

2020

Nick's year in review





Nick's year in review

Once a year I create a 'year in review' slideshow, because I am not much of a social media user, but do recognize that many people would still like to know what's going on in my life.

But who wants to read a year in review about 2020, for most people easily the most depressing year in decades?

Don't worry, as a natural optimist and believer in the power of positive thought, I will focus on the highs, rather than the 'lows', of 2020. I might even try to not mention the cursed C-word! Because honestly, apart from financial doom and shattered dreams, there was still so much to be thankful for! Ultimately, what does one need other than a happy and healthy family?



Family picture end of 2019, totally ready for 2020. Or so we thought...



Completion of the 'TMS project'

On overall, in all 10 years, our travel agency Tailor Made Safaris (TMS) has never been profitable. It was fun and 'successful', but we barely managed to scrape a living out of it. It would never pay for a house, retirement savings, kids schooling, things like life insurance etc. And now we have a family, these things have become important. Like most travel agencies, TMS was born out of passion. But with very low margins, travel agencies seldom make much financial sense, unless 'volume' of bookings go up.

A high volume of low margins can still be profitable. Hence, for many years now, I have had the vision to grow TMS to a level where it could process a certain 'volume' of bookings. In January 2020, the 'Tailor Made Safaris project' was completed: Ten years of hard work, investments in office space and equipment and training up staff, but finally we were there: End of 2019 we had the team we needed to make Tailor Made Safaris a financial success!



The Tailor Made Safaris Dream Team end of 2019

Vakantiebeurs

Every year, January is big month for me, as that is when I exhibit at the annual travel fair Vakantiebeurs in Utrecht, The Netherlands. It is a big and costly event, but a great start of the year as we easily get 25% of our bookings for the entire year from just those 5 days.

It was our 10-year anniversary as well, so we produced a luxury 150-page brochure, and proudly presented our amazing team to the world. The Vakantiebeurs Travel Fair was a great success, we managed to secure a tsunami of bookings. 'Volume' achieved! 2020 was going to be the year! We might even get rich!





Optimism for the year

The year ahead was so promising, that we got rid of our last 'old' car and bought Freya a brand-new runaround vehicle as well. No more break downs and expensive repairs. She would be safe and comfortable on the road.

Not only the finances were looking good, we also love travel, and for 2020 alone we had planned & booked trips to amongst others Thailand, The Netherlands, Iceland, Mauritius, Kruger and potentially Vietnam, Cambodia and Namibia. Admittedly, most of them would be photo-tours with clients, and not perse holidays, but still..., we were definitely looking forward to an exciting 2020!





NORTHLAND

SCHOOL

Ariel to school

2020 was also the year Ariel started to go to school. Yes, time flies! Little girls grow up quickly!





Life was good

Really, everything looked honky dory. Loving life, teaching the kids about nature.





Lockdown...

In March, the writing came on the wall. 2020 wasn't gonna be the year we were hoping for. I always thought we were clever, spreading financial risk by having 4 different companies under the Van De Wiel Travel Group umbrella. But we forgot they were all in the same sector; tourism... Oops 🤔🤔👤!

Priorities first, I had to repatriate not only my parents and their friends who were here, but also some clients who were traveling with us. Cancellations starting to flow in. While for many people in South Africa the following months of lockdown meant sitting at home doing nothing, for us and our team it became a super busy period, dealing with all cancellations and postponements!



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Lockdown...

We dealt with our first disappointments (not having any idea about how many more we would have to deal with this year 🤔🤔🤔) and in March we settled into the world's hardest lockdown. No-one was allowed to leave their house/garden at all, only for shopping of 'essential food'. This means:

- You could buy an uncooked chicken, but not a grilled one.
- And you could buy cheese, but no biscuits or cake.
- Alcohol and tobacco were banned completely for a few months.
- No online shopping was allowed at all.
- Leaving one's garden for exercise or walking the dogs was NOT allowed.
- Nature reserves and beaches were closed for 4,5 months!



President Ramaphosa doing one of his Covid-19 speeches

Lockdown for us.

For us, the lockdown provided a few challenges. Obviously, no more income at all. But we also had a herd of 16 horses to look after. And 2 highly active dogs that need exercise, and 2 toddlers that need love, attention and entertainment. And while it is great to have a big house and 2000 M² garden, it unfortunately also requires a lot of cleaning and maintenance. I already mentioned that we also had a full-time job dealing with client repatriations, cancelations and postponements.

This is what we settled on: Freya got a special permit to leave the house. Our daily schedule: Up at 5 with the kids, breakfast etc. At 7 in the morning Freya left to look after the horses, coming back around 16:30. During that time I looked after the kids and tried to do household and garden maintenance. From 17:00 till 19:00 was cooking, dinner, kids bath and bedtime routine. From 20:00 onwards to midnight was my office time, doing my normal work duties. This routine we followed seven days a week, weeks on end. There was not a day the horses could not be looked after of course.

And the dogs? Daily I cycled up and down the driveway for 30-45 minutes, with the kids on the bicycle seats, and the dogs running up and down with us.



Freya waving the kids goodbye as she leaves for work at the horses.



Silver lining of lockdown

But it wasn't all doom and gloom. Hard work it was, sure. But it also provided some unexpected benefits.

- Amber and Ariel became best friends, having only each other to play with
- We had a big garden, with jungle gym, a trampoline and pool, how lucky were we not living in a city apartment!
- and we got more quality time with the kids than ever before, which was truly special.



Aunty Josie

We also had company. One of our office team, Josselyn, also Dutch, didn't fancy being on her own during lockdown in her apartment on the first floor of a complex. So, she moved into a room in our office during lockdown and became part of our family for a few months. She helped me looking after the kids and quickly became Ariel's favorite person. We all exercised and did yoga together and tried to make the most of the situation. This included a daily afternoon Gin & Tonic, where also the kids were not forgotten.





10-year Wedding Anniversary.

In October this year we were celebrating our ten-year wedding anniversary. We had planned to be here in Mauritius but that obviously didn't happen.



So, we grabbed some takeaway (sorry, our money was finished by now), and we went for an afternoon drive & picnic in the local park instead. We love each other all the same.





Financial Doom



Talking about ‘the money is finished’, this is one of the things most of our European friends and family often don’t fully comprehend. Oh yes, the whole world went into lockdown, and everyone is affected and has certain level of freedom taken away. But in Europe, governments were able to mitigate the financial impact for most individuals. Salaries usually still got paid, even if you couldn’t work from home. Businesses had to shut down, but still got monetary support from the government to pay for their expenses.

For us, our companies, for our team, and for most of our friends here in South Africa, the situation was very different. No income means no income here. The government tried what they could by offering some financial assistance, but almost all people around us saw their monthly spending ability suddenly reduced to below 20%. Around us, friends and team members, people close to us, people we care deeply about, suddenly had to ask for food parcels, give up their entire life dreams, got evicted from their house, move away to live with parents, lost their cars, take their kids out of school, got divorced. It truly was carnage.

For Freya and myself, we did what we could for our team, but ultimately, and very soon, had to make the hard decisions to let people go, and leave them to fend largely for themselves. It was gut-wrenching, as we realized we were not simply sending them towards a life of government support, but to likely financial doom. But we had no choice. For the first 6-9 months, our companies made zero, literally ZERO, income. Not 1 rand. Obviously, that also meant that Freya and I had no income. While bills still had to be paid. Close your eyes for a moment and ask yourself: How would I look after my family and business if I had zero money coming in for 9 months? You’ll either get interesting ideas or a very uncomfortable feeling...



Financial Doom



Bottom line, we were forced to put our companies into ‘hibernation mode’, reducing costs to an absolute minimum. From October onwards, only Bhangazi Horse Safaris could start trading again, for local tourists only. But it couldn’t even break even those months. Somehow, Freya and I managed to keep us and the companies financially going for a good 8 months, emptying investment accounts, savings accounts, the children’s savings accounts, retirement funds, everything. We ran a fundraiser to buy horse feed to look after the horses, which was thankfully well supported. We had to take Ariel out of school, until a good friend from America decided to sponsor her school fees with her husband. Our parents chipped in generously to help us, and some good friends from Europe and Australia also made some very generous monetary donations, allowing us to pay our bills.

Throughout the whole pandemic, there was always some hope on the horizon. THEN borders will open. THEN tourism will come back! THEN will you be able to restart your companies and make some bucks again. But the goalpost was continuously moved. By November, it had become clear that even ‘carrying on in financial hibernation mode’ was no longer viable. The money was really finished, and it could still be months before international tourism was to be back. Our financial situation had deteriorated to the point where we were living hand to mouth, selling office computers, bicycles, kitchen appliances, smart watches and the like. Freya started an online shop to make some money, I offered myself on the digital freelance market to do literally anything. I got some odd-jobs as a ‘consultant’, text writer, did some photography workshops, offered myself as an event photographer and did some guesthouse shoots. Even though I think we did remarkably well and earned a fair amount of money, it wasn’t enough. I still had to beg our landlord to waive the rent for a couple of months and request some other suppliers to stop some other debit orders. However embarrassing, I still had to ask our parents for financial help.



Financial Doom



And here we are, now it is January 2021, but the situation hasn't really changed, and to be honest. we don't really know what we're going to do. But a plan will be made. We hope that my photography work will start to take off, we have some other ideas in the pipeline, and have listed some other belongings that we can sell. If we want to keep the horses, it is likely we might have to start another fundraiser. And in the meantime, we can only hope for tourism to come back rather sooner than later.



Mental Mindfuck

A year like this is obviously never easy for anyone. Stress, disappointment, loss, financial insecurity, getting overworked with no days off, worry, fear, despair, you name it. Like most people, we experienced it all. But the most difficult things for me where:

- As mentioned before: Having to send our team that we really care about to their likely financial doom, in the knowledge that it would have far reaching consequences for them and their kids.
- Continuously moving timeframe about when borders would reopen. Not only to know when we could restart our companies, but also when we could see our family again. Freya's family hasn't seen the kids for 15 months now, and my parents we saw 9 months ago for the last time. And no-one knows when we will eventually be able to see & hold them again, it could still be many months away.
- Turning 40 this year and be in a position where I couldn't even pay the bills to support my family and having had to ask my parents and in-laws for financial help. Even though it was due to the pandemic, and wasn't really my fault, (I didn't gamble my money away), I still felt as a total failure.
- No matter whether we worked 20 or 60 hours every week the last 9 months, it made no difference, we were continuously losing money, and still are, and we can't even stop it. Life goes on, and bills keep on arriving every month and need to be paid.



Mental Mindfuck



- And the biggest mindfuck was realising that the Tailor Made Safaris dream that was 10 years in the making, is now broken beyond repair. Not that we're going to close-down, but we're forced to scale it back permanently to a small company. Most of the team has moved on in the meantime, and it takes on average a full year to train someone up again to the point they can deal with clients independently. I don't have the money or energy to rebuilt it again and pay salaries for a full year before they can 'earn' money for the company. Besides, I also had to sell their computers in the meantime.



From here...



to an empty office, with on the right computers ready to be sold off...



Mental Fix



But let's not linger on the negatives. When you are mentally stretched to the max, what better way to address that than with a little holiday? We obviously didn't have the money for it, but again my parents and Freya's parents came to the rescue and bought us a week-long holiday to Kruger! And that was just what we needed to be honest! A family that we're good friends with joined us. And friends, family, in nature, away from all the stressors at home, game drives looking at cool animals, playing in the pool with the kids. A total mental fix!

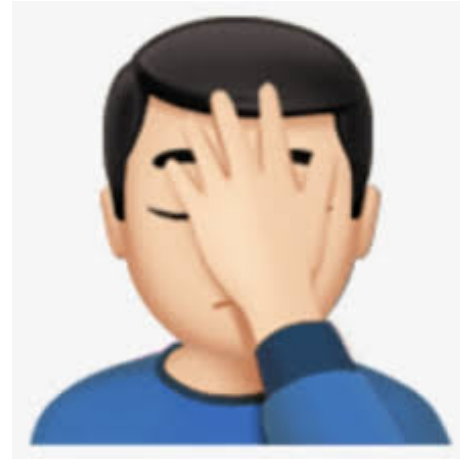


Family photo in Kruger end of 2020. Not quite ready for 2021, but alas...



Ending the year in style...

And then the end of December arrived... And the 'second wave' came over South Africa, and somehow got hold of us too... Our symptoms started on Boxing Day, and luckily remained relatively mild for all of us. But it meant we had to isolate for at least 10 days, so you can imagine our festive season wasn't very festive.





Sounds like quite a year to forget
indeed...

But there was still so much to
be thankful for.



The small things matter

When we forget the financial doom and shattered dreams for a moment, there are so many small things that still make even 2020 a year to treasure. (Okay maybe I am exaggerating when I say 'to treasure', but you know what I mean...). For example, family days in the park, looking at animals.



Daddy and Amber watching animals from a game viewing hide.



The girls in Mkhuzi Game Reserve



Cool projects

Having spent an extraordinary amount of time in our garden this year, instead of in the real bush, I tried to attract wildlife to our garden by building insect hotels, bird nesting boxes, bat boxes and owl boxes.



Inviting birds and bats home



'Insect Hotel' providing a home to carpenter bees and the like

Cool projects

And since lockdown prevented me from going to my regular gym, I decided to built my own in the garden. I am proud to present my pride and joy; including bench press, squat rack, parallel bars, pull-up bars, push-up bars, gymnastics rings, concrete filled buckets as free weights, punch bag and recline ab station.





Little outings

Obviously, all big holiday and overseas travel plans got cancelled, but I managed to get away for a little bit on a few occasions. I joined a walking safari with South African tourists, and explored a new game reserve with a friend.





Little outings

As part of my, hopefully, new career as photo- and videographer, I spend 5 days at a lodge making a marketing video. Hard work, but very exciting!



Ariel as super model

And then there are of course the kids who bring so much joy in our lives!
Perhaps everyone says that about their daughter, but I think Ariel is starting to turn into a super model...





Amber the comedian


And Amber makes us laugh everyday with her cuteness and free spirit.



Guinea Pigs

The kids are learning new responsibilities as they have to look after their new pets...





Life might be insecure, but it is still good!

Yeah, of course I wish this year was different. But we still live in one of the most awesome places, and the kids get to grow up in and around nature. And that is something to be thankful for.



Thank you everyone!

So here we are. As we head into an uncertain 2021, we would like to thank everyone that helped and supported us last year. It sounds cliché but if it were not for your financial and moral support, well, I don't know what our situation would have been now. Just know we are very grateful!

Best wishes to everyone!

Nick and the Van de Wiel family.

