take care of the earth not because it was given to us by our parents, but because it belongs to our children.

“The many years I worked in different capacities for various tourism based establishment provided me with the much-needed hands-on experience required to participate positively in the industry in Africa. Apart from being sensitized to the needs of our very fragile environment that is the life& blood of tourism in this part of the world, I also came to understand what it takes to satisfy the needs of each and every visitor.

“When in 1984 I started Visit Africa Limited, my goal was to establish a firm that shied away from “mass tourism” dedicating itself to providing customized and personalized service to the visitor. This begins with the language our guides use on safari. For example, if you are French, we will get you a French speaking guide. We do the same for Spanish, Italian and English –speaking visitors.”

There were no airs or graces about this man but his first job in Kibwezi was a gas station attendant. This gave him the chance to meet all sorts of people and he was delighted because Lewis was always the proverbial people person. Heather says: “My Dad was a very loving family man who showered my Mum and me with abundance. He enjoyed his leisure time at home in the company of my Mum and his dogs and cat. He had a passion for good food.....prawns, cheese, pate and most of all, chocolates. He also loved the finer things in life and ensured that he had the latest aftershave lotions and well-tailored Italian slacks. From a young age, he developed a love of automobiles and was so very proud of his fleet of 23 top-of-the-line Toyota Highlander vehicles and personally oversaw their maintenance and road-worthiness. His attention to detail was inspiring.”

In later years, he worked in different tourism-based organisations among them Block Hotels, Mini Cabs and Tours and Francorosso before starting up Visit Africa Safaris.

Visit Africa Ltd marked its 35<sup>th</sup> year recently and Lewis handed over the reins to his daughter Heather. She says: “I started working with my dad 10 years ago when I returned to Kenya after studying and working abroad. I have had a front row seat to observe and learn the ropes of running and managing a successful company from “The Master” ... My Dad was a humble and ethical man who stressed the importance of being diligent, transparent and trustworthy and

earned not only the respect of his business community but also of his employees, many of whom have kept faithful vigil at his hospital bed for the past few weeks.

“I am very grateful to my dad for having made me what I am. From small beginnings, assisted with Mum’s career and expertise in the travel industry, he has left us a booming business.”

Heather says she will be proud to carry on her dad’s legacy but she will always miss not being able to work side by side with him.

Rest in Peace, my friend, Kibwezi Lewis.

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