

Buyer's View: Sandstorm



On safari with Sandstorm in Paris or Botswana

Keith Steel has a history in Scotch Whisky and Nepalese pashminas but, being born in Kenya, he has never got Africa out of his blood.

So, when he was ready to start a new business he was at once off to Africa. Two years ago he teamed up with Gary McIntyre who was making rugged, top quality safari tents in Kenya and out of this came a new business making high quality, safari style bags in canvas and leather.

A look at their web site www.sandstormbags.com shows you that this interesting approach has paid off. Their good-looking rugged bags are as much at home in Manhattan's upmarket concrete jungle as in the Amazon Forests. A mix of green or brown canvas with tan leather gives their products a distinctive look and the bags ooze the character that the discriminating traveller likes to display.

Keith Steel says his hope is "to build a long-term brand in the premium fashion

goods and accessories market, yet one that remains true to the Sandstorm, Out of Africa, image." The product has to be robust and with a safari image. This is a hand crafted product and will remain so. "The challenge is making sure the quality remains high while meeting the volume, although we are not planning to be a really high volume business."

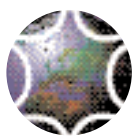
Currently production in bags is running at about 7,000 per annum but rising rapidly towards 12,000 units. Production is all managed in Kenya by Greg McIntyre while marketing is controlled by Keith from Edinburgh in Scotland. The first market to be opened up was the UK followed more recently by the US. Reception has been good with retailers and consumers and the products have been positively reviewed in the press.

With such a product line materials are key to the quality and consistency of the product and to remain true to the African

product concept. This means that all components are sourced locally. For leather Sandstorm looked to Bata's Kenyan tannery.

Working with leather goods expert Robert Topping they chose two leathers, one a cattle hide oil pull up and the other a nubuck camel. Gary McIntyre states, "We





work closely with BATA to maintain a consistent quality." The East African camel does have to deal with heavy scrub and thorn so a texture is used followed by dry drumming to maintain the camel character and give reasonable cutting values. "It looks like a camel that has had to deal with nature and lived in the real world," says Gary.

Designs for the bags using bovine material allow the incorporation of small pieces, so there is little waste. Gary acknowledges that although the chosen

leathers may appear straightforward they took a long time to develop, and that Bata's ability to use some of the selections for shoes has been a useful element.

The intention is to remain with one 'signature' leather colour but to allow some variation in shading as the leather is unfinished and aniline dyed. They work with the tannery on a three grade basis.

The other materials evolved out of the need to make robust products for safari. The choice is very much based on practical applications. The drill cotton used in the weekend bags is an area where Gary had specific knowledge from his tent manufacture and the bag fittings and threads are all designed to be hard wearing as well as good looking.

According to Keith Steel, the canvas and leather and camel and cow mix has captured the imagination of trade and consumer. Launches over the last two years at major international fairs have all met with a good response. There were initially issues with the "made in Africa" approach says Steel but he was clear that he was "philosophically wedded to a

Made in Africa concept" and so they are going to great lengths to comply with this approach, playing to a style and a production that Gary had created in his safari tents.

"We must remain true to the Out of Africa image," says Steel, "rugged, robust, and contemporary." They already have over thirty items coming out of the plant in Kenya, a mix of regular travel bag designs and unusual items such as their distinct wash bag, safari cooler and fishing stool. As they say in the catalogue, the Kiri bag—knapsack type—is a perfect companion for a trip round the corner or a trip round the world. Owners of the champagne cooler will have to decide whether the next trip will be to the opera on the lawns of Glyndebourne or big game watching in the Serengeti.

Product proliferation will be avoided and plans are essentially laid for the next three years with 2005 likely to see six new products and 2005 to 2006 one new range.

So, from yellow cab in New York to camel in Alice Springs, expect to find stylish, Swahili-named bags from Sandstorm doing the business for African leather and leathersgoods. ●

