

COMPANY TOWN

Fake court records. Forged signatures. Head of celebrity-fronted travel company confronts fraud claims



(Rob Dobi / For The Times)

BY JESSICA GELT | STAFF WRITER

OCT. 17, 2023 3 AM PT

FOR SUBSCRIBERS

On Sept. 29 Eric Blaine Hodgson celebrated his arrival in Zambia on Facebook. The landlocked country in southern Africa, known for its vast floodplains and epic waterfalls, was the 100th country Hodgson had visited.

He was leading an Africa safari cruise in his role as a travel expert with OUTbound, the LGBTQ+ travel company he founded in late 2020 with “Mean Girls” star Jonathan Bennett and Bennett’s husband, “The Amazing Race” alum Jaymes Vaughan.

“Thank you OUTBounders for making this happen,” Hodgson said in his Facebook video, holding his phone in front of his face and panning around at a group of happy tourists holding silver wine glasses on a sandy shore. “Only 106 [countries] to go and I’ll have hit ‘em all!”

The banks of Zambia’s glistening Lake Kariba are a far cry from the Ishi Conservation Camp on the chaparral-covered outskirts of Paynes Creek, Calif., where Hodgson resided eight years ago. At that time, he was serving his second year of a nine-year sentence after pleading guilty to seven felony counts of grand theft in a case prosecuted by then-California Atty. Gen. Kamala Harris. Hodgson was convicted of defrauding the California Department of Transportation (Caltrans) out of nearly \$1.9 million.



FOR SUBSCRIBERS ONLY

Subscribers get exclusive access to this story

We're offering L.A. Times subscribers special access to our best journalism. Thank you for your support.

[Explore more Subscriber Exclusive content.](#)

Today, as Hodgson embarks on luxe OUTbound tours of Africa, Paris, Italy and Spain, his criminal past and alleged efforts to conceal it are at the center of an extraordinary lawsuit that is winding its way through a Delaware court. In that case, another LGBTQ+ travel company he previously worked for called Vacaya alleges that Hodgson is a “serial fraudster” who duped Vacaya’s owners into hiring him and giving him a stake in their business after Hodgson forged court documents showing that his felony conviction had been vacated and his restitution obligations set aside.

“Hodgson — a convicted felon and admitted fraudster — has lied, cheated and stolen from others over the past decade,” alleges the complaint, which was filed in March.

The depiction in the lawsuit is at odds with the affable, easygoing image of Hodgson on the Outbound website, which describes him as “an LGBTQ+ travel expert of the highest order.” In his company profile photo, the 53-year-old smiles from the deck of a boat in front of the Sydney Opera House.

Hodgson adamantly disputes these claims. In an interview from South Africa he said,

“Vacaya was a very vicious, dark experience. It was nothing but backstabbing and manipulation.” He alleged that he forged the court orders at the behest of Vacaya co-founder Randle Roper. He said Roper wanted to convince one of Vacaya’s partners to give Hodgson an ownership stake. He considered the partner a “weak link” and wanted to vote him out, Hodgson said, echoing claims he made as part of a lawsuit against Vacaya in 2020 that was dismissed.

“I deny any accusations that I attempted to defraud Vacaya in any way,” said Hodgson. “I maintain that I earned my position with Vacaya through my fundraising, sales, promotion, contacts and hard work.”

Vacaya and its owners — Roper, Patrick Gunn and Tracy Terrill — declined an interview request but issued a statement through their lawyer.

“Mr. Hodgson’s lawsuit was dismissed and, after finding that he sued Vacaya ‘to enforce agreements that he procured in part by fraud,’ he was rightfully sanctioned by the Court ‘to prevent and remedy the harms of abusive and wasteful litigation,’” the statement read. “Vacaya refuses to discuss the merit of falsehoods that already have been resolved and sanctioned by the Court.”

Both lawsuits, and dozens of supporting documents filed with the court, weave a riveting tale of Hodgson’s last 16 years and his alleged repeated attempts to hide his felony record.

OUTbound’s Bennett and Vaughan — who are also currently on an OUTbound Africa safari cruise — declined multiple requests for an interview with The Times, but Bennett’s publicist issued a statement from them that said, “We are blindsided and

absolutely shocked to learn this information, and are launching our own investigation accordingly.”

The couple no longer appear on the company website.

Toys, comics and exotic trips

Before entering into the travel business, Hodgson operated a printing shop called Phenix Print and Image, located in a small beige office park just off the 5 Freeway in Elk Grove, Calif., near Sacramento. Hodgson served as president, chief executive and chief financial officer of the business between 2008 and 2011, during which time he won three state contracts with Caltrans worth more than \$1.9 million.

Phenix was hired to publish details about upcoming Caltrans building projects in local newspapers on behalf of the transportation department. Hodgson was supposed to pay up front for the cost of publication, and Caltrans would reimburse him for his expenses, according to a declaration filed by the Department of Justice.

To get reimbursed, Hodgson had to submit monthly invoices with a list of fees paid to each publication, along with proof of payment and publication.

But a random California State Controller’s Office audit in 2011 failed to unearth any of the notices Hodgson had apparently published and discovered that Hodgson had submitted fabricated documents to Caltrans “containing forged or false signatures of real or fictional employees of the publications.”

Caltrans canceled Phenix’s third contract and referred the case to the California

Department of Justice, which revealed that Hodgson had published only a handful of Caltrans ads out of the more than 1,500 he purported to have placed. The DOJ investigation found that he had submitted a lengthy trail of forged and falsified documents for review, including credit card statements, affidavits of publication, newspaper clippings and postings of the ads, price quotes and invoices to newspapers.

“It appeared as though Hodgson scanned a Visa statement into his computer, then ‘cut and pasted’ information in order to make it appear as if Hodgson had really paid the newspapers for ad placements on behalf of Caltrans,” states a DOJ declaration in support of issuing an arrest warrant.

The DOJ’s Special Crimes Unit uncovered Hodgson’s real credit card and bank statements, which showed Hodgson had spent only \$4,226.31 on Caltrans ads. He used the rest of his \$1.9-million earnings to “pay off a mortgage, make purchases of toys and comics, and pay for exotic trips for him and his company staff,” the declaration said. These trips included 17 airline tickets purchased between Oct. 5 and Oct. 7, 2009, and “a cruise a month” for an entire year. Hodgson also put in a pool and landscaping at his home and paid off a number of car loans.

Hodgson was arrested in April 2013 and charged with 22 counts of grand theft. The DOJ also seized 47 counterfeit \$20 bills and ordered them destroyed.

On June 13, 2013, Hodgson pleaded guilty to seven counts of theft and was sentenced to nine years in state prison.

Later that month, Atty. Gen. Harris obtained several injunctions preventing Hodgson

from transferring any of his property, cars or money. The court entered a restitution order against Hodgson for the \$1.9 million he misappropriated from Caltrans.

His plea deal included “forfeiture of his personal and real property, which includes two residences, two cars, several retirement accounts and a collection of Star Wars items worth more than \$10,000,” Harris’ office said.

A Times story noted that a [3-foot-tall rubber Yoda figurine](#) was part of Hodgson’s collection.

In an interview, Hodgson told The Times that his contract with Caltrans was “ambiguous” and that he didn’t realize he had to pay for the ads in advance.

“I got in over my head,” he said. “I didn’t have enough money in 2008 ... to keep placing the ads — to loan the state of California a quarter of a million dollars at the time,” he said, referring to money he was spending upfront for reimbursement. “There was a gap where I ran out of money, and I panicked. And I did the wrong thing. I told them that I was placing the ads, and I wasn’t, because I didn’t know what else to do.”

An alleged plot hatches in prison

While Hodgson was in prison, the Vacaya lawsuit alleges he picked his “next victim,” hatching a plot to reel in a friend who shared his love of travel.

Vacaya co-founder Roper met Hodgson in 2008 on a cruise, Hodgson said. At the time Roper was working for another LGBTQ+ travel company called Atlantis, and

Hodgson said he was a guest. The two became close friends. At Roper's wedding, Hodgson said he was Roper's husband's best man.

According to his company bio, Roper was an avid traveler, having entered the business after having a massive stroke at age 27 and realizing he had not seen nearly enough of the world.

Roper and Hodgson's friendship remained intact when Hodgson went to prison, and Vacaya's lawsuit against Hodgson includes a number of letters Hodgson sent to Roper while incarcerated.

"In all these letters, in all this time, I've tried desperately to find the words that express my gratitude for all your support & thoughts," Hodgson wrote to Roper on Christmas Day 2015. "Try as I might, I just can't ... because the words simply don't exist. How do you thank someone for giving them hope? And by extension, life?"

"Instead of approaching life outside of prison with an honest, clean slate, Hodgson chose to double-down as a fraudster while feigning repentance for his prior crimes," the Vacaya lawsuit states.

In a letter requesting resentencing sent in 2015 to the Office of the Sacramento County Public Defender, Hodgson wrote that he had no intention of repeating his past mistakes, and that 22 months in jail had taught him some valuable lessons, including the importance of accepting personal responsibility and paying one's debt to society.

"I can say without a doubt that I will never return to prison. Your help in returning

my life to me through resentencing would change my future forever,” Hodgson wrote.

After serving three years of his sentence, Hodgson was released from prison in June 2016.

But while behind bars, the Vacaya lawsuit alleges, Hodgson was crafting a false narrative for Roper that he was innocent of the crimes he had been convicted of.

In his December letter to Roper, for example, Hodgson wrote, “One more Christmas miracle for me ... I finally got official notice from the court that I do not owe any restitution for the money that was taken from the state contract.”

It’s a small consolation, he wrote, “but at least I have a legal document now that says I’m not a thief.”

According to the lawsuit, the purpose of this letter, and others with similar claims, was to con Roper into hiring Hodgson to work at the LGBTQ+ travel company that Roper was in the process of co-founding at the time.

“In August 2017, one year after his release from prison, Hodgson was lying in wait,” the lawsuit states, adding that Hodgson knew Roper and his co-founders were preparing to formally organize Vacaya the following month. “Hodgson also knew that Roper would attempt to help him as a purportedly-innocent person wrongly charged and imprisoned for crimes he did not commit.”

Roper told Hodgson that his Vacaya co-founders needed to see proof that the court had — as Hodgson had repeatedly told him — vacated his criminal conviction and set

aside his restitution order.

In late 2017, Hodgson emailed Roper and attached two Superior Court orders showing just that. The documents, the lawsuit alleges, were fake, with forged signatures of a Superior Court judge and a deputy attorney general for the state of California.

A representative for the Attorney General's Office declined to comment on Hodgson's case but noted that forgery is a crime under the penal code that can be punishable by up to a year in county jail.

With no reason to suspect foul play, Vacaya hired Hodgson on as director of sales. Hodgson soon began lobbying the founders to make him a fifth member and co-owner of the company, the lawsuit said. In early 2019 Hodgson was voted in as a minority owner and given a 10% stake in the business.

Hodgson said that Vacaya's version of events is false. He claimed that he was never an employee of Vacaya, and that he worked as an independent contractor for a few months before Vacaya ran out of money to pay him. At that point, he said, he was asked to volunteer his services in exchange for the promise of a future partnership. In that capacity, Hodgson said he raised \$285,000 for Vacaya, and provided free printing and graphic design services for marketing purposes, and most of the customer service to guests.

As for the forged documents, he said Roper "outlined what needed to be included in the letter. I drafted a version of the document & he made edits until he felt it was satisfactory for his needs."

Red flags began to appear soon after Hodgson was given an ownership stake in the business, according to the Vacaya lawsuit.

During a trip to South Africa in November 2019, the complaint alleges, Hodgson repeatedly harassed a person on the trip, eventually sending him home “in retaliation for his refusal to succumb to Hodgson’s unsolicited advances.”

The person, described as “John Doe,” reported the alleged harassment to Vacaya, which quickly suspended Hodgson pending an investigation. Hodgson refused to participate in the investigation and instead became angry, allegedly leaving a voicemail with a Vacaya employee that he was contemplating a “hostile takeover of Vacaya,” according to the complaint.

Hodgson said it is “absolutely not true” that he harassed John Doe, whom he said was sent home for being disruptive and making unreasonable demands.

“I state unequivocally that I never once touched John Doe, solicited him, pressured him or threatened him in any way, sexually or otherwise,” Hodgson stated.

Eric Hodgson strikes back

Two weeks after Vacaya fired him in March 2020, Hodgson filed a nine-count lawsuit alleging, among other things, that Vacaya defrauded him out of his interest in the business and had conspired to obtain his services without compensation.

The complaint depicted Roper as a disreputable businessman, citing a 2018 lawsuit in which his former employer Atlantis accused him and a Vacaya co-founder of stealing

a proprietary list of hundreds of travel agents and customers.

Roper refuted those claims in a subsequent filing, and the case was settled in mediation, with neither party admitting wrongdoing.

Atlantis CEO Rich Campbell declined to comment.

As the legal fight mounted, Vacaya began investigating Hodgson and discovered that the court orders he used to get hired were in fact fake, according to the lawsuit. When Hodgson's lawyer was confronted with that news, Hodgson admitted that the documents were indeed forged, the lawsuit adds.

“Using the resources of his graphics design company, Phenix, your client's ability to forge documents seems to be limitless,” attorney Aaron Nichols wrote in a filing. “We can only imagine the documents your client and Phenix are in the process of creating ... to support the assertion that Defendant Roper was ‘complicit’ in your client's fraud.”

After Vacaya's discovery of forgery was presented to the court, Hodgson's earlier filed lawsuit was dismissed in February 2022. Vacaya's lawyers asked the court to enter sanctions against Hodgson and his lawyer, Thomas Barth.

The court concluded that monetary sanctions were appropriate based on Hodgson's “bad faith” assertion that Roper asked him to forge the court documents. The judge ordered Barth to pay \$28,555.67 and Hodgson to pay \$43,766.19 in January.

In a filing, Barth wrote that he was “ashamed of the impact of this ruling on my

family,” and assured the court that he would never “engage in any similar conduct in the future.”

Barth did not respond to a request for comment.

In his own request for relief from sanctions, Hodgson detailed his grim financial state, claiming that his tax return for 2020 showed no income and only \$55 in interest on his limited savings. He wrote that he works for Phenix printing company, which is owned by his mother, and does not receive a salary.

“I live in a house owned by my mother, and with very limited exceptions, I do not pay her anything for staying there. I use California Fresh (food stamp) entitlements of approximately \$197 per month for my food,” Hodgson wrote, adding that he had no health insurance, no life insurance and no car. He listed his checking account balance as of February 2022 as \$789.37 and his savings as \$74.03.

A rival LGBTQ travel business

While Hodgson battled his former employer in court, he was working to establish a rival LGBTQ+ travel business with Bennett and Vaughan.

Bennett rose to fame playing Lindsay Lohan’s love interest in the 2004 comedy “Mean Girls” and has since gone on to become a prominent gay influencer, television host and podcaster. In 2022 he starred in “The Holiday Sitter,” the first Hallmark movie to feature a gay couple.

Vaughan appeared on “The Amazing Race” and hosted the entertainment news show

“Celebrity Page.” The men were the first gay couple to appear on the cover of wedding magazine the Knot. In many social media posts, Bennett and Vaughan tout OUTbound, posting from gorgeous vacation spots around the world.

Hodgson said he was a fan of “The Amazing Race” and that he first met Vaughan after successfully recruiting him as the cruise director of Vacaya’s inaugural 2018 Provincetown cruise. A Facebook post written by Vaughan on Vacaya’s page during that cruise shows a picture of him and Bennett arm-in-arm with two other men.

“Hiya from VACAYA! Jaymes Vaughan here! The only thing better than being the cruise director for VACAYA’s inaugural cruise is getting to do it with my good friends, boyfriend, and new friends in tow!” the post reads.

Hodgson said he and Vaughan bonded over certain travel ideals: “The one thing we share is that we cringe a bit when the term ‘gay cruise’ comes up and immediately means circuit parties or drugs or some of the things that go on with other companies.”

OUTbound was created to combat that stereotype by being a safe space for LGBTQ+ travelers from all walks of life, said Hodgson.

In January Bennett and Vaughan were on the cover of Out Traveler. In the accompanying interview, which referred to them as a “gay power couple,” the men said the idea for OUTbound came to them during the pandemic lockdown.

“We were sitting around the house and itching to go somewhere,” Bennett said in the story. “We really wanted to see the world, but we wanted to do it with people that are

part of the LGBTQ+ community. We went down this road and OUTbound was born.”

The article notes, “They own the company, but it’s more than a business for these two. When you embark on an OUTbound cruise, you are booking time with Bennett and Vaughan themselves.”

Bennett and Vaughan, however, do not own OUTbound — or even have any financial stake in it, said Hodgson, although the option was always there for them should they choose it.

“My mother owns the company,” Hodgson said. “Jaymes and Jonathan and I say that we’re owners, and it’s part of the marketing. It’s part of the story. They are just wonderful, amazing people who want to see an LGBT company that isn’t circuit-party-oriented exist in our space. And it’s always been a very handshake deal.”

OUTbound LLC was founded in October 2020 in Elk Grove and lists Barth, Hodgson’s former lawyer, as its registered agent, according to records filed with the California Secretary of State. Hodgson’s mother, Fonda Lee Hodgson, is listed as the owner on Outbound’s seller of travel application (through Phenix, the same company Hodgson owned when he was convicted of fraud in 2013).

Fonda, 81, is not mentioned anywhere on the OUTbound website, although Hodgson said she loves owning the company and goes on many of the cruises.

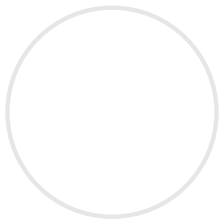
“She is an incredible supporter of our community & takes pride in the fact that she is contributing to building a safe space for those of us who don’t feel like we belong,” Hodgson wrote in an email.

OUTbound now is caught up in the legal fight between Hodgson and Vacaya.

In one motion for sanctions, Vacaya’s lawyer argues that Hodgson’s description of his dire financial state is belied by his activities as a co-founder of OUTbound. It notes that on social media Hodgson goes by the name “OUTbound Eric,” and since early 2021 has posted many videos to Facebook and Instagram showcasing his extensive travels with the company, including to Portugal, Egypt, Austria, France, Montenegro, Greece, Croatia, Mexico, Cambodia and Italy.

In an emotional interview, during which he broke down in tears several times, Hodgson conceded he only discussed his legal troubles with OUTbound’s Bennett and Vaughan in “broad strokes.”

“They’ve always been sympathetic,” he said. “They’ve never ever ever once pushed, they’ve never once demanded. ... It’s hard for me to talk about these things. Because this isn’t who I am. Nobody listens when I say, ‘Yes, I did the wrong thing. But it wasn’t a malicious intent.’ I got in over my head.”



Jessica Gelt

Jessica Gelt is an arts and culture writer for the Los Angeles Times.