

THE BORN-AGAIN CHRISTIAN

CHRISTIAN SLATER

The Hollywood star's new addiction is a far cry from his days as a hellraiser: travel. Inspired by a visit to Richard Branson's South African game reserve, Ulusaba, Slater donated to its charitable project, Pride 'n Purpose, and he returned in December for the launch of a creche. Interview by Helen Warwick

No question, there's something very special about Africa. From the moment my son and I arrived at Ulusaba for our first visit in 2007, I was hooked. Going on safari at dusk was phenomenal. We were parked right next to a pride of lions, with one of its members up against our vehicle, roaring to another pride miles away. Can you imagine how exciting that was for a seven-year-old? We were both totally in awe. It was remarkable. I want to have as many experiences with my children as possible.

When I'm filming I don't get to see much of a destination. I've always travelled a lot with work but you don't have the opportunity to experience the surroundings or meet the people. Visiting Ulusaba was one of the first times I put everything to one side and relaxed into it, allowing myself to totally immerse myself in the moment. I'm proud I'm an ambassador for its charitable project, Pride 'n Purpose, and with some of the money I've donated we've established a creche, clean water supply to the local school, a library and a computer lab. It's an important place, giving guests the chance to stay in five-star while helping at the local Sabi San reserve.

It's ironic that some of the poorest people in Africa appear to be some of the happiest. A lot of people think it's quite an unfortunate continent, but the locals aren't distracted by the things we are in the western world. Many of us consider Africa to be uncivilised, but after flying back from Ulusaba I landed in London, only to be stuck on the plane for several hours because of a feared terrorist attack. It's insane what we class as civilised and uncivilised.

Visiting the troops on a USO (United Service Organizations) tour was a real eye-opener. I travelled to Bahrain and Djibouti and was totally blown away by how helpful the troops were to the surrounding communities. It was amazing to see it wasn't all about fighting. What the soldiers were doing reminded me a little of Ulusaba, especially since the villages had no running water or electricity. I flew in via Ethiopia and that was an experience in itself. I was stuck in the airport with a monsoon raging outside, trying to find something decent to eat. I don't want to offend anyone but there was some seriously strange food in the terminal. An interesting dining experience to say the least.

Swimming with tiger sharks was pretty exhilarating. I was diving in Beqa Lagoon Resort in Fiji with no cage or protective clothing. I got pretty excited down there; one minute worrying whether I'd cut my hand on coral, the other if a shark would come and bite my head off — it was overwhelming. They are serious deadly creatures; they sweep up the ocean they're so aggressive. I'm a big fan of diving and Fiji was definitely one of



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the best places I've done it in — even though, on the same shark dive, I ran out of air. I had to do the old buddy system and borrow regulators — it made it all the more exciting, though. When I left the water, I felt like I'd really achieved something, like I'd emerged a better person.

I'd love to go and see the mountain gorillas in Uganda. I've had it on my list for a very long time, particularly as there are only around 700 left in the wild — frightening. It's fascinating to watch animals in their natural habitats — you enter their territory. I struggle to agree with zoos in the US — you can't help but feel the animals are trapped.

I'm obsessed with Italian food. The Amalfi coast, Capri and Rome — you can't beat them. I love Greece, too; just wandering around its ruins. And Miami is a beautiful place. I've lived here now for 25 years and it's not too overwhelming, with great people — even the hurricanes are kind of exciting.

BIOGRAPHY

■ Born in 1969 in New York, Slater shot to fame after landing the role of Binx Davey in *The Legend of Billie Jean* (1985). Moving to LA, he gained a reputation as a debauched rebel, while his career took off with films such as *The Name of the Rose* (1986), *Heathers* (1988) and *Robin Hood: Prince of Thieves* (1991).

■ Since 2000, Slater's career has included TV and stage roles, including

a stint in the West End in *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* and *Swimming With Sharks* and on Broadway in *The Glass Menagerie* and *Macbeth*.

■ Slater first visited Ulusaba in 2007 and has since made contributions and donated money to build classrooms and facilities at a local school. www.virginlimitededition.com www.ulusaba.virgin.com/pridenpurpose