

Experiential Travel



Geoffrey Kent on Easter Island (above);

Abercrombie & Kent Exclusive Desert Camp in the Sahara Desert in Morocco (below)

An Interview with Geoffrey Kent, Founder, Chairman, and Chief Executive Officer, Abercrombie & Kent

EDITORS' NOTE *Geoffrey Kent's life began much as he lives it today – amidst excitement and adventure in an exotic location. After attending the Royal Military Academy at Sandhurst, he saw service in Bahrain, Aden, Oman, Yemen, Cyprus, Libya, and Malta. After his last posting as Aide-de-Camp to General John Frost, his armed forces career was cut short. While still serving in the British Army, Kent joined his parents in founding Abercrombie & Kent in Kenya. By 1967, the elder Kent retired and Geoffrey moved full bore into turning A&K into the internationally renowned luxury travel powerhouse it is today with 52 offices around the world and 2,500 employees. He also became a world-class polo player, winning the U.S. Open twice, the U.S. Gold Cup, the Cartier International, and the World Cup. He served as captain of the Windsor Park polo team, on which he played with HRH The Prince of Wales. He is a member of former UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon's Leadership Council for Sustainable Development Solutions Network.*



COMPANY BRIEF *Abercrombie & Kent (abercrombiekent.com; A&K) offered its first Royal Air Tour in 1989 and was the first to feature the supersonic Concorde from British Airways. Clients can choose from a Luxury Small Group Journey, one of the finest group travel experiences in the world; a Connections Boutique Group Journey, which combines A&K's renowned service with unbeatable value; a Marco Polo Journey to an exotic locale or local festival; a private Signature Series itinerary; or a custom Tailor Made luxury journey created just for them. In 2016, A&K launched Inspiring Expeditions by Geoffrey Kent to provide thrilling adventures personally led by Geoffrey Kent for those top-tier clients who have done pretty much everything. Making these extraordinary journeys possible are handpicked experts worldwide, on call around the clock.*

Would you discuss the history and heritage of Abercrombie & Kent and how the brand has evolved over the years?

I helped my parents set up Abercrombie & Kent in 1962 after they were forced off their farm in the run-up to Kenya's independence. Those early safaris were modest affairs conducted with little more than my mother's silver ice bucket and a Bedford truck. But I had a very clear vision for the future: days filled with adventures with total comfort at night.

Our philosophy was "shoot with a camera, not with a gun." Using experience I gained in the British military, we introduced the first mobile tented safaris with refrigeration, making it possible to have fresh meat, fruit, vegetables – and unlimited ice for the gin & tonics – in the bush.

I waited until my parents were on vacation trekking the Khyber Pass and withdrew most of our savings from the bank to order luxurious new tents from Low & Bonar, Royal Doulton china and crystal, and custom made trunks to pack everything in.

That's how A&K became known for providing unexpected comforts and amenities in remote destinations.

What was your vision in creating the concept of experiential travel?

Safaris are considered the original form of experiential travel. This is travel for people who define luxury not so much by the degree of elegance but by the quality of the experience. Each journey is an adventure that offers a 360-degree view of the culture, wildlife, and natural environment, as well as the challenges they face.

As we became more and more established, guests like David Rockefeller asked us about bringing A&K's unique style to other places.

We were among the first Westerners to visit China when it opened up. People forget what an enormous challenge travel there used to be. On our very first trip, we had to stay in army barracks – there simply were no hotels.

We introduced expedition cruising in places like Antarctica and the Galapagos to provide extraordinary wildlife encounters in a

pristine environment. A luxury yacht is our base camp, providing a comfortable home away from home in even the most remote places.

How do you define the Abercrombie & Kent difference – what sets it apart?

Our business model is based on working in partnership with local communities. We do this by setting up a destination management company in each country to plan and orchestrate arrangements for our guests from arrival to departure.

We invest in hiring and training local staff; comfortable air-conditioned vehicles and garages to maintain them in the best condition; and building our own infrastructure.

Deep roots and long-established relationships are the key to delivering authentic and unparalleled experiences. These are coordinated by our expert local guides, who have an intimate knowledge of the destination, its history and culture, as well as the local flora and fauna. Most importantly, they must have the kind of engaging personality that makes them ideal companions.

How do you define the target market for Abercrombie & Kent?

While many who travel are thrilled to simply be in a foreign country, our guests seek a deeper knowledge and appreciation, an experience of a more profound nature that expands their understanding of the world. They want travel that does more than just provide a rest and a getaway.

They are experience seekers – educated, active, accomplished connoisseurs who enjoy the good life and insist on the best the world has to offer. The majority are professionals and entrepreneurs with an intense curiosity about the world. Travel is an essential part of their luxury lifestyle.

The majority are between the ages of 35 and 64. Older and younger travelers are also well represented, depending on the trip. Whether solo travelers, families, or couples, they have a diversity of interests and occupations, but share a passion for travel. Our guests tend to be primarily Americans, with Canadians, British, Europeans, and Australians also represented.

What was the idea behind introducing the A&K Connections product?

Connections Boutique Group Journeys are designed to fully immerse travelers in local life with one-of-a-kind boutique hotels and intimate local interactions that connect our guests to interesting people and places.

Our goal is to focus on experiences that offer insight into the local culture. Boutique Connections range from introducing guests to the crafts and produce markets where locals gather, such as the Mercato Centrale in Florence, to bringing to life a locale's culture and history, such as a private tour of Badminton House, the country estate of the Duke and Duchess of Beaufort.

Dining is also an important part of the experience, and we feature vibrant restaurants favored more by locals than by tourists. There are opportunities to sample Burgundy's most famous white wines in the cellars, meet the brewer of a family-run Bavarian brewery, or the chance to try your hand at Icelandic fishing and let the chef prepare your catch for dinner.

Would you provide an overview of your destinations and the different types of experiences you offer?

Abercrombie & Kent enables travelers to literally discover the world around them and to do it in a uniquely stylish manner. Today, our award-winning travel services extend around the globe to more than 100 countries on all seven continents.

From our beginnings in East Africa, we expanded to Southern Africa, Europe, Egypt, China, India, Australia, and New Zealand, as well as Southeast Asia and South America. Today we have a network of 52 offices around the world, with recent additions in Sri Lanka and Brazil.

To ensure one consistent standard of quality, we own Sanctuary Retreats luxury safari lodges in pristine wilderness areas across East and Southern Africa; exclusive rights to camps with some of Africa's finest game-viewing; and luxurious river cruisers – the Sanctuary Sun Boats on the Nile in Egypt, the Sanctuary *Yangzi Explorer* in China, and the Sanctuary *Ananda* in Myanmar.

We also create memorable travel experiences aboard the most luxurious all-balcony expedition ships in Antarctica, the Arctic, and Japan, as well as more than 30 canal and river cruisers in Africa, Asia, Europe, and South America.

You recently introduced a luxury jet product. What is the concept behind this offering?

Abercrombie & Kent was a private jet pioneer, introducing the Royal Air Tour by Private Jet

in 1989. My plan was to offer our guests the same time-saving luxury enjoyed by royalty and heads of state when they travel. In subsequent years, we began offering around-the-world trips aboard the Concorde.

Under ordinary circumstances, many of these destinations are difficult – seemingly impossible – to visit on a single itinerary. A private jet brings these experiences within reach.

We have a dedicated Private Jet team, which has designed around-the-world journeys for many of our VIP clients aboard their own aircraft or planes we charter on their behalf. We know the most convenient airports to each iconic site and which airports can accommodate different size jets. Our local experts guarantee “by invitation only” access, plan memorable meals in unusual venues, and provide introductions to engaging local personalities.

Will you touch on Inspiring Expeditions by Geoffrey Kent?

Last year, we launched this program, which includes thrilling adventures that I personally lead for top-tier clients who have done pretty much everything. Each expedition is designed to go above and beyond – by private jet, helicopter, luxury private superyacht – and to do it in A&K's signature style with Michelin-star chefs and fine wines.

On our first Inspiring Expedition last fall, we recreated Jacques Cousteau's famous expedition to Palau aboard the exclusively chartered superyacht, *MS Saluzi*. Our guests enjoyed some of the finest scuba diving and snorkeling in the world.

Later this year, I am leading an expedition around the world by private jet with stops on the exclusive Hawaiian island of Lana'i, Tasmania, Borneo, Everest Base Camp, Bhutan, Armenia, and Iceland.

In March, I am organizing an expedition to see the Northern Lights. We will fly by private jet to a remote Wilderness Lodge near the Arctic Circle. During the day, we have planned ice-rally car racing on a purpose-built ice track, safaris by snowmobile, dogsleds, and reindeer sleigh with cross-country skiing and snowshoeing, and more.

We are also planning future expeditions into the heart of Kamkatcha, to Mongolia and Nagaland where the eagle hunters live, along the coast of West Papua New Guinea to the Raja Ampat Islands, and to the South Pole to see the Emperor Penguins.

What support does Abercrombie & Kent lend to sustainable tourism?



A bush breakfast at a mobile camping site in Eastern Africa (above); a view from the rear deck of the MS Saluzi Yacht (below)

Giving back has always been part of our DNA. We are committed to ensuring our presence impacts the natural and cultural environment in a positive way, providing benefits to all sectors of society, attracting and developing a skilled workforce, and stimulating consumer demand for sustainable local products.

Each of our offices address challenges in the local community, nominating projects they feel are of value and partnering with organizations making a difference by protecting wildlife and the environment; supporting hospitals, schools, and orphanages; and providing education, meals, and shelter to impoverished children.

In Uganda, our guests spend more than \$1 million dollars each year on gorilla tracking permits in Bwindi Impenetrable Forest, home to half the world's endangered mountain gorillas. They have also contributed more than \$1.18 million to Bwindi Community Hospital, making it possible for what started as a clinic under a tree to expand their services with a maternity ward, children's ward, neonatal unit, and operating theatre. Today, Bwindi is now a fully-fledged regional hospital, with its own nursing school. At the same time, the gorilla population has grown from 302 to more than 400.

This is a 21st century approach to philanthropy, a new form of community development assistance that evolved from a partnership between a forward-looking travel business and guests who want to give something back. We have more than 20 projects supported by Abercrombie & Kent Philanthropy and passionate travelers that are helping to improve the lives of more than 69,000 men, women and children worldwide.

What has made the business so special for you for all these years, and do you ever think about slowing down?

Travel is transformational. It builds bridges between people and cultures, ultimately leading to understanding those who come from entirely different backgrounds. I love spending time with our guests and learning about how travel has changed their lives – something which you simply can't put a price on.

I truly believe that if we were to travel more, there would be far less conflict in this world. ●

