



NOMAD'S LAND

Wings meets six obsessive adventurers who have made a lifestyle of traversing Africa, each on a mission to discover it for themselves

WORDS BELINDA OTAS

Travelling by any means necessary, from bike, plane, bus, motorcycle, donkey and on foot may not be your ideal adventure. But for a new generation of African nomads, it's the only way to make the dream of discovering the continent for themselves, a reality. In his bestselling book, charting an epic journey from the Cape to Cairo, South African author Sihle Khumalo writes: "I discovered that... these so-called discoveries by early explorers were nothing but first sightings by non-Africans; local people knew about the rivers and lakes and waterfalls long before exploring Africa became such a thing to Europeans." Khumalo's views are shared by Chioma and Oluchi Ogwuegbu, two Nigerian sisters, who set out in 2008 on an adventure to uncover Africa in all its undiscovered glory, with the aim of taking people deep into the heart of the continent.

Fast-forward to 2013, and the trend has grown to include movements like Invisible Borders: The Trans-African Photography Project, an art-led initiative established to encourage cross-continental artistic relationships. At the core of its mission, participants travel and engage in photography projects that tell Africa's stories by Africans. Emeke Okereke, the project's artistic director, believes that in the next 10 to 20 years, more young Africans travelling between countries will become the norm: "I see it vividly. I have no doubt about this cross-border movement," he says. "I think that's really where the innovation will be." Here, six travellers already living the dream tell Wings about their experiences.



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THE BACKPACKER

Thapelo Mokhathi, 35, is a mineral explorer and an ardent traveller who has been to over 20 African countries. Born and raised in South Africa, he describes himself as a backpacker whose perception of the continent has changed.



Sihle Khumalo's book *Dark Continent My Black Arse* ignited my desire and passion to travel around the continent. Though I had the opportunity to travel around Europe and North America, I was never really excited by the prospect. When I started travelling around Africa, it was for work, and that didn't allow me to experience the beauty of the countries I visited. You move from the airport to the hotel and back to the airport

again, to leave. I started travelling in 2007, and the impact has been tremendous, primarily because it has changed my perception of the continent. Like everyone, I used to believe the stereotypes being told about Africa, but that has changed at a time when the narrative of how we view the continent is also changing. Today, we hear stories about youth exuberance, an emerging middle class, growing economies and deepening democratic cultures. What's fascinating is the fact that citizens have a strong desire to uplift their countries, with

or without their government. From South Africa to Senegal, I have interacted with people who grew up and studied abroad and are back in their home countries to make a contribution. The returning diaspora gives me the biggest hope about Africa.

I have had a lot of fun along the way, especially as a backpacker. The experiences have been awesome, and I have created memories along the way that I will never forget. One encounter that stands out for me was when my guide to Ngorongoro Crater, Tanzania wanted to claim I was Tanzanian, so we could share my \$200 entrance fee, but my Mohawk and camera exposed me; the guard asked me a few questions in Swahili, and I couldn't answer. We were busted, and our guides had to pay a \$25 dollar fine. The other was when I was diagnosed with malaria in Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso using Google Translate, since the doctor and I could not communicate.

The biggest takeaway from my experiences as a traveller is how common our cultures are, except when they are informed by religion. The Ubuntu spirit of 'I am because you are' is common around the continent. Many young Africans still aspire, and prefer, to travel to developed countries mainly because of what has been drummed up in their minds about how beautiful and advanced those countries are. For me, there is more excitement in travelling within Africa. The sense of belonging doesn't compare to anywhere else I have been.

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THE BLOGGER

Lerato Mogoatlhe is a South African journalist and blogger, and blogs at Madam Africa, where she documents her current journey around the continent.



I travel to taste, hear, touch, smell and see. People are so diverse and amazing that travelling just makes sense. Why wouldn't anyone want to do it? Why Africa, when you can go to North America, Asia or South America? Why not? Africa is my home. I can't know it through the one-sided media reports of a continent in crisis, or as a novelty, or through the experiences of others. This continent gave me everything –

an amazing life, a great education, opportunities and a career I love. It carries my hopes and dreams. So it's natural for me to know Africa better than other continents.

I describe myself as a backpacker, heritage and adventure seeker. I experience everything Africa has to offer. When it comes to experiences I go all-out; from adrenaline highs to festivals, living in historic ancient cities and tracing remains of empires. I'm a do-it-all kind of traveller. I started travelling in 2008, and have visited Senegal, Mali, Burkina Faso, Ghana, Togo, Benin, Ivory Coast, and Guinea Conakry among others. I have been to DRC and Burundi in Central Africa. I'm currently in Ethiopia to explore the Horn Of Africa. One thing that stands out in all the places I have been to is the spirit of Ubuntu. From the start in Senegal, I was made to feel at home and that I belonged. People have opened their hearts and homes, and sometimes wallets and purses. I hardly stay in hotels, because people invite me to stay with them, sometimes whether I like it or not. "You are home" is the one thing I get told more than anything.

My experiences around Africa are like a mirror. Looking at it, I love what I see: freedom, beauty, love, joy, dignity, resilience, faith, hope and diversity. I have been gifted with some awesome experiences, there are too many to mention but these ones I cherish include being at the inauguration of the Ahmed Baba Institute of Islamic Advanced Studies And Research in Timbuktu, attending the Festival Au Desert in Essakane, Mali and I have been on the slave trail from West to East Africa. Every country has given me an experience to love forever. The only time I was robbed in Dar es Salaam also turned into another great display of Ubuntu – strangers paid my fare, hotel room and gave me a loan while I waited for money via Western Union.

What I have enjoyed about discovering and being exposed to different cultures along the way is the affirmation of shared values. I can't count the many great discoveries without getting a headache. Africa is the cradle of humankind, so you can just imagine all the prehistoric wonders we have. It's a melting pot of all things good. I also think there is a new appetite from Africans who want to know Africa differently, and more Africans are writing on blogs and websites and using social media. Africa's narrative has been stuck on doom and gloom for too long now. The best thing about travelling around Africa is that I get to form my own reality. It's a beautiful reality.

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THE AUTHOR

Olufemi Terry, 40, is a Sierra Leonean writer and journalist who divides his time between Germany and the US, while shuttling between African countries. He won the Caine Prize for African Writing in 2010 for his short story, *Stickfighting Days*.



My interest in travelling irrespective of where, originates from the same impulse: curiosity. I've been travelling and moving to new countries for a long time. I was just one when my family moved to Nigeria. And for as long as I can remember, my family went on holidays across West Africa. I remember ours being the only black family on Safari in Kenya and Tanzania in the mid-80s. Some of the countries I've visited in adulthood – Uganda, Djibouti, Somalia, I went to for work. I went to Mozambique and Democratic Republic Of Congo (DRC) to visit family members. Comoros, Mauritius and Cape Verde, I went out of a curiosity sharpened by a suspicion that in these little-visited countries, far removed from the axes of Lagos, Nairobi and Johannesburg, life was more interesting.

Having said that, one cultural observation I have made on the continent recently is that there's been a convergence in terms of the similarities that we share when

it comes to youth culture, particularly music, which was less evident when I was much younger. In Cape Verde, for instance, I heard P-Square everywhere I went. And Comorians have developed their own zouk, analogous to Kizomba in Angola, or Cabo Love: the rhythms are the same, only the language is different. Young people are mostly the same, why should Africans be different?

In equal measure, I have had amazing experiences in places far from the continent. Encounters that reminded me of how far we as Africans travel – I remember a woman in a Laos bar looked at me as if she knew me, and when I met her, I understand that it was because her father was Congolese, a soldier, and he had left the country before she was born. And so she was looking at me for some connection to her "blackness", whatever that means. Then there are the humorous moments – I once met a Zulu girl in Central Mozambique at the hotel pool, and she was swimming in her bra and panties while complaining to me how undeveloped Africa was.

I don't consider myself to be a backpacker as I don't like backpack travel, in part because I associate it with a certain sort of Western tourist: a little grubby, and at once utopian and yet prone to haggling over pennies. Ordinarily, I prefer to travel with a suitcase, itinerary-less, lightly armed, and seeking neither adventure, history nor heritage. I think we are now at a place where there are young people who have more of an appetite to travel the continent more than in previous years. If there's one thing discouraging young people from travelling, it's because it's expensive.

THE PHOTOGRAPHER

Lola Akinmade-Åkerström, 34, is a Swedish-based writer, photographer and globetrotter. Originally from Nigeria, she combines photography with travelling, and says her goal is to capture the contentment in the lives of those whom she encounters.



For me, travel is about connecting with people. It's more than just seeing the landmarks. I love to soak up the culture, food, and local traditions. I come from a family of travellers. I'd say my curiosity regarding the world around me was fed by their wanderlust. While I have visited over 40 countries in the world, I've only been to a handful of African countries so far, and that pains me.

There's something about going home that makes life rich on so many levels – the diversity

and complexity, culture, language, lifestyles, traditions, and ethnic nuances pull me right in. Having lived in both the US and Europe for extended periods of time, there's no place I feel completely at home like Nigeria. Nigeria always stands out for me. It's the call-you-out-on-your-pretences vibe that I enjoy whenever I'm in Lagos. The "organised chaos" just works. There's an amazing creativity and ingenuity – the parties, the markets, the lifestyle, the down-to-earth

humour. While every culture on some level is generous and inviting, I always ascertain that we Africans are unbelievably warm and inviting. We rarely turn each other away when it comes to sharing meals and invitations are usually "just show up" deals. I have come to appreciate how Africans often treat each other as 'Africans first', country second.

Travelling within Africa has had a transformative impact on my work. I have a deeper appreciation for those nuances within each culture that makes it unique but at the same time, makes it very similar to mine. On the surface, Africa is extremely vibrant and bursts with colours. Now, I see my preference for vibrant colours communicated through my photography. Photography has made my journeys within the continent all the more interesting and encompassing. People are beautiful enough in their simplicity, and I want to capture that moment of contentment in a person's life through my portraits. I love what's going on in Nigeria right now. Society has finally (and fully) embraced creativity and the arts without constantly relegating them to "hobbies". This means many Nigerians are free to be themselves; to live their true calling; and be the best they can be. That's how a society succeeds, grows, and prospers – when people are realising their talents, working within them, and contributing their best to society.

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Why be a standard doctor when you can be an exceptional painter contributing murals to some of the city's landmark buildings? Travel is an investment for me, and it's my dream to travel all 54 countries and create portraits of everyday contentment. I want to show images of contentment. Not complacency, or lack of ambition. Just pure contentment!



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THE CULTURAL CREATIVES

Ala Kheir from Sudan and Nana Oforiatta-Ayim from Ghana were part of the Invisible Borders: The Trans-African Photography Project, 2011 team that travelled the continent. Kheir is a mechanical engineer and photographer. Oforiatta-Ayim is a writer, filmmaker and cultural historian.

Ala Kheir



Going to new places keeps me curious and busy. Meeting people, and experiencing things for the first time is a pleasing experience on my senses, one reason I'll never stop travelling. Africa is home. My aim is not just to travel, but also show the world how I see Africa through my lens. In 2011, I went to Ethiopia for the Addis Photo festival. It was instant love – for its history, rich culture and breathtaking landscape. And it's very welcoming. I also visited Bamako, Mali, for another photo

festival. I felt right at home, except for the language barrier. Everyone looked like me and I didn't feel different. It was after my trip to Mali that I travelled by road back to Ethiopia with Invisible Borders and in 2012, went to Lubumbashi, Congo. I didn't understand a word of French and that was a tricky time, but a stop in Nairobi on my way back made up for it.

A chemical engineer by profession, I believe my passion for photography, which has become a part of me and is more or less like a full-time job, fuels my desire to travel. It makes me see things differently and pay attention to details others might ignore. There have been times when photography was the reason I went to a new place more than once, because I thoroughly enjoyed the work I did there. I have always had a dream to travel to Asia, South America and other exotic places, but after visiting some of the countries I have been to within Africa, coupled with my addiction to photography, I would rather travel around Africa and allow my photography to tell the stories I come across. This, in my opinion, is the biggest shift in paradigm that has happened to me. I want to show the world through photography that we are like everyone else, with the same hopes and dreams, and sense of shared humanity.

I remember being in Mali, and as I took photographs in the market, I noticed people were not very comfortable with the camera around them. There was one man I had to tell I could not print the picture that instant. He said: "I don't want a printed photo; I want you to show it to the people of Sudan".

I'm equally excited about the change I see happening. I believe it's just a matter of time for Africa to stand out. I prefer backpacking when on the road, so I can stop every time I see something that attracts my attention, and that's one of the best things about travelling within Africa. You don't know what to expect. There isn't much information about African destinations, and it's like a new discovery, especially for photographers. More young Africans are tempted to travel around, but it's expensive. Transportation and language are still big barriers. However, it's nice to see them getting involved.

Nana Oforiatta Ayim



I grew up in many different places – Germany, Ghana and England. Travelling is part of who I am and the decision to travel around Africa was not a difficult one to make. There's so much in the press about different places in Africa. What you hear and read does not necessarily reflect the realities on the ground. I drove to Nigeria through Togo and Benin in 2003 with some friends to visit my then boyfriend who was Nigerian: you could say that love got me started. I then went to Morocco with that same

boyfriend to visit the incredible Gnawa Festival in Essaouira in 2004. I went to Cape Town for work in 2005 and Addis Ababa in 2008. With Invisible Borders, we drove from Nigeria, through Chad, Sudan and ended in Ethiopia in 2011, where I stayed for a few months after the group left, researching an Ethiopian photographer, and then went to Dakar in 2012 for six months, to work on two books.

Travelling and my work are intertwined. I write and make films about people and their connections, synergies, similarities and differences. I'm about to embark on a large-scale project, a cultural encyclopaedia of the African continent, which means that I will eventually see all 54 countries, which I'm hugely excited about. Maybe that's why I see myself as a world explorer, connection seeker and gypsy princess – gypsy for my need to experience, see, move, ride in tro-tros or the back of an okada, eat fofof and flatbread with Sudanese border guards, listen to lone guitarists in raw Chadian night shacks; princess, for the desire at the end of it all for clean cotton sheets, firm mattresses, long baths to wash away the travel debris, and for that ultimate privilege, solitude.

There's more intra-African travel by young people. In Ghana, Adventure Junkies organise Ghanaian travel for young Ghanaians. Travelling by road, van, taxi, and okada gave me the opportunity to see countries in ways I might not otherwise have seen them. Travelling with others

that you did not know before, 24/7, was challenging and definitely takes you out of your comfort zone – a healthy experience is the best part of going on the road with Invisible Borders. The cultural vibrancy and depth of metropolises I've been to is astounding. At the same time, it has been refreshing to learn there's nothing to be afraid of, as long as you exercise the same caution, sensitivity and restraint you would anywhere else. There is an enormous amount to be gained. ➤

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