

## How to dress for Africa

by James Thomas

So this is your first trip to Africa. Congratulations for having the resources to travel and for the opportunity to visit Africa. This will likely be one of your most memorable trips. When you get ready to pack, you will have lots of questions. As an Africa frequent flier, I can give you some tips. My career in public health has taken me to countries in all corners of the continent, beginning with two years living in the Congo jungle. In Kenya and South Africa I helped my church form long-term relationships with two African churches. And I founded Africa Rising, an organization that works with African social entrepreneurs. I travel to Africa at least once a year, sometimes more.

When I travel anywhere, be it Paris or Nairobi, I try to avoid looking like a tourist. Obvious tourists are a target for pick pockets, scammers and merchants who charge what they think a person will pay. More generally, tourists are often seen by locals as a necessary evil. They contribute to the economy, but they also make locals feel like animals in a zoo, on the wrong side of the camera lens.

Encountering tourists that fit the stereotypes commonly result in locals wearing one of two faces: one that says “How may I help you,” like a shop owner making a sale; the other, less common one says “welcome to our country, now go home.” They are both veneers that maintain an emotional distance, intended to prevent unguarded and open conversations. But to me, unguarded conversations are the best way to get to know a person and their culture. I try to minimize my tourist appearance (it can seldom be completely hidden) because I want to know the people I am with and the country I am in.

### Stereotypes

For most travelers – especially first timers – Africa is the last exotic place on earth, the one continent unspoiled by modernity that presents an opportunity for genuine adventure. Mention Africa and most Americans picture lions prowling the savannah and slender warriors hunting with spears and living in mud huts. For those who hold these mental images, a visit to Africa is a chance to re-enact the safaris of the early European explorers, but now with cameras instead of rifles.

For others, Africa invokes images of starving children and a visit is an opportunity to show compassion or to see firsthand how bad poverty can be. We can be forgiven for harboring such stereotypes: the popular media feed us a steady diet of them. This includes many Christian relief and child support organizations, because images of needy children with imploring eyes are good for fund raising.

There is an element of truth to these stereotypes. There is more poverty in Africa than in other continents. And some African tribes play up to the stereotypes as a source of income from image-hungry tourists. There is also an element of truth to the stereotypes Africans have of Americans. Their sources are also the popular media: exported American television and movies. According to these sources, American streets are riddled with crime; Americans live in mansions and drive the latest sleek cars, and are as likely to hop into bed with someone as ask their name.

Few of us Americans fit that stereotype, and we don't want to be viewed that way. Our lives are more complex, our challenges are greater, and our relationships are more meaningful. In the same way, Africans don't want to be seen as the African stereotype. If you manage to go beyond stereotypes to encounters that welcome new information, surprises and genuine conversations, you will be rewarded

with personal insights and growth and, in some cases, with lasting friendships. How you dress and behave affect the odds of this happening.

### **Bwana Bob and Clueless Claire**

The most stereotypical way to dress is what I call the “Bwana Bob” attire. (Bwana is Swahili for Lord. It was a title used by Africans for the ruling Europeans during the colonial era.) This is the many-pocketed vest and large-brimmed hat. There are male and female versions. Men often wear them along with a vented synthetic fiber backpacker shirt and many-pocketed trousers (I’d call them pants, but that would leave the British readers rolling with laughter). These clothes are the uniform for the African explorer fantasy. They are commonly seen on people in the lobbies of the tourist hotels and on animal safaris. For true photographers – the kind that make their living on it – a multitude of pockets makes their craft more feasible. Even so, the outfit is like wearing a neon sign that blinks “tourist.” So, some professional photographers will forgo the convenience in favor of not standing out so much.

A stereotypical fashion mistake of young women visiting Africa for the first time is to wear too little. “Clueless Claire” is what we’ll call this stereotype, and I have met her often. She wears a top with spaghetti straps, or a neckline that reveals cleavage. These are clothes that most wouldn’t give a second thought or look in the US. But typically, African cultures are more conservative and to dress revealingly is to be culturally insensitive.

The most counter-intuitive clothing faux pas is shorts. They were made for heat and humidity, so they should be perfect for the tropics. However, in many African countries shorts are worn only by school children and are thus associated with youth and immaturity. Men in shorts are seen by many Africans as silly. Women in shorts, however, are often seen as sultry. Culturally speaking, women’s bare legs in some African cultures are more taboo than bare breasts. Women who don’t want to be viewed as “loose,” should avoid shorts and short skirts. Women experienced with travel to Africa will often wear slacks, jeans, or a mid-to-full-length skirt; and a top that covers the shoulders.

A third stereotype is simpler. I’ll call it “Mission Team Mackenzie.” It is the group of youth all wearing the same t-shirt, usually printed with the name of a church and a purposeful tag line like “Serving all nations.” I understand the usefulness of such a uniform for the adults shepherding these groups. They make it easier to spot the kids and keep them together. By the same token, however, the shirts make the kids easier to label as outsiders and tourists. Moreover, a purposeful tag line can make the people visited feel like a project rather than a person. This has a dehumanizing effect that is likely to be the opposite of what the group intends.

There are a few other things that mark a person as a tourist but aren’t part of a uniform. They are the visor cap – the kind without a top - the fanny pack, and daypacks. Yes, even the common-as-water pack used for books, day hikes and as an airplane carry-on. The fanny pack and daypack have the added disadvantage of being thief magnets. A razor blade provides easy access to the contents when the wearer is preoccupied or distracted.

Bwana Bob, Clueless Claire and Mission Team Mackenzie have each arrived at some practical solutions. Synthetic shirts can be washed and dried overnight in a hotel room, shorts are cool in heat, and uniform t-shirts are easy to spot in a crowded airport. Their disadvantages are mostly relational. They make it easier to put people in boxes and harder to move beyond stereotypes into genuine encounters.

## **How I dress for Africa**

When I pack for an African trip, I take clothes with solid dark colors. Solid because plaids, prints, and large stripes, with some exceptions, mark one as an American – in Europe as well as in Africa. Dark because bright colors stand out in a crowd – just by definition – and because dark colors hide dirt better. I often do wear a synthetic shirt while en route because it can endure long flights in cramped places without wrinkling. Then once I arrive, it washes easily in the bathroom sink. During my stay, however, I wear the kinds of shirts I normally wear in the US: long sleeve cotton. I wear long sleeves for protection against the sun, the cold (some African latitudes and altitudes are quite cold), and mosquitoes.

I also wear cargo pants when en route because the extra pocket on the thigh is a convenient place to keep a passport. But once in country I wear denim or non-cargo-type pants, as I would at home in the US. And except when in my hotel room or a host's home, I wear shoes that thoroughly cover my feet. Even in cities, one can encounter sharp objects, dirt, mud or worse. I wear shoes that are comfortable for walking, but not running shoes: again, they are part of the American stereotype.

I carry dark glasses, but I usually wear them only when I'm not talking to someone. Eye contact is essential for conversations which, as I've explained, are one of my principal objectives. To shield the sun I rely mostly on a baseball cap. But now here I am in a quandary. Most dark-skinned Africans simply don't wear hats. But my fair skin begs for something between me and the sun. Although some hats make one stand out more (think Bwana Bob), I'm not sure any hat will make me stand out less.

While away from my hotel room I carry things like a cell phone, wallet, camera, water, notebook, and sometimes a rain shell. I put them in a small side sling pack that I bought in a backpacking store. Because it hangs to my side, I can easily swing it around in front to pull something out or keep it where I can watch it. Cameras, like the one I carry in the bag, are virtually a piece of clothing these days. They are ubiquitous among Africans as well as Americans. They are part of many cell phones, which nearly every African from secondary school up has. What can make a camera a liability is large size and what it is pointed at. Nothing maintains or accentuates a distance between two strangers like a camera. To be photographed by a stranger is to feel like an oddity. I have posted guidelines on when and when not to use a camera at [www.africanising.org/resources](http://www.africanising.org/resources).

## **Enjoy**

If you can avoid being easily categorized or dismissed as a tourist, you stand more of a chance of having rewarding conversations with local people and unpackaged cultural experiences. Although it is unfair to refer to Africans as a single group – after all it is a continent, not a country – no matter where you travel in Africa, you will likely find people who are open, generous, and with a terrific sense of humor. They too will welcome the opportunity to sidestep stereotypes and treat you to the best of their country and culture. My bet is that you will want to return time and again to bask in the beauty and hospitality.

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