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I left a successful career in my 20s for a job halfway up a mountain in a country I'd never visited

I leveraged my corporate skills to build a meaningful career in conservation based on partnership - all thanks to one bold telephone call.

By Florence Midwood

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I've always been a dynamic person - the type that struggles to concentrate in the classroom and is better suited outdoors, doing different things and meeting new people. After five years of working in the events industry, I felt I'd done my time. Although I'd had

a great few years and met some interesting people, I grew tired of the boozy parties and sought more fulfillment.



The writer working in London in her early 20s | CREDIT: Florence Midwood

I spent an evening in a pub with a friend who worked in travel. Looking at my notes the next morning, one thing stood out: [Borana Lodge](#). I'd never been to Kenya, but it just sounded like a great place, so I decided I had to get there.

I did some background research on LinkedIn and found its owner. So I picked up the phone and called the lodge directly “Hi it’s Florence, is Michael there please?”

A little bold. Perhaps overconfident. And, of course, he wasn't around; he was busy managing the 32,000 acres of arid grassland that was Borana Conservancy at the time (it is now part of the [Lewa/Borana landscape](#) in northern Kenya, totalling 93,000 acres). There you'll find one of the best black rhino habitats in the world, inspirational conservation projects and endless open space. Not quite events planning in London.

Although Michael Dyer wasn't available at that moment I did manage to obtain his email address. I sent a polished and passionate cover letter along with my CV and followed it up two days later with another call. “You can work for board and lodging” was what they came back with, and that seemed a good enough arrangement for me.

The following month, I flew out to a country I never thought of living in before.

Culture shift

Arriving at the lodge was a surreal experience. Having come from one of the greatest cities in the world, from a very fast-paced, high-stress, multi-tasking environment, I was all geared up to throw myself into things. Little did I know how bush life and its pole pole (Swahili for ‘slowly’) progress works. Looking back, I probably seemed a bit arrogant, certainly out of place.

The lodge manager at the time looked at me, perplexed, and suggested that I should head out with an eco-training group that afternoon to get a feel for the area, as there wasn’t anything too urgent for me to do.



Once she arrived at Borana, north of Mount Kenya, the writer realised that she needed to change her approach | CREDIT: Robert Harding/Alamy Stock Photo

Walking on foot, we stumbled across a family of cheetah with a kill. I’d never seen anything like this; day one, fresh off the plane, I was in love already.

Life progressed from there. Having come with no expectations or experience of East Africa, I stood out: I was a young, confident, single woman and not remotely nervous about confrontation, which is alien to Kenyans. I slowly learnt how to hold my tongue and

handle situations differently. Once I'd figured out the softer approach, making friends felt natural: this was such a cool new environment. Over time I got to know everyone and working side-by-side became second nature.

Building connections

A few months into my life at the lodge, and having finally fallen into a guilt free pole pole approach to work, which was so refreshing and far more rewarding than the racing pace of London events, our new assistant manager arrived, as planned. As is typical in Kenya, no one had really thought through the logistics in advance. There really was no point in having three of us there but, as if by fate, soon after we went to a drinks party at the neighbouring lodge. There I met a lovely lady who needed some help with her travel agency, [The Safari and Conservation Company](#) in Nairobi.

Chatting over a gin and tonic by the fireplace, I volunteered my office skills and we tested it out for a week. This turned into a few months of volunteering, but this time in the city, which was another new experience for me.

Through this role I saw the other side of the hospitality business and met key conservationists from around the country, discussing with them how we could get more tourists involved in safaris focused on sustainability. Wildlife conservation was of key importance and value to everyone I met. I'm not sure if I was just in with the right crowd, but everyone I met was passionate about conserving the wildlife and land.

Identifying key skills

Perhaps the combination of being at Borana and then in Nairobi also drove home what my greatest work skills actually are - persistence, networking, and ability to cultivate relationships with people, whether they're wealthy tourists or dubious Masai CEOs. It was the on-the-ground learning that made me realise that the skills I'd cultivated in London and developed in the shadow of Mount Kenya would allow me to set up my own business.



After living and working in Kenya, the writer, a former events planner, had a new goal: to unite people in conservation work
|CREDIT: Abbie Trayler-Smith

It was daunting, and I lacked funds, but I started to develop a strategy to build my own conservation project. I figured: as long as I was friendly, polite and had a genuine smile on my face, I had nothing to lose. The worst a stranger can say to you is: No. You didn't know them five minutes earlier and you might not in five minutes' time. I think that's a 10-minute risk worth taking!

Plus, if you have the right connection, people vibe off that enthusiasm in a positive way. You really never know where one small introduction may take you.

Gathering ideas

After Kenya I went to Zambia for a season, hosting in lodges along the beautiful South Luangwa River. This was such a different environment and I was shocked by the more commercial atmosphere. Guests were here on a safari sales loop. It was, indeed, an amazing experience for them, but I began to feel frustrated that the majority seemed to leave without really getting to know about wildlife conservation or the land management. They got the top line, but none of the details.

It's so fascinating when you start to talk about it, and meet the rangers, and see how they handle sniffer dogs, and how the communities are supported by the lodges, and that the

medical clinics pretty much exist because of them. Successful conservation is an impressive web of community support. Safaris are awesome, but to visit and not fully grasp the human life around these spectacular animals is to miss the main story: we will only preserve animals and land when we support and champion people.



The writer with students in Kenya | CREDIT: Florence Midwood

Making a plan

There was a lot of down time in Zambia so, fuelled by my own frustrations, I started to write a plan. I wanted to inspire more people and teach them about conservation as I had seen and experienced at Borana. And where better to start than with the next generation, young people who, like me when I arrived in Kenya, are fresh-eyed and keen to learn. So I created [Culsans Gap Travel](#), a purposeful gap year experience to foster future conservation ambassadors through adventure and authentic conservation-based activity with local experts.

Of course, coming face-to-face with the Big Five is a thrill, and my students do that. They spend time in one of the world's most beautiful and varied landscapes.

But we do so much more: through carefully curated lessons in conservation and sustainability from the best experts in East Africa, students get an overview of what is needed to help animals, land and people not just survive, but thrive. And, crucially, the

students who sign up for the programme are learning alongside Kenyan guides. They're working in Masai communities alongside members of those communities who they know from their classes.

Building an international community

Getting students really stuck in for eight weeks with local, normal people of all backgrounds, races, tribes and generations has always been my goal. This isn't rich kids jetting in for a knees-up, it's an educational and cultural exchange that leaves a lasting, positive legacy.

And I'm measuring its success by the remarkable retention of my students in the field of conservation: this isn't a jolly, it's the birth of a lifelong passion.



The eight-week Culsans trip includes learning at Il Ngwesi, a Masai community-owned eco-lodge, and climbing Mount Kenya
| CREDIT: Il Ngwesi

It's crazy when I stop and think about what I am achieving. I'm so proud. Even if it all goes wrong tomorrow, I can see the impact my trip has on each student. And it doesn't just end when they get home. Consider the first cohort: Sam is off to South Africa to gain further qualifications and then some work experience back in Kenya. Mimi has raised more than £10k for [Tusk, the conservation charity](#), by trekking across the Arctic Circle with some friends. Izzy loved it so much she stayed on for an extra week and is now looking at

conservation-based trips in South America - and Eli has named her guinea pig after me! I am in touch with them all, talking about further life decisions and acting as a general mentor when needed.

I am also immensely proud to see the impact Culsans has on the communities and conservancies we work with in Kenya. Culsans is just two years old, but from local men on the Borana farm, to Maasai trainee guides – both male and female – to school children that feel a little more inspired, and know that their education will be funded, I am proud of the connections I've built. The trainee guides walk away with a boosted knowledge of guiding through our joint conservation education programme, and together, in this international partnership of young people, we are all inspiring each other to aim high. Learning side-by-side is such a valuable thing.

Supporting the dream

In order to stay afloat with financial commitments and be able to pay for a much-needed drink every now and then, I work part-time back in London. This is inevitable and I think will always be the case for me with Culsans; I'm the generation of the portfolio career and have lots of friends in the same boat.

But what is really cool is that I completely love my part-time job: I work for the [African Wildlife Foundation](#), which keeps me in the loop with continent-wide conservation progress. It's such an amazing place to work as it's really starting to leverage African leadership in development decisions, prioritising conservation. I got the job originally as they were planning a large event and needed an extra pair of hands. It's funny how things can come full circle: I thought I was finished with events, but this work has kept me sane and afloat.

Florence Midwood is founder of Culsans Gap Travel. Culsans' next 8-week adventure departs on January 8, 2021 and costs £7890, including all accommodation, food and lessons. See the full itinerary [here](#).
