

At Home with the World:  
An Interview with Bibi Jordan  
by Sonja Magdevski

UPBRINGING:

Q. I'm impressed with your international background. Was it your father's work that resulted in such a cosmopolitan upbringing?

A. Both my parents were born in England. An active pacifist, my father wrote a landmark book on peace negotiations. After completing his PhD at University of London, he was asked to go to San Francisco to help write the charter of the United Nations. He was then appointed Director of Security Council Affairs at the UN headquarters in New York.

Q. What did your father tell you about his work and how did it impact you?

My father really didn't discuss his work at home. He liked to come home and start another part of the day, afresh. And, I was just a teenager when he died. But that didn't prevent him from influencing his four daughters profoundly.

Each evening when he came home, he took our two black dogs out for a long walk and he would dutifully allow one adoring daughter to accompany him. On these walks he would teach us poetry- 'The Ancient Mariner' was a favorite, or teach us French, or sing old English pub songs. On our travels, he browsed every second-hand book store we saw, and we returned home with trunks of esoteric books. During the winter, he would build bookshelves (and allow daughters to help in rotation) until they covered half the house. Then, in the spring we turned to the garden – like many British, my parents loved gardening, and they had a beautiful rose garden with beds of flowers surrounding the house.

Q. Was about your mother-- was she a stay-at-home mother... or a working mother?

A. Certainly both, as any stay-at-home mother has to be! I was lucky to have a traditional childhood. My mother insisted on good manners and upbringing. Even now celebrating her 99<sup>th</sup> year, she is an inspiration to all the family. She kept a well-organized household and made us each beautiful dresses. Prior to the dinners she hosted for my father's colleagues, she would read up on each country and share her knowledge with us. However, she believed at these functions 'children should be seen not heard', giving us the benefit of overhearing interesting discussions instead of engaging in childish prattle. Even now, celebrating her 99<sup>th</sup> year, my mother is an inspiration to all the family. She is a dedicated learner ... for example, she started learning her fifth language when she was in her 80's.

Q. What about your sisters?

A. I was blessed with a twin sister, my co-conspirator, and two older sisters, our mentors. When we traveled, my mother would pair up one twin with one older sister and let us loose for the day. Our older sister took us museums and cathedrals, and our other sister took us to cafes and markets. One sister supervised our studies and the other shared avant-garde arts with us... and that close mentoring relationship still is strong today.

Q. What did this upbringing teach you?

A. From my parent's, I developed an interest in foreign cultures and a life-long love of learning. Although I resented the fact that we never had television, I'm grateful now and, in fact, insisted on the same mixed blessing for my children. From my parents' language facility (they both spoke five languages), I took for granted that whenever I lived, I had to learn the language. From their commitment to higher education (which with 4 children was not insignificant), I was blessed with the best education a student could have. And from their faith in each daughter, I was encouraged to discover my own passion in life.

Q. What languages do you speak?

A. The foreign languages that I speak quite fluently are: Portuguese, Spanish and French. I've also learned.. but am no longer fluent in ...Arabic and Japanese. I'm still learning Swahili and want to learn Tibetan next.

Q. What was the most important gift your parents gave you?

A. Besides my sisters and my education, it was the gift of travel. My sisters and I learned to understand different people by living with them ... in campsites. As I result, by the time I was a teenager, I felt I could go anywhere and land on my feet... and I did. Competing for scholarships, I was able to study and live for a year in Brazil, Colombia and Switzerland. I worked overseas for several years before settling in California.

FAMILY LIFE:

Q. Is that a gift that you've passed onto your children, too?

A. Yes, I made the same commitment to my children because I realize how important it was in my development. We've gone to the cloud forest in Costa Rica, the rain forest in the Amazon, the alluvial plains of the Pantanal (Brazil), the atoll islands of Belize, the delta of the Okavango (Botswana), the Cotswolds of England, the Midi Valley of France, the Nile Valley of Egypt, the Himalayas of India as well as the Sierra Madres, the Adirondacks, Death Valley and Baja here in California ... always camping or staying with host families.

Q. How did you afford that as a single mother?

A. It was a matter of priorities, using frequent flyer miles, and using the word 'no'. When the children pleaded for a sodas, for cable TV, or designer shoes, I said 'no.' We

saved for our trips, planned them together using Lonely Planet guidebooks instead of travel agents. We camped in tents, bunked in youth hostels, and stayed with host families. We had a blast – and by being outside of our element, the playing field was leveled. We enjoyed a real sense of camaraderie quite distinct from the routine parent-child relationship.

The only downside of this is that they are older (16 and 22), they have launched into independent travel. Last summer my 16 year old son volunteered in China in a rural school. And, this year my daughter did an independent research project on ethno-pharmacology in Fiji.

## SAFARI CHIC

Q. How did you get started writing books?

A. I had been working in marketing communications for a long time in Corporate America and then started working as a freelance consultant. I had developed a new product marketing plan for a client that was admired by a friend who was a celebrity photographer. He said he wished I could develop a product line for him but he didn't have a product to sell, only celebrity photographs. I asked why he didn't do a book. He answered that he didn't know how and asked if I did. Of course, I said yes: I knew I'd learn how just by doing it.

Q. Why did you decide to write a book on Safari?

A. When I took the children on safari, they were 5 and 10 years old. Each night as we slept in our tent in unfenced game parks, I vowed I would come back again on my own ... in style... with a night watchman on guard outside my tent so I could sleep instead of worrying over every growl and yelp. The only way I could afford it was to write a book about it!

Q. But what possessed you to take such young children on safari to begin with?!

A. It all started with a casual conversation with a friend while our children were playing. We were both recently divorced and were talking what we anticipated in the future. We were talking about the places we wanted to go with the children. My friend said she was going to take her son to Africa when he was 10 and my 5 year old asked if we could go too. Sure, I said. Every year she would bring it up again and by the time she was 10 I was committed to going. It was probably our best trip ever. Of course, now they are campaigning me to go on safari ... one more time again.

Q. How would you describe the safari lifestyle flair?

A. Safari lifestyle is ‘savoir-faire sauvage’... That is, knowing how to conduct yourself and express your individuality with style and grace... in the wild! It’s living in the wild with class while respecting the wildlife and traditional culture. It’s living life to the fullest while watching out for your comrades and for the wildlife. It’s “Out of Africa” and “I Dreamed of Africa”, two memoirs of life in Africa made into Hollywood extravaganza’s.

## SAFARI VS SWAHILI

Q. How different is the Swahili style from the safari style?

A. Completely different! It’s fun to contrast them:

Setting	Bush	Beach
Construction	Canvas	Coral
Furniture	Fold-up and go	Fixed for generations
Decorating style	Over the top	Minimalistic
Accessibility	Out in the open	Behind closed doors
Mood	Unrestrained exuberance	Contained civility
Sights	the Big 5 (wildlife)	the Big 500 (tropical fish)
Silhouette	Baobab tree	Mosque spire
Drink	Gin and tonic	Turkish coffee
Theme song	Lion’s roar	Muezzin call
Transportation	4WD & bush charter	Donkey and dhow
Best known story	Out of Africa	Sinbad the Sailor
Celebrity author	Karen Blixen	Princess Salame

## SWAHILI CHIC

Q. Why did you choose the Swahili for your next book?

The Swahili coast was mystified me from the first time moment because everyone knew my name before I was even introduced! Black magic, I thought. Until I learned that my name is a Swahili word. How could I not be charmed by a culture that greets any woman – maiden, mother, or grandmother – as ‘princess’? When I was photographing ‘Safari Chic’, I returned to Lamu and was so intrigued by the coral architecture that I decided I would feature it in a separate book just on the Swahili coast.

Q. What was the biggest challenge in writing Swahili Chic?

A. Getting access to the homes of the Swahili patricians was not easy. These houses are built as bastions of privacy based on an interior design philosophy that distinguishes between ‘public’ and ‘private’ space. Much of the most beautiful space of these houses is considered sacred and reserved only for the women of the family. I knew that to write this new book I had to gain access to these houses.

My break came when Lamu was nominated to be added to the list of UNESCO World Heritage sites. Savvy designers from Europe flocked to this beautiful intact Swahili Stone Town to buy up crumbling townhouses and villas that maintenance-weary owners happily sold, constructing modern homes in new resorts along the coast. The Stone Houses had to be renovated according to age-old (and expensive) customs. Many are now available as vacation villas. I explored those first and then found myself invited into exclusive homes.

Q. How were you able to wrangle that?

A. I needed a charm to open the door to the Swahili world... and that turned out to be my knowledge of Arabic. Because Arabic is considered a sacred language by Moslems, the fact that I still had some command of the language convinced the Swahili that I respected their culture and was a little different than the run of the mill tourist. I was perceived as a 'traveler' not a 'tourist'... which was important because both Africans and Moslems consider 'hospitality' a fundamental value of their culture. A traveler must be received with kindness and tolerance... for a few days. Without gracious hospitality of the Swahili people, I would never have been able to discover the secrets of their culture and this is why I dedicate the book to 'my friends on the sweet Swahili shores'.

SWAHILI LESSONS:

Q. What can the West learn from this part of the world?

Perhaps the most important thing that I hope readers will learn from my book on the Swahili is that there are as many different shades of Islam as there is of the Judeo-Christian culture. The Swahili culture is Moslem but it has nothing in common with the actions of radical Moslem groups that dominate today's headlines. The Swahili worldview includes African shamanism and Swahili Sufism with Islamic beliefs. My experiences with the Swahili proved that you cannot judge a worldview without examining the local context within which it is practiced. It is a mistake to make rash generalizations about any group of people and it is particularly dangerous if that is the basis for domestic or foreign policy.

Q. What single aspect of the Swahili culture that impressed you most?

A. One of the fundamental values of the Swahili is 'utamaduni' or cosmopolitanism. That is the acknowledgement that we, as human beings, have an obligation to explore foreign cultures so that even if we don't agree, at least we can understand each other. Without understanding other cultures and environments, we can't act as responsible world citizens working together to protect our endangered planet.

'Utamaduni' is has been an key value of the Swahili for 2,000 years. While Europe was in the Dark Ages, the Swahili Stone Towns were important entrepots in the busy maritime trade of the Indian Ocean network. Swahili emissaries traveled to the royal

courts in China and the Chinese sent delegations to the Swahili sultanates. The Swahili also interacted with African chiefs, Arabian traders, Indian merchants, American whalers and European explorers. In order to operate in their role as middlemen in the Trade Wind trade route, they had to understand all these nationalities which is why cosmopolitanism has always been an attribute of the Swahili.

Q. Is that why the Swahili style is the first *true* fusion style.

A. Yes, because it doesn't just blend East and West. Because of the constant cultural exchange, the Swahili style incorporates influences from the Bantu cultures of Africa with Arabia, India, China and even Italy. Both India and China had interior design philosophies – vastu shastra and feng shui respectively – which the Swahili absorbed. By the time the Portuguese arrived, the Swahili were living a sophisticated, literate lifestyle far exceeding that of the European invaders. Because the Swahili style is essentially an eclectic traveler's style with a minimalist slant, it is a style that can be incorporated by anyone who wants to celebrate the cultural diversity of the global tribe we are becoming. In the last chapter I show how designers from New York to California embrace the Swahili style in modern Western homes.

#### ORGANIC FARMING AND NEW TURF

Q. Why Malibu?

A. Why not?!

Q. How did the organic Meyer lemon orchard come about and how has it changed you?

The Meyer lemon farm is owned by partner and soul mate, Bruce Schultz who is a cinematographer working for the Hollywood studios. One of the wonderful things about living here is that I finally feel I have roots in California. Working on the farm – tending the orchard, the vegetables, and the chickens grounds me. The farm connects me with the earth. And, living in a rural canyon with distant views of the ocean, I know adventure is waiting on the horizon.

Q. Next exploration for you?

A. Right now, I'm on a spiritual journey as I complete my next book --- it's the story behind "Swahili Chic", a travel memoir tracing my pilgrimage to the 'inner sanctum' of Swahili shamans and sultans' harems.

Of course, I hope to return to the Swahili Stone Towns as part of the book launch. I'm also delving into new virtual territory with my new website that incorporates W2 technology to create interactive community and commerce with readers around the world. I'm also working on a new edition of Safari Chic and a new title, the third in my travel-n-style series of books.

Q. Will you *ever* settle down?

A. Not until the earth settles me!

*If you have questions you'd like to ask Bibi, send an email to [bibi@bibijordan.com](mailto:bibi@bibijordan.com)*