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Luxurious Magazine Interview With Robyn Woodhead, CEO Of White Desert

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Athlete, globetrotter and arctic explorer, Robyn Woodhead, is the CEO of White Desert, the only full-service luxury travel experience in Antarctica.

Together with her husband Patrick, she manages White Desert's entirely carbon neutral camp, which comes complete with a private jet service, luxury food and accommodation, and countless safari and adventure experiences in Antarctica's stunning vistas. Luxurious magazine's reporter, Sabi Phagura, caught up with her to chat about balancing style, sport and sustainability in the harsh but beautiful landscape of Antarctica.



LM: Let's start with a little bit of background. It's clear that adventure and polar exploration were always important to you, but what inspired you and Patrick to take the leap and start the first luxury safari camp in Antarctica?

RW: Travel has always been a part of my DNA as well as Patrick's. As a child growing up, my parents always prioritised collecting interesting experiences over collecting material possessions. I was fortunate enough to rack up seeing 90 countries by the age of 21, as well as climbing Everest Base camp twice, the Inca Trail, and Kilimanjaro to name a few.

Patrick also had unique exploration in his blood. After he broke a Guinness World Record walking to the South Pole back in 2002, we embarked on a crazy expedition together in 2005 to traverse the entire Antarctic continent, which won us a second World Record.

While sitting in a tent with our fellow explorers in an Antarctic storm, we wondered why Antarctica was only the preserve of the odd explorer and a few scientists. We both came to the realisation that taking a few people to this place could be a way for us to both share Antarctica, as well as to share our passion for unique travel. At the time, there was no market for luxury travel in the interior of Antarctica, so we created it. Luxury travel to the two of us is about capturing memorable experiences, and Antarctica is the most unique experience a human can have on this planet.



LM: What was the biggest challenge you had to overcome when setting up the camp?

RW: We set up White Desert in 2005 on a dream and without a team of investors. It was just my husband and I. We re-mortgaged our home and threw everything we had into the business. One of the biggest challenges we faced when setting up the business was a lack of insight into the flight logistic complexities of operating in Antarctica. Antarctica is a continent that is a minimum of five hours flight from the nearest shop. So, if we forget something, there is no popping to the corner shop. This tends to focus the mind on all the details coming together on time. We don't have the luxury of making mistakes or forgetting anything. Antarctica has a habit of trashing your best-laid plans, so you need to be agile and incredibly resourceful.



LM: Protecting the environment is big news currently and here at Luxurious Magazine we support this very much. Clearly, it's very important to you in this project. How does sustainability inform your personal style and the camps?

RW: I agree with you. We all have a responsibility to protect our fragile environment. Antarctica is one of the last great wildernesses. It holds the key to some of the most complex and pressing environmental issues, sea rises as well as a lot of climate change research in ice coring and other deeply scientific work. We decided to keep it small, super low impact and pay attention to the effects we would have throughout our entire supply chain. It has always been at the core of what we do, not a big news fad for us.

We are the only 100% carbon neutral operator in Antarctica, and we have been since our inception back in 2005. Our camp has used solar power to heat and generate water since we started, and we are constantly testing new cutting-edge technologies with our unique 24-hour sunlit environment. For us, it's a bit more in-depth than just cutting out plastic straws.

We try to impart our passion for conserving Antarctica and minimising our impact onto every single guest who stays with us. We try to teach all our guests about how they can get involved in Citizen Science projects as well as help them develop a deep passion for Antarctica. All our guests become Antarctic Ambassadors when they leave the White Desert, and they impart their passion for conserving Antarctica to others, thereby continuing the cycle of conservation. We don't believe in mass tourism, but we do believe in saving what you see and our guests are no exception to that trend.



LM: But at its core, White Desert is about adventure – how do you marry style with practicability with activities that you offer, such as emperor penguin safaris and treks?

RW: We have worked very hard over the years to continually evolve and improve our offering. When guests come to our camp, they can do as much or as little as they like. That is part of the luxury. If we take our guests for a trek to the nearby ice caves, they go for a long walk, but when it's time to stop for lunch, we choose a backdrop with breath-taking views and complete wilderness. There is a table set on the ice with chairs draped in sheepskins for warmth and comfort and a delicious meal is served in the middle of the frozen tundra. When we visit the Emperor Penguin colony, we are the only tourists allowed exclusive access to a 6000-strong colony with newly hatched chicks. We have a team who are based there throughout the four-month season just to prepare the ski way for a safe landing. They then walk our guests into a scene right out of happy feet!



LM: What will you wear for the Jet Marathon? What tips do you have for the style-conscious guest who is dressing for the challenge?

RW: I will be wearing a new brand of cold weather leggings which is all about combining the functionality of traditional woolly thermals with the aesthetics of high fashion gym wear – it's called HHolderness (www.hholderness.com). Then I will wear my trusty Moncler overcoat when I get a bit cold, and my Doug Stoup Baffin Boots.

LM: And what's different about Race the Jet from the other experiences White Desert offers?

RW: The thing that makes this marathon unique is that you really don't want to miss your ride home. The winners of this Antarctic marathon get flown home in a \$50 million private jet and the losers get left behind. That's why we call it Race the Jet. From the 2nd February 2019, to the 4th February 2019, 24 runners will be flown from Cape Town, South Africa, and will need to complete the marathon in under five hours running over blue ice and surrounded by some pretty surreal terrain. For the runners that don't complete the race within five hours, they are stranded at the Wolfs Fang Runway until the next day, when we fly them home on a cargo plane with the rubbish.

LM: You've had some pretty high-profile clients, like Prince Harry to name one. What's it like to work with high profile people?

RW: We treat all our clientele the same, irrespective of whom they might be to the outside world. We have had a lot of high-profile guests who are probably in complete control of every aspect of their typical lives, but when they come to Antarctica, they really are in our care and most people like that sense of letting go. We have had to tell a Saudi Royal that they may not need their bodyguards at our camp, because we are the only people out there. They ended up bringing them along and they enjoyed a much needed 'week off' too! People are just people and we all want to feel special and be a part of something truly unique, that's what we offer. Sometimes, we are privileged to sit around a dinner table with a genuine astrophysicist discussing with Buzz Aldrin about how Mars travel is actually going to work.



LM: White Desert is defined by its dedication to a truly luxurious experience. How do you bring those luxury touches to life in the Antarctic?

RW: We feel that true luxury is now about capturing memorable experiences. The luxury of the camp is the end product, and of course, that has to be perfect. It takes a lot of effort to make a camp look luxurious when it costs 15 Euros to fly every single kilogram there. That is also part of the fun of what we have created. We have a team of experts from all over the world. Our guides are the finest high mountain guides in the world with a plethora of World Records between them, yet they are able to give our guests one-on-one attention. There lies the uniqueness of what we offer.

LM: And now you're taking a leap into jewellery as well with the Ice Compass necklace! Can you tell us more about that?

RW: Yes. I kept getting asked by guests, both men and women, if they could have a keepsake memory of their time with us. We designed an exclusive watch with Bremont, another truly British brand, which we have dubbed an experiential timepiece. It is the first of its kind, and something you can only own if you have travelled to the South Pole – but we had no gift for the ladies. I always referred guests to buy tanzanite and diamond jewellery as it hails from Africa (the gateway to our Antarctic camp), but tanzanite also looks just like the iridescent blue of the glacial 100,000-year-old ice that you see in Antarctica. I have always loved the symbol of the compass, so we used that as a basis for creating an experiential necklace with 66 diamonds surrounding one tanzanite in the centre. Our daughter, Electra, actually named it the 'Ice Compass' because she said she wants me to wear it, so when I go to Antarctica, I always know how to find my way home to her.





LM: Sounds like there is lots going on and you're not about to stop there. Tell us, what's next for White Desert?

RW: I have recently been voted onto the Executive Committee of IAATO (The International Association of Antarctic Tour Operators), so I am really looking forward to helping to shape policy in Antarctica and particularly working as I do on the Climate Change Working Group. We are just launching our brand new mountain camp this season, which will be nestled high in the mountains at Wolfs Fang Runway and will be hosting some of the world's top explorers doing record-breaking expeditions. We are also introducing a second aircraft, which we hope will offer the scientific community a lot of support for their work, as we see a future whereby there is more collaboration between scientists and responsible tourism.

There is always a lot going on, but the challenge is to stay focused on doing what you do a little bit better every time you do it. Always evolving, always growing, yet always being humbled by a place and an environment like Antarctica.

LM: Wow, thanks so much for your time. We look forward to hearing about your next adventure. Good luck.

RW: You're very welcome. Indeed, exciting times ahead.

White Desert – Where and How?

For more information on White Desert and their luxury adventures, visit www.white-desert.com.

By Sabi Phagura