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# Wild Rainbow: An African Love Story

by Bonnie Osborn

**P**hilanthropist and LGBT activist Jody Cole didn't set out to start a safari company, but once she followed her life-long dream to go on safari in Africa, her course was set.

It began in 1998 with a six-week trip to South Africa and Tanzania. "I loved it the moment I got off the plane in South Africa," she told *Outword*. "I recognized the smell of the soil; it was a visceral experience. It caught me off-guard."

A year later she returned for a walking safari in Zimbabwe. "That was really the safari that sealed the deal for me and my

subtler forms of African nature. She holds a Level 2 Field Guide and Trails Guide certification, with advanced rifle handling, and will begin her Level 3 training, the highest level certification, this year. Her training involved a rigorous, month-long curriculum, learning "everything from ground to sky: soils, botany, geology, animal behavior, insects, birds and more.

Although there has been political turmoil in some areas where Wild Rainbow operates, for the most part the unrest is concentrated in urban areas rather than in safari country. The company did cancel planned trips to Uganda in 2014 after its government passed a punitive law criminalizing homosexuality, not only to avoid risk to its safari guests, but to make a political point.

Walking safaris are paced for most fitness levels, canoe trips are easy floats, and other game safaris primarily use vehicle transport. Health services are accessible in most safari



Jody Cole (squatting, right) and her safari group meeting members of the Maasai tribe in Tanzania. Photo credit: Wild Rainbow Safaris

future," she says. She began traveling in Africa once or twice a year. Ten years ago this summer she organized her first group safari, for a friend's 50th birthday. "I told her you can be the birthday queen; you organize your dream trip itinerary, who comes and all that, but the minute the wheels hit the tarmac in Africa, I am in charge. The trip was magic.

"After that, I said, 'I want to do this again.' After the next trip, I started the company, and I have not regretted it."

Even the economic downturn didn't discourage Cole. During Wild Rainbow African Safari's first three years, she spent a lot of time at travel shows and other events to put herself in front of people. Many of her customers are LGBT people, and most of her marketing effort is spent in the LGBT community via publications and organizations such as *Curve Magazine*, *Out Traveler* and the International Gay & Lesbian Travel Association. The business has grown primarily through word of mouth.

Safari companies, are "a dime a dozen" in Africa, she says. What differentiates her from the typical, "cookie-cutter safari company" is her field expertise and her passion for the

"I was the oldest in my course, the only American female – and it's a man's world," Cole says. "I was the only person in my course who passed the exam, written and practical." The advanced training was in the bush learning about dangerous game behavior – "anything that can get you before you could run" – and how to respond in order to keep guests safe. "I am the only gun-toting lesbian in the bush of Africa that I know of," she says.

But it is Cole's appreciation for – and ability to share – the small, everyday wonders of the African wild – from a massive termite mound to the web-covered hole of a baboon spider that distinguish her. People in East Africa call her "Mama," a term that offended her until she understood it was a sign of respect for her expertise.

Cole guides all Wild Rainbow trips, which are planned a year in advance. "I didn't get into this business to be a travel agent," she says.

People of all ages and fitness levels are able to participate, Cole says. The company monitors travel and safety alerts from a variety of sources as well as communications with its personnel on the ground.

areas.

Wild Rainbow Operations Manager Robyn Eckern has known Cole since 1989, "before this became a passion." "I have seen her grow so much in those years," Eckern says. "I knew her here in California. In 2009 I went on one of the safaris. When I saw her in Africa, she was like a totally different person. She comes alive.

"She is very well respected there and here for her knowledge and her passion. I see the reaction of the people who go with her and the trust. We all go because we trust her."

Eight trips are planned for 2015, the company's 10th anniversary year, as well as a couple of custom trips. "All my 10th anniversary trips are safaris I want to do," Cole says. "Next year is like my birthday."

The Zimbabwe trip will be a close approximation of her second safari, the one that "sealed the deal" on her future. "What I am trying to create for people is my first experience, which is that mind blowing experience of falling in love," Cole says. "I want people to say 'omigod' multiple times."

For more information about Wild Rainbow African Safaris, visit [WildRainbowSafaris.com](http://WildRainbowSafaris.com).