



Meet
Andile Franco Kleinbooï
Sussurros de Africa Group Travel

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Meet owner

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The company serves as a one-stop service provider for accommodation, transport, transfers, camping, hiking and teambuilding, with a special focus on Mozambique.

A traveller from an early age

I was born in Durban, but I have Mozambican roots through my grandfather. From the age of around four, I was exposed to travelling when my grandfather used to take me and my family to visit relatives in Mozambique. This was before democracy, and it was

complicated to travel across the border. We had to get a visa in Swaziland, stay overnight, and then cross to Mozambique. The country was war-torn back then and sometimes our experiences were traumatic, such as coming across soldiers on the road, who would search the car and strip it of valuables.

In 1995 when I was 13, I decided to stay in Mozambique because I loved the country so much. I attended high school there and my uncles decided it was time to give me a local Portuguese name – that's where "Franco" comes from.

After matric, I wasn't sure what I wanted to do in terms of a career, and decided to take up the opportunity of a two-year work visa that was available for Commonwealth countries. I went to the UK where I worked, saved, and travelled. That's when I realised that I wanted to sell destinations and more than that, I wanted to sell experiences. Returning to South Africa, I enrolled at Varsity College and completed a diploma in international travel.

I was fortunate that one of my Business Studies lecturers owned a travel agency, and he allowed me to work there on weekends and holidays. I gained exposure to the career of a travel consultant and began refining what I wanted to do in the travel space. I was particularly fascinated by group travel like Contiki Tours.

The side-hustle

In 2009, I began organising trips to Mozambique for friends because I knew the country, had lived there, and I spoke the language. We were typical backpackers going on a road trip – young and having fun. I posted about these trips on Facebook, people shared the photos, and the following year, I got inquiries from individuals keen to travel to Mozambique. This is how my group travel business started – on Facebook – and it has remained an online business ever since.

In 2011, I registered the company. Many tour operators were marketing to German, Asian and other markets, but because I could speak Portuguese, I decided to target Portuguese-speaking markets such as Mozambique, Brazil, Portugal and Angola. The name of my company had to be Portuguese, and translated, Sussuros de Africa means "*African Whispers*".

It was a struggle, however, to connect with these markets, so I ended up focusing on the domestic market instead. Most of my clients were family, friends, and referrals and I became comfortable with this way of working. Sussuros de Africa was my safe side-hustle while I was working full-time, but I recognised there was value in it, and I had so much passion for it.

Just before the pandemic, in 2019, I resigned from Deloitte to focus on my business. I was determined to make it work, but just as we were about to relaunch, Covid hit. It was disastrous, I had to refund people's deposits and it felt as though I had made the wrong decision...

But in calamity there is opportunity and I started to see the potential in the lockdown. As my business is online, there were many platforms I could tap into over and above Facebook – Instagram, Twitter, WhatsApp. I decided to promote and sell destinations while people were spending a great deal of time online with

the intention that when travelling reopened, they would already have their bucket lists set up. This kept me going during lockdown.

When level three was implemented, travelling to other provinces was still risky, and suddenly hiking became popular; something I haven't considered before. In Durban we are fortunate to have Inanda and the Inanda Dam; there were many unexplored trails in the area, so I worked with local guides to open up these trails as hiking trails, which helped boost our followers and clients.

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I knew, however, that hiking was a temporary solution for travelling. People would eventually want to do something else and if I couldn't offer that, they would look elsewhere. I realised I needed to bring in the products I'd initially wanted to sell.

Looking back, the pandemic gave me valuable consumer insights that I would not have had before; it taught me to be agile and to adapt, so that my business could survive and move into the next phase.

Services and differentiators

Travel connects people to experiences and when you're travelling, you often experience something you wish others could also experience. I put these experiences into packages for my customers. I made group travel my focus because I have always liked travelling in a group. It can be complex, so it's not for every business, but it can also be fun.

As travellers are changing, my focus has also shifted to unique destinations and experiences, as well as ecotourism. I target people who want to connect more with nature and still have fun, who want to experience unique destinations and activities that are not easily accessible, and those seeking adventure-based experiences.

People are increasingly becoming inspired by destinations they see on Instagram, and while many companies on this social media platform offer similar packages to me, I differentiate my business by providing that personal touch, speaking the local language, and having an in-depth understanding of Mozambique. Logistics can be complicated there, and understanding the locals and the culture is essential for a positive travel experience. Many tour operators, even the well-established ones in South Africa, struggle with navigating Mozambique.

My main aim is to sell this beautiful destination in Southern Africa that people may think is too far away or unattainable. I also provide peace of mind and security to my clients, knowing that they have an expert with them who can deal with any situation that may arise.

The challenges & learnings

Access to markets has always been my greatest challenge. Also challenging were my competitors – during lockdown many online travel agencies were up and coming and growing. However, they also motivated me – they invested in their businesses and had websites. I was still using my Gmail account while they had professional email accounts. I had been working with just the basics, but lockdown changed everything. I had time on my hands, so I started learning about websites and investing.

I also realised the importance of understanding clients. Travelling has a great deal to do with emotions, with what resonates with people and responding to that in terms of your offerings. This is why I include ecotourism – it resonates with people's emotions and values.

Becoming part of the incubator programme

There is an interesting backstory to this. When I finished at Varsity College, some of my peers went to work at New Frontiers Tours owned by Craig Smith but unfortunately, I didn't make the cut. In 2010 or 2011, when I was getting my business going, I saw online that Craig was selling Mozambique. I had some unique properties that I wanted to pitch to him, and while we had a first meeting, we never had a follow-up, so I made peace with this and moved on.

Last year, I decided to contact him again but this time not to sell him my products but because I was looking for a mentor. Craig explained he was snowed under but could refer me to someone else and I was grateful for that. He referred me to Craig Drysdale, the sales and marketing director at Inspirations Travel and Tours. As I was engaging with him, the SATSA Tourism Business Incubator Programme run by Sigma International came up. Craig Smith mentioned wanting to sponsor me and invest in my business. Things had come full circle.

The programme offers me exactly what I need to grow my business which had always been hand-to-mouth. Now I am being guided by people who have already travelled this road, and the progress I have made since being able to join the programme would have taken me years to accomplish, especially working on my own. It's a rewarding and valuable process, and I look forward to seeing where it takes me in the future.

Nurturing a start-up

Andile's mentor overseeing sales, marketing and distribution is Sigma International's Craig Drysdale. He explains the process of evaluating Sussurros de Africa Group Travel and the progress to date:

When Andile entered the programme a few months ago, we recognised that he had a great start-up with the added benefit that he speaks Portuguese and knows Mozambique. We always kick off with a bit of diagnostics – we assess a business as it is, what it offers and then identify what it needs.

Getting Andile's compliance right was the first step. Compliance is an issue for many start-ups – if they do not have the right documentation, such as business plans, financial statements, BEE affidavits, SARS certificates, they cannot get tenders.

The second step was identifying Andile's target market. Then we worked on his sales and marketing strategy and collateral. He needed a new website, which we are currently building, we looked at what packages could be put together and uploaded to the site, and we also devised a social media campaign.

Next, we need to create linkages – I would like to introduce him to the big tour operators in the country like Thompsons and Tourvest to help him find customers. This is why we had to get his house in order first. His products could gain exposure through their distribution channels, either online or in brochures, and then the bookings will start coming in and his business will take off.

Many mentors will continue to come into Andile's space in the coming year to help him get his business right, because the Sigma International approach is holistic; it looks at a business from all angles, also in terms of financial management and costings. Andile recently went on a South African Institute of Chartered Accountants mentorship course to give him insight into how to run a business from a financial aspect.

The biggest challenge for start-ups remains funding – building a website, for instance, can be in the region of R25k. Launching a business costs money. The programmes that SATSA has put together with all the partners coming on board to provide funding, a platform and tools, gives these businesses a fighting chance.

Being an incubatee is temporary, however, and the time must come to launch. Andile is serious, though, he's embracing all the opportunities and he has that entrepreneurial spirit. Once he's on his feet the rest will be up to him, but I think he will be a great success. For people like this, we will always go the extra mile.