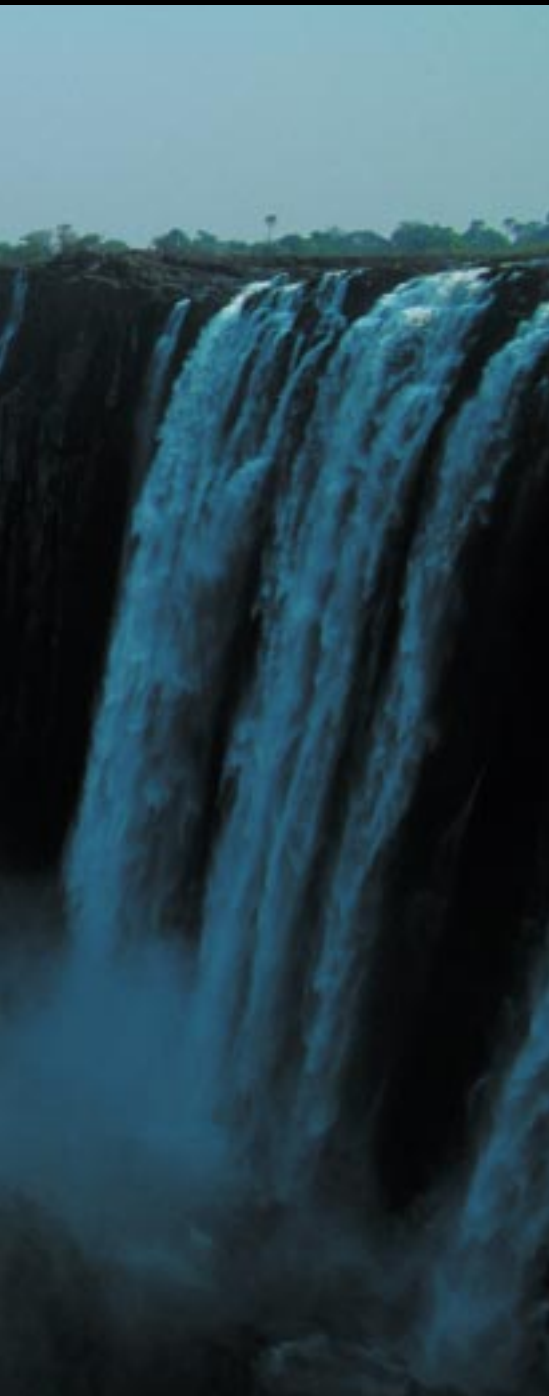


# SAFARI



# SISTERS



## **Casey Gamba '94 and Teresa Isabelle '95 went from college roommates to successful safari guides and tour company owners. What? Like it's hard?**

**By Todd Schwartz**

The lions, three big males, one snarling menacingly, surround the two women. The vertical walls of the canyon hem them in, and the women are defenseless, carrying nothing but a camera and a compass. Then the situation gets really dangerous—the pizza delivery guy and the bike messenger barely miss them. And the only cab in sight zooms right past. If not for the huge bottle of Scotch at their feet, they could be in serious trouble.

Such are the perils of the asphalt jungle, amid the concrete-and-glass canyons of the big city. In the ad, a “Dewar’s Profile” that appeared in national magazines in November 2001, Casey Gamba and Teresa Isabelle stand undaunted between the photogenic Photoshop™ lions and the far more savage pedestrians. They are featured as the young and unlikely founders, leaders, visionaries, and office staff of Mango African Safaris, a growing boutique tour company born during a fifteen-month around-the-world adventure. “They traded the pinstripes of the business world for the zebra stripes of Africa,” reads the ad copy, and it happened almost like that. Braced by a cocktail of friendship, fearlessness, luck, naiveté, and the odd waitress job, the Mango women are living their dreams. Or perhaps their dreams are living them. It’s been that sort of trip.

Gamba is the taller one with the straight hair. Isabelle is the shorter one with the wavy hair. Gamba is a political science major from Denver; Isabelle is a journalism and advertising major from Portland. Gamba is a little more laid back; Isabelle is high energy. Beyond those differences, they seem to be one person, sharing the same goals, the same passions, the same *why not?* attitudes, and the same, yes, dreams. The itinerary of their particular journey to fulfillment parallels one of their safaris: adventurous, surprising, sometimes heart-pounding, always rewarding—and food is a big thing.

### **The Mango Safari**

#### **Segment 1: Eugene to Zimbabwe.**

They met their first year at the University of Oregon, two among the sea of faces in Writing 121, and from then on they just seemed to keep running into each other around campus. It was soon evident that they were similar on the surface—often wearing nearly the same outfit when they met—and the more they learned about each other, the more it was clear that they were kindred spirits, sharing the same tastes and the same willingness to leap before they looked. Isabelle and Gamba quickly became fast friends, and by senior year they were roommates. They talked a lot about travel and adventure, and they each decided that “there’s no one more like me than her.”

After graduation in 1994 (Isabelle finished one class later that summer, so her official graduation year is '95), they decided to pursue their career goals by moving to Steamboat Springs, Colorado, working restaurant gigs and skiing. Since they had very little idea what their career goals were, it seemed as good a strategy as any.

After a year, they felt it was time to get serious, and they tried in Portland. Isabelle went to work for an ad agency; Gamba, who is fluent in Italian, sold wine for an international distributor. But they never stopped talking about travel and adventure, and, before long, getting serious lost whatever appeal it may have had.

*Teresa Isabelle and Casey Gamba relax at Victoria Falls in Zimbabwe.*

**Photography by Michael Lewis**

Isabelle, Gamba, and Mango clients examine lion tracks with renowned guide Dave Carson.



“We soon started planning and saving for a long trip around the world,” Isabelle remembers. “Both of us really wanted to go to Africa, so that became the focus of the trip. For me, it was because of the first Omnimax movie I ever saw—*Africa: The Serengeti*. Once I watched those cheetahs racing across the big dome, I knew I had to go see that for myself.”

While Isabelle’s wanderlust was mainly cinematic, Gamba had been traveling her entire life. Her family disposed of its disposable income by roaming the globe, and before she was in high school she’d been to almost as many countries as FedEx.

But she had never seen Africa, and it held as much fascination for her as for her friend. So they began to research African safaris. Time was no problem. Money, on the other hand . . .

“We didn’t have any plans or schedules for the rest of the trip,” Gamba says, “but we knew we probably couldn’t just free-lance in Africa. We had to book something, but all the options were incredibly expensive.”

Then Isabelle saw a brochure that caught her eye. “I was always looking at the photos, to see if I could picture us on that particular trip. This one had a picture

**They climbed Mt. Kilimanjaro, crossed the Serengeti, watched rainbows float above Victoria Falls, camped in the Maasai Mara, communed with gorillas in Uganda, swam in the warm ocean off Zanzibar, trekked across Botswana, saw every animal they had imagined.**



The Mango group sneaks up on a young bull elephant.

of a bunch of people sitting in the back of a truck eating out of tin cans. I said, 'Hey Casey—I think we can afford this one!'"

Gamba and Isabelle scrimped and saved for several months, then quit their jobs, kissed their boyfriends good-bye, and in February of 1997 flew off to Europe. Some weeks later they found themselves in the exotic, if somewhat threatening, city of Nairobi, Kenya, ready to begin a ten-week African safari. They climbed Mt. Kilimanjaro, crossed the Serengeti, watched rainbows float above Victoria Falls, camped in the Maasai Mara, communed with gorillas in Uganda, swam in the warm ocean off Zanzibar, trekked across Botswana, saw every animal they had imagined—including cheetahs racing across the big flat of the savanna. They were completely, happily, irretrievably hooked. Africa had gone on safari in their hearts.

Isabelle and Gamba didn't want to leave when the ten weeks ended, but they were out of money for even the lowest-budget tour. Sitting in the final camp in Zimbabwe, not knowing what to do next, they told their story to the owner of the safari company with whom they'd been traveling. A day or two later, when the owner heard that another tour operator was looking for a cook, she sought him out and said "I know these two crazy American girls. . . ."

Both Gamba and Isabelle love to cook and had made a few well-received dinners over the course of their safari. They applied for the job—*why not?*—and were told that the tour only needed one cook. "We're a two-fer deal," they insisted and, after cooking their audition, they were hired. They would have to split the \$100 per week cook's salary, but they got what they were after: two more months on safari in Zimbabwe, Botswana, and Namibia. Soon, visions of Mango were dancing in their heads.

### Segment 2: Zimbabwe to Denver.

The safaris with the two young American cooks drew rave reviews, and soon both their knowledge and their responsibilities expanded.

"All of a sudden we were kind of running the trips," says Isabelle, "and we noticed that not many Americans were coming to Africa on the mid-priced tours. They all seemed to gravitate toward the high-end, big-money trips. We were

excited, naive, and twenty-five years old, so we figured why not start our own safari company? How hard could it be?"

Gamba and Isabelle decided to spend six weeks hitchhiking through Mozambique to work on their business plan: offer slightly more than mid-priced trips to adventurous travelers, mixing some genteel bivouacking with some discreet luxury, as it were. Along the way, they came across a woman selling mangos from a big bucket by the side of the road. They asked for two, but when they gave her what they thought was the equivalent of about ten cents, the woman smiled broadly, dumped out the entire bucket at their feet and walked away. They're still not sure exactly how much they paid her—but for the next week, everywhere they went they took along two large, slowly emptying bags of yellow fruit. Isabelle and Gamba began calling themselves the Mango Adventure Team. Much later, after several months in southeast Asia and the long trip home, this time to Denver, the name—like the last of the mangos—stuck around. It was July 1998, and the two decided that a safari company by any other name would not smell as sweet. Mango African Safaris was born.

By April of the following year, their first brochure was ready. "We worked lots of extra wait-shifts to pay for the printing," Isabelle says. "We didn't have a clue what we were doing. I mean, why would anyone spend thousands of dollars with—and trust their once-in-a-lifetime trip to—a couple of twenty-five-year-old girls with no track record? But we had made a lot of good contacts in Africa, and we just believed we could do this. As it turned out, it wasn't quite that easy."

### Segment 3: Denver to Mango.

Most of the five people they convinced to travel with them that first year were old friends, not new customers. But the trip was a success, and when it ended Gamba and Isabelle spent six more weeks scouting the best lodges, parks, and game drives. Back in the United States, they made another brochure, worked more extra shifts, gave slide shows, talked to anyone and everyone, and by the time the next safari season rolled around they had sold two full group tours—thirty-three people in all. Minuscule by the standards of a Butterfield & Robinson or one of the other elite safari outfitters, but enough to answer the question of who would trust their trip to two twenty-six-year-old women who still had more enthusiasm than experience: independent travelers who wanted a different sort of safari.



A Mango client on a "chimp walk" at a sanctuary for chimpanzees.



*An elephant crosses the Chobe River.*

**“The keys to success are: Always have at least two backup plans for everything, always have a cooler full of cold beer and snacks to turn a flat tire into a party, and be honest when setting expectations.”**

“I think what makes Mango special,” Isabelle explains, “is that we love Africa so much that our trips can’t help but evoke the spirit of the place—powerful, emotional, spiritual. And we try to design trips that have a natural flow between adventure and comfort. Maybe you’re in a nice tented camp for a couple nights, then you get a night in a luxurious lodge. So there’s a great balance. After six days of game drives you’re over it for awhile! You need to lie by a pool for a day. Our tours aren’t about roughing it, but they aren’t about twenty-four-hour-a-day pampering, either.”

“And we do all we can to keep our travelers away from the masses [of tourists],” adds Gamba. “On our game drives there aren’t fifteen minivans surrounding every lion, because we’re staying in small lodges or tented camps that are fifty miles from anything. And we’ve built great friendships with the people who are our drivers, game spotters, and hosts, relationships that go beyond just work, so on our trips we really get to experience the wisdom and warmth of the African people.”

The two women have now made so many friends that Africa feels like a home away from home, and they hope to communicate some of that to their guests. So beyond the standard shopping/posing-

for-pictures interface, a meaningful community project, paid for by a portion of the tour fee, is part of the mix. Often the tour will visit a local school, bringing books and supplies. “Our tours are for the travelers who don’t believe they would ever enjoy a tour,” Gamba says.

With their first two full tours behind them, the safari sisters kept up their vigorous marketing efforts—gorilla marketing, you might say—and then one day the Fates decided to pour a little scotch on the rocks, lift their heavenly glasses, and toast the Mango women with good fortune. They got an e-mail from the New York advertising agency for Dewar’s—a series of ads was in the works (backed by a \$2 million media buy) profiling young entrepreneurs following their dreams, and the agency had come across Mango African Safaris on the Web. Once the Dewar’s people discovered that Gamba and Isabelle personally led all their tours, they were even more interested. But the competition over which of several dozen up-and-comers would be featured in the profiles was intense.

One of the main reasons Mango exists at all is that both Isabelle and Gamba are smart, tireless promoters, and they stayed on this opportunity like tickbirds on a rhino. Isabelle went to New York to work the players, using her agency background to put together a pitch that included a spec ad starring the young safari queens, Isabelle’s then-boyfriend’s Land Rover, and two very uncooperative housecats. It worked, and in November 2001, there they were: the lions, the pizza guy, and the attractive CEOs of Mango, on newsstands everywhere.

Even in those unsettled, post-9/11 weeks, it was the validation (not to mention free press) that the young company needed. Mango, as it were, was beginning to bear fruit.

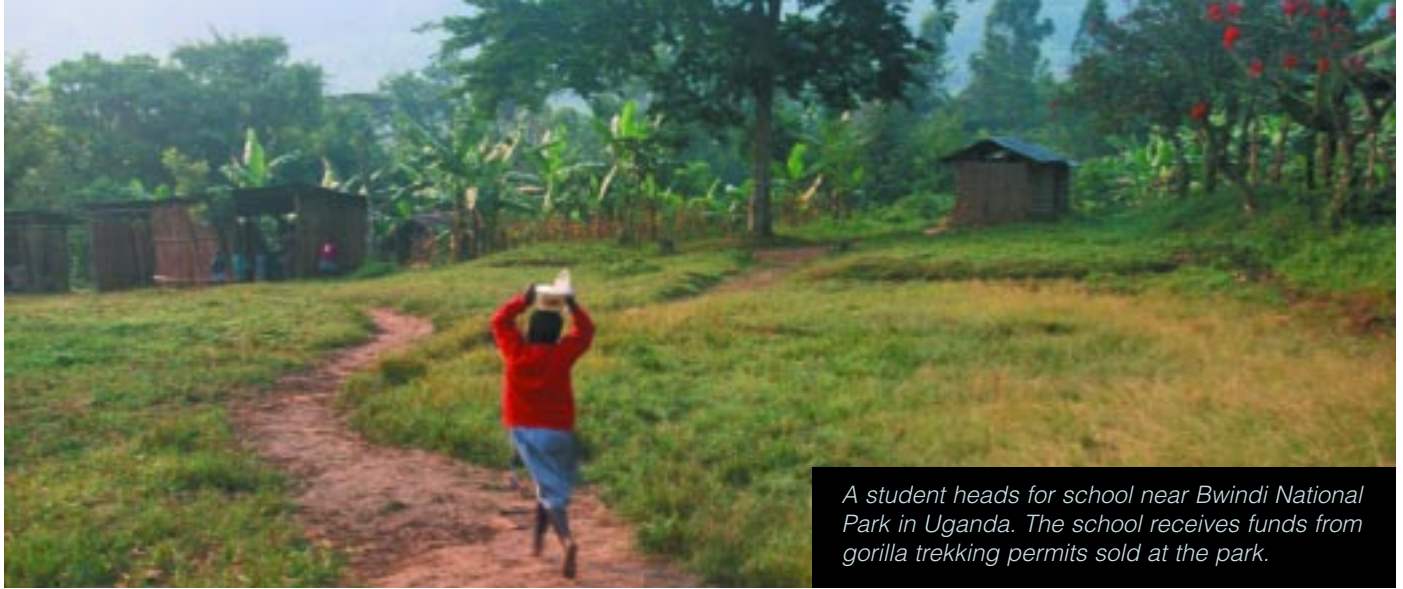
#### **Segment 4: Mango to Mali to Addis Ababa to Points Unknown.**

This year more than sixty people will experience Africa with Mango. That’s not enough to put Gamba and Isabelle, both now thirty-one years old, into diamond-studded safari togs, but it does cut down on the nights that involve the phrase “I’ll be your server this evening.” They are a going concern, even in these travel-wary times, with group and custom trips to places as far-flung as Cape Town’s wine country, the Sahara desert, Ethiopia, Senegal, and Mali, and of course the twenty-four-hour-Animal-Planet safari lands of East, Central, and Southern Africa. Renowned *National Geographic* photographer Michael Lewis has teamed with Mango to offer photo workshops in several locations.

Isabelle and Gamba will spend nearly three months in Africa this year, leading trips and scouting new locations, working constantly behind the scenes to make the daily surprises, breakdowns, and cultural cross-purposes of African travel, if not invisible to their guests, at least part of the act.

“The biggest challenge of guiding tours in Africa is keeping Americans, who are so time-sensitive and who expect so much, happy in a place that runs on an entirely different kind of clock,” says Isabelle. “The African pace is slower, more accepting, far more relaxed, and keeping people functioning on an American schedule means keeping Africans working way ahead of schedule! Ask someone in Africa how long something will take and the answer will always be ‘Just now.’ ‘Just now’ means anything from five minutes to two hours!”

“The keys to success are: Always have at least two backup plans for everything, always have a cooler full of cold beer and snacks to turn a flat tire into a party, and be honest when setting expectations,” says



*A student heads for school near Bwindi National Park in Uganda. The school receives funds from gorilla trekking permits sold at the park.*

Isabelle. “If you know it’s a three-and-a-half-hour drive in a perfect world, tell people it’s four hours, because you know there will be a police stop or we’ll get stuck in the mud at some point. And always have a great friend and business partner to cheer you up!”

Gamba agrees: “Mango wouldn’t exist without our friendship. It’s been a huge factor in our success. We pool our strengths—I slow Teresa down, she speeds me up. We’re always there for each other, even when we’re getting on each other’s nerves. And we help each other understand that even when you do everything right, the travel business will always be affected by forces beyond our control, so we don’t take it quite as personally as we did at the beginning.”

And so—*why not?*—the dream career has come to pass for the Mango women. Are they surprised? Yes and no.

“When we graduated from high school,” Gamba, who today lives in Denver, says, “a bunch of my friends and I wrote down what we each thought the others would be doing ten years later. For me, more than one person wrote down ‘Booking tour groups’! So I guess it was pretty clear how much I was into travel. But I never guessed it would be Africa, and I’m so lucky that I have the opportunity to show this incredible place to people—and to get to tell Africa stories on a regular basis. I believe in what we’re doing and the way we’re doing it. And it’s even more rewarding when it’s your own company.”

Isabelle, now back in Portland, says, “I’m very surprised by what I’m doing! It’s amazing, the ‘choose your own adventure’ trip that life takes you on. But if you’re not going to get out there and go after it, then what the hell are you doing? I’m

pretty free-spirited about the experiences life has to offer. I want to see all the corners and have all the thrills. At the time, it took a lot of naiveté for Casey and me to start Mango, but we just never looked back. So many people get locked into a path, doing what they know, and it’s hard to break out. But we discovered that an idea—even a hare-brained idea like starting a safari company!—will work if you really put your heart into it. Most people succeed at the things their hearts drive.”

Especially when there’s an entire continent along for the ride.

*Todd Schwartz ’75 is a Portland writer who has been nervous in Nairobi, thrilled in Tanzania, captivated in Cape Town, and zoned out in Zanzibar. His last piece for Oregon Quarterly was “It’s Not About the Bike Racer,” Spring 2003.*



*Mango clients check out a leopard in Moremi National Park in Botswana.*