

If You Want the Best

An Interview with **Geoffrey J. W. Kent, Chairman and Chief Executive Officer, Abercrombie & Kent Group of Companies, London**

EDITORS' NOTE *Born while his parents were on safari in what is now Zambia, Geoffrey Kent became managing director of Abercrombie & Kent in 1967, after studying at the Royal Military Academy Sandhurst (England) and serving in the British armed forces. He is a founder of the World Travel & Tourism Council (WTTC) and a member of its executive committee.*



Geoffrey J. W. Kent

COMPANY BRIEF *Founded in 1962 by Colonel John and Valerie Kent along with their son (the present chairman and CEO), Abercrombie & Kent Ltd. has grown from a small African safari company into the world's foremost adventure-travel enterprise, with headquarters in London, as well as 45 branch offices and 42 subsidiary companies worldwide. Employing some 3,000 people and attracting about 200,000 clients per year (including former guests Hillary Rodham Clinton, Michael Crichton, Bill Gates, Goldie Hawn, and Diane Sawyer), it specializes in unique and luxurious vacations to exotic as well as more conventional destinations in more than 100 countries on all seven continents.*

Are you satisfied with the market's recognition of the Abercrombie & Kent brand and your broad range of products and services?

We've obviously changed a lot over the past 42 years, from owning one Land Rover to what Abercrombie & Kent is today. But one thing hasn't changed, which is that we want to exceed the expectations of every single guest who travels with us. As long as we continue to do this, our brand awareness will grow and grow.

Today, apart from the cruise-ship industry and the five-star hotel industry, I believe that we're the only strictly travel brand in the luxury category that people are aware of. We define luxury travel in general and luxury adventure travel in particular, from India to Antarctica to wherever.

Having started as a safari company, will your business keep that as-

pect of travel at its core?

Yes, it will. A tree must remember its roots, so we'll continue being – without question – the world's best safari company. However, safaris represent an increasingly smaller part of our business.

Abercrombie & Kent is going to continue taking people on new adventures to new places. Iran may open up, and it's not beyond possibility that Iraq may open up. And who's

going to be the first company in there? We are. We're a pioneer brand. The U.S. still has a fledgling space program, but it may be advanced to a front burner. And when the first commercial aircraft goes into outer space, one thing is for sure: We'll be the first to welcome guests aboard because we always have been. We're travel innovators.

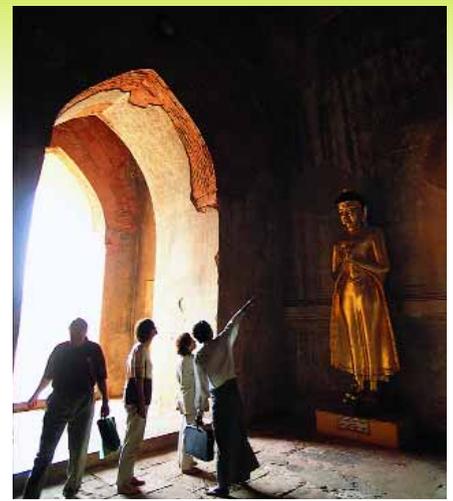
Do you target only luxury travelers, or is your market broader than that?

First of all, I don't like the word "luxury," even though we use it. I prefer to say that we provide inner access to all corners of the world in peerless comfort, safety, and style. In fact, we pitch safety as the highest concern on our list. And we provide only the finest local guides.

That said, we do occupy the luxury niche, but we've broadened our market to include what I call the "aspirational classes" – the next layer of those moving up.

The emphasis on safety obviously has increased since 9/11. How has the ensuing war on terrorism affected your business?

The last three years have been the worst for the travel industry since World War II. Companies in Britain alone have lost £1 billion, and many U.S. firms have gone bankrupt. However, because of Abercrombie & Kent's business model – we're based in more than 40 countries and market throughout Europe, the Middle East, and elsewhere, in addition to the United States – we've been able to weather this really, really bad storm, which wiped out many others.



Has the travel industry rebounded yet?

We know for a fact that recovery is under way. For example, bookings from the United States to Europe are up more than 45 percent over last year.

Small, escorted, group programs are a particularly good value right now because prices were set before the rapid rise of the euro. These escorted journeys enable guests to travel comfortably to places they might otherwise hesitate to visit on their own. Plus, our choice of itineraries is accompanied by a choice of accommodations, making some of these programs more affordable to the aspirational classes. In addition, we've seen a significant growth in independent travel over the past year. In response, we've developed a series of Private Journeys to destinations around the world, which include the dedicated support of a driver/guide, additional local guides, the finest hotels, and a choice of activities. A key element, again, is that prices are already set, and we've been getting a very strong reaction.

When a marketplace is totally destabilized, as ours was over the past three years, those companies that don't change and innovate founder. We, however, have been able to change and innovate in many ways.

Is the Marco Polo Club a key part of your operations?

Yes. It's a very powerful tool and helps to develop Abercrombie & Kent aficionados.

Anyone who has booked with us in the past is eligible to join for a modest fee, but the club is really intended for a loyal customer base of about 15,000 people, who love our company and travel with us at least two or three times a year. They receive discounts on land arrangements as well as insider access to trips not on the open market. And at focus groups, we get tips on upcoming trends from these dedicated travelers.

Is Abercrombie & Kent only for adults, or do you also design programs with younger explorers in mind?

We host many family-only trips. Aber-

Guests explore a temple in Pagan, Myanmar.

crombie & Kent is like a tailor: We're always designing trips to suit individual requests. Even our regular escorted itineraries are tailor-made by my staff and me. We're able to do this because we own a vast network of destination management companies, which are always up to speed because they operate locally.

High-end travel of course offers personalized touches, but does new technology also play a significant role in your operations?

Absolutely. First of all, we're a global company. No other company in the world today can compete with our size and scope of destination management, and technology has simplified the whole process of communicating with our offices worldwide. Second, we use technology to bring us closer to our customers. Our database captures information about guests' preferences, which then enables our travel-agent associates to do target mailings. And third, Internet marketing has been an integral part of our success. Our Web sites [www.abercrombiekent.co.uk and www.abercrombiekent.com] now log more than 275,000 visits each month. The home pages include a search function, which allows people to find information quickly. The day-by-day itineraries include maps and color photographs, and you can order brochures, books, videos, and even travel clothes and accessories online.

With the Internet now so pervasive, do you think that travel agents can survive?

As I said, everybody has to evolve and innovate. Travel agents – the good ones – are doing this by offering customers added value, which means they must be specialists. If agents can provide detailed knowledge, they are here to stay. As for the agents who primarily process bookings, their role is already challenged.

All the unique aspects of Abercrombie & Kent notwithstanding, is there anything else that distinguishes the company from its would-be competitors?

Abercrombie & Kent – and I feel a touch of arrogance creeping in – is the only real travel company that offers products it knows it can deliver. I believe all of our competitors should be in the publishing business. They publish brochures and use operating agents around the world, but they have no control over quality. They therefore must settle for certain standards. On the other hand, we own our destination management companies around the world. They're like guardian

angels, hovering just out of sight and making sure that every aspect of every trip meets our expectations. As such, we can accept responsibility for the experience from the minute guests book to when

over hundreds of millions of dollars a year, and my office never really shuts because there's an Abercrombie & Kent office open somewhere in the world at all times.

I'm a totally hands-on chairman and

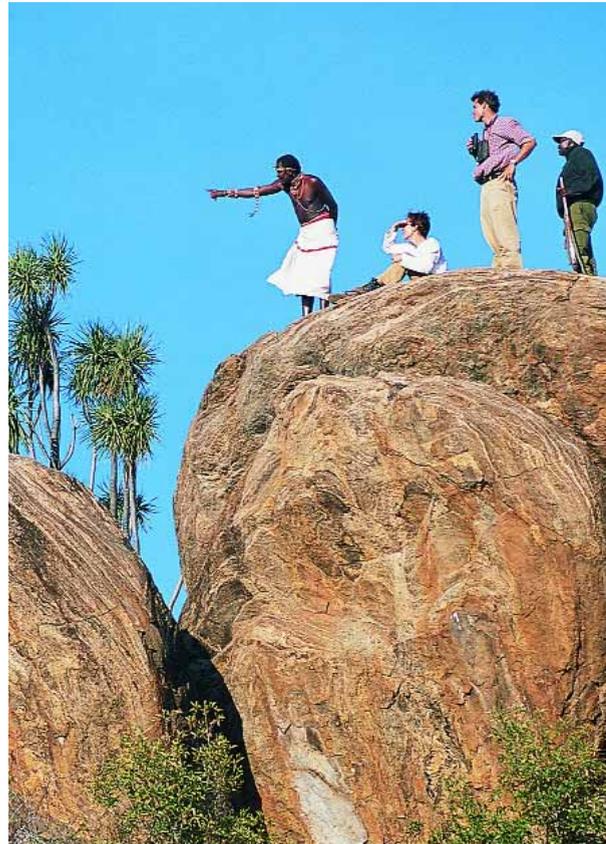
CEO. In fact, I don't believe there's a CEO worth his salt today who isn't totally hands-on. We must know everything about our companies, which means that there's no substitute for long hours. We all delegate, of course, but we have to know exactly what decisions are being made, and we must have enough information ourselves to counter a decision if it's wrong. You can't simply say: "What do you think? Oh good! Do that!" That's a fatal error. You have to be more pragmatic. You mustn't have your head in the clouds.

I guide my brand every day – like a tiger. Every single complaint arrives on my desk, and I take action daily. Fortunately, the number and seriousness of complaints are small because everyone in the organization knows that I'll be down their necks if they make mistakes. And fewer complaints help to build the brand. So, of all my duties, I really care most about satisfying our guests. That aspect of my job hasn't changed in 42 years.

Did you ever imagine in the early days that the company would grow to the extent it has?

Back in the early days, all the hunters would congregate at the Thorn Tree café outside the New Stanley Hotel in Nairobi. Some would ask me the name of our company and, specifically, "Who's Abercrombie?" I'd say, "There isn't one." Then they'd ask about my plans for A&K. Well, this may sound a bit conceited, but I'd answer, "I want to make this the largest and best-known travel company in the world." After loads of laughter, they'd respond: "Well, you'd better get going. You have one Land Rover – and, by the way, Geoff, it's dirty."

Somehow, I think every entrepreneur has this kind of optimism inside. Did I really know that I'd succeed to this extent? Of course not, but I thought I would. And to be honest, the company has grown beyond all my expectations, but we still have a long, long way to go. Our horizons are limitless. ●



they return home. We're able to provide 24/7 support from our network of 45 branch offices, which guarantee levels of service and safety no other single company can match. That's the key point, but it's a challenge to get this information across in brochures.

Would you buy a Mercedes just from reading a brochure? No. You'd want to test-drive it. In our business, however, you actually have to buy the product; you have to take the holiday. But nearly two-thirds of our guests are repeat customers. Once you travel with Abercrombie & Kent, you're unlikely to travel with anybody else.

As the company has grown, how has your role as chairman and CEO changed?

When I first started managing the company, our annual turnover was about \$24,000. My concerns were whether we had enough petrol for a 30-day safari around East Africa, and who was going to answer the mail while I was away. Today, we turn



A guided walking safari in Kenya (top); a view of Positano, Italy, from Le Sirenuse, an 18th-century palazzo cum 61-room hotel