

COX & KINGS USA

BY MELISSA WELLS

A visit with the Dali Lama. A swim in the Amazon with pink dolphins. Dinner with former Vietcong officers. These are snapshots of the exotic world of this 245-year-old Tampa company.



DINNER, ANYONE? Deep in the heart of Africa a mountain gorilla checks out Nathaniel Waring, president of Cox & Kings USA. In another setting, he says, the Everglades in Florida is very similar to the Okavango Delta in Botswana.

1758. THAT WAS THE YEAR THIS TAMPA COMPANY came into existence. That's right, Cox and Kings USA was established in India 18 years before this country declared its independence. Since then, it's handled the travel needs of many, famous and not so famous, for two-and-a-half centuries. Among the most famous is Dr. David Livingstone, the physician missionary who spent a good portion of his life in Africa. "We did not lose him," jokes Nathaniel Waring, president of Cox & Kings USA. "We shipped his collections back to England."

While Cox & Kings' clients no longer travel by clipper ships, today's vacationers still enjoy the customized care awaiting them at each of the firm's exotic destinations. That might be a safari along the Okavango Delta in Botswana, or a tour of Buddhist monasteries in Bhutan with the Himalayan mountains as a backdrop, or a visit to one of India's cosmopolitan cities. "Bombay is busy 24 hours a day, just like New York City," Waring says. "It is a center for business, the arts and film-making. I would like to live there."

While Tampa is home to the 39-year-old executive, he spends three or four months of the year overseas. Travel seems to have been Waring's destiny. His grandfather lived in Africa and his French mother, born in Cameroon (Africa), raised her son in New England and Paris. "I did a lot of international travel as a child," he says.

Waring graduated from Stanford University with a degree in political science and started his career in Paris as a research editor for Readers Digest. Meanwhile, his college roommate, Peter Kerkar, had been working at the London office of Cox & Kings. Kerkar did his best to recruit Waring. "I finally crossed the channel," says Waring.

Thus started in 1987 his affiliation with Cox & Kings, which originated as Cox & Co. in the 18th century when King George II of England appointed Richard Cox the agent in Madras, India, to handle travel and shipping for the British East India Co. "The company would ship personal effects by trunk and conduct banking," says Waring. "It grew in India with the British Empire."

The company's name changed to Cox & Kings in 1918 when it purchased the Henry S. King Bank in London. Five years later, Lloyds Bank purchased the travel/banking company, maintaining its name as a subsidiary. Then in the 1950s, Lloyds sold the company to Grindlay Bank. And this is when the American traveler started to hit the radar screen of Cox & Kings. "Tourism as we know it now in America started after World War II," Waring says. "Our business has completely changed in the last 50 years."

In 1972, new banking regulations in England forced the sale of the travel portion of the business to current owner and chairman Anthony Good, who has retired from day-to-day control and shares ownership with key persons. Waring's college roommate Kerkar now co-owns the London-based company, which has 45 employees. Cox & Kings in Madras, India — the largest with 300 employees — is a public company traded on the Indian exchange still partly owned by the London company. Another Cox & Kings operates in Japan, with ownership split between London and a Japanese partner.

In the U.S., Cox & Kings USA (www.coxandkingsusa.com) was founded in 1989, when Waring and Kerkar opened an office in New York City. Waring manages the U.S. office and Kerkar manages the London office. "It was a very good decision to come to the U.S. to expand the business of Americans traveling with us," Waring says. "We can offer a higher degree of service and customization to our American clients. We were very well received." Travel + Leisure magazine, for example, has named Cox & Kings first among tour operators for its small groups, with an average of nine participants per tour.

This year, about 600 clients will have called on Waring and his seven U.S. employees to create travel experiences they will not soon forget. Want to go to Africa? India? China? South America? A two-week trip — including luxury accommodations and special events — ranges in cost from \$5,000 to \$7,000 a person, not including international airfare from the United States to the destination. Depending on the extent of luxury, “costs can be much more,” says Waring.

To see Waring’s offices from the outside — a nondescript, two-story brick building on Davis Island — you would never imagine the world that lies behind the Cox & Kings name. Only after stepping into his personal office would that world be made clear by the walls of art and mementos from exotic locales and shelf after shelf of books from around the world.

So, how did Cox & Kings USA wind up in Tampa from New York City?

Business recruiters, take note: It was Waring’s love of Florida mystery writers that piqued his curiosity about the Sunshine State. His favorite authors are John D. MacDonald, Carl Hiassen, James Hall and Randy Wayne White. Books such as MacDonald’s *The Deep Blue Good Bye* and White’s thrillers of Siesta Key made their impression. “I’ve read every one of these books I can get my hands on,” he admits. “That’s one reason I wanted to come to Florida.”

Waring originally thought to relocate to Miami, with its “strong relationship to New York,” he says. But a travel industry colleague based in Tampa suggested that he check out the Tampa Bay area. “I really liked it,” says Waring. “It’s very connected to the world. It has great accessibility with direct flights to California from the St. Petersburg/Clearwater International Airport and nonstop flights to London from Tampa International Airport.”

The weather pattern in the Tampa Bay area is much better suited to his business, adds Waring, a competitive Masters swimmer. “The climate here more closely matches the climate of our international destinations,” he says. “Going from Florida to Botswana (Africa) is much easier.”

Creating unique travel experiences in remote corners of the world fills Waring’s life. “I don’t take vacations,” he says, “I’m always developing trips.” Travel with Cox & Kings USA, while luxurious, is not “just tourism,” Waring emphasizes. “Luxury is only part of what we do. Our clients want to learn and experience a country’s culture, its cuisine, its history. We try to match clients with our network of guides who treat our clients as their guests and our friends. This is a true cultural trip.”

Waring creates signature events as part of the travel experience. “The BBC correspondent for South Asia, Mark Tully, meets our clients and takes them to dinner,” he says. “Retired North Vietnamese military officers have had dinner with our clients. The exchange is fascinating.” Waring has even organized groups to have an audience with the Dali Lama in India.

“Fifty percent of our clients travel with us (again) within two years,” Waring, says of repeat customers.

One of those is Molly Shannon, an executive of Wellington Management Co. in Boston. “Nathaniel Waring has access that is phenomenal,” she says.

Shannon initially traveled to South Africa and later to Peru. “My first trip to South Africa was beyond expectation,” she says. “The guides we had were fantastic. We visited a village in Zambia and spent time with the school children. We were able to interact with them and realize how open, fun-loving and optimistic they are.”

What Shannon most enjoyed in Peru was a swim with pink dolphins in the Amazon River.

“Our staff travels overseas at least three times a year,” says Waring. “We are experts in each country and in showing it to clients within a time frame and budget.”

Among Waring’s corporate clients is United Technologies, which held its initial overseas board of directors meeting in India six years ago. Twelve board members and their spouses journeyed to the Lake Palace Hotel, a white marble structure built in the 17th century by Maharana Jagjit Singh — ruler of Jaipur — in the center of Lake Pichola.

Politics has played havoc with Waring’s business at times. “During apartheid, most Americans went along with the levels of boycotts that the United States had with South Africa,” he says. “With the end of apartheid, South Africa has grown to our number-one selling destination to Americans.

“As political events occur throughout the world, we have to be flexible,” says Waring. “We used to tour the Middle East, but since September 11, it’s a waste of paper to create a brochure.”

International airfare, visa fees where applicable, travel insurance, airport taxes if not included on your tickets, alcoholic beverages, gratuities and personal expenses.

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