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AFRICA - THE 'GREAT MIGRATION' OF AUSSIE TOURISTS

Dubbo businesswoman, zookeeper, globally recognised wildlife photographer, and wildlife safari host, Bobby-Jo Vial has witnessed the great migration of a different kind in Africa – a constant stream of tourists from regional Australia. Despite the current cost of living crisis, holidaymakers from Australia, including metropolitan and regional areas, are contributing to record overseas tourism growth.

Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) data shows a 32 per cent increase in outbound travel in the year to June, compared to the previous year, recording more than 11 million trips abroad by Australians. While outside of the 'top ten' destinations Aussies are flocking to, East African nations like Tanzania and Uganda are also doing well. Both nations are experiencing exponential tourism growth due to their overall destination appeal, stability and safety amid concerns of increasing global unrest and conflict.

Bobby-Jo Safaris was established in 2022 after the 41-year-old Dubbo business entrepreneur and renowned wildlife photographer, who has been hosting safaris since 2013, saw a market for bespoke small group photographic tours. "When I went out on my own after establishing Bobby-Jo Safaris in 2022, I never thought my small Dubbo-based business would – literally – open up the world for me like it has," said Bobby-Jo. "Now I split my time between my rural property in Dubbo and the rest of the world as I get to take amazing Australian and international clients to see incredible, and often endangered wildlife, across the northern and southern hemispheres."

"For many, it's their first time seeing wildlife outside of a zoo, or off the pages of a book, or screen," said Bobby-Jo, who is also a professional zookeeper with nearly two-decades' experience. "Sadly, some of the wildlife my guests are seeing is under threat - even critically endangered. So, for me, it's an 'experience' I work hard to give my guests. But it is also an education and conservation experience they take home and share with others – usually via stunning images they've taken. That's pretty special, too."

The Australian wildlife photographer is no stranger to international headlines when it comes to her incredible images of nature's critters from all four corners of the globe. Bobby-Jo's photos have featured in The Guardian, The Times, The New York Post, Huffington Post, Africa Geographic, as well as domestically in major metropolitan newspapers. Complementing this media exposure, various stunning images captured by Bobby-Jo have been shared millions of times on social media. In 2016, the wildlife photographer published a book titled, *Reflections of Elephants* – selling world-wide. However, being touched – and gently moved aside by a 200 plus kilogram (440lb) wild silverback gorilla foraging in a Ugandan forest during her most recent East African safari is considered a 'personal life-changing' moment for the seasoned wildlife professional. An encounter also filmed and shared on social media.

"He was heading towards us, and we were with the rangers and guides – following all the instructions drilled into us before the trek," said Bobby-Jo. "Then suddenly, the male gorilla slowly reached out, touched my stomach and gently nudged me to the side as he continued past to get to the berries behind me. It's my tenth time seeing wild gorillas, but this was amazing! It was such a gentle moment."

As Bobby-Jo's social media following and clientele continues to expand and grow, the safari operator also has plans underway to break into the exclusive North American overseas traveller market. While Bobby-Jo has hosted nearly 600 guests from around the globe on world-wide safaris since starting in the tourism industry in 2013, the most recent Bobby-Jo Safari's Ugandan adventure marks her 100th trip with Australian and overseas safari guests.

Bobby-Jo has 10 up-coming safaris planned for 2025. Adding to her already jam-packed schedule, the accomplished wildlife photographer has also been commissioned as the 'Photographer in residence' for the exclusive high-end Alex Walker's Serian resorts across Kenya and Tanzania, where Bobby-Jo is currently based and working until November this year. The wildlife photographer is also working with Northern Beaches Gallery, located in Cromer (Sydney) to host an international exhibition featuring her photographic work. While a date is yet to be confirmed, the exhibition will most likely take place in the first quarter of 2025 when Bobby-Jo returns to Australia from a safari tour of Antarctica.

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