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WELCOME TO ANOTHER EDITION OF RESPONSIBLE TRAVELLER.

In this edition we explore beyond South Africa's borders… we travel #LikeaLocal in Mauritius and continue our road trip into Botswana for a Chobe River experience, and then in Zambia we delve into the history and proud legacy of Chongwe River Lodge with award-winning writer Sharon Gilbert-Rivett. In Tanzania Warren Green reveals Lemala's untold story and the ethos behind their operation, and in Kenya I share why Lake Nakuru should be on your birding bucket-list.

Back in South Africa we go birding in the Berg River Region, plan a wildflower trip along the Cape West Coast, and spend time exploring beach, bush and berg in KwaZulu-Natal. We visit Makakatana Bay Lodge in the iSimangaliso Wetland Park and mFulaWozi Wilderness in Zululand and if that's not enough, we hike mountains for education at The Cavern in northern Drakensberg and learn how running the Pondo Trail Run makes a difference to local communities. Add to that some wonderful conservation success stories to inspire as well as interesting people to 'meet'…

But as always, the responsibility of being a responsible traveller lies ultimately with the person travelling and the choices they make. Remember to stay, shop, experience and 'eat local' and to search for off the beaten track experiences - many small businesses depend on you. This all goes a long way in helping to provide employment, contributing to the local economy, and making a difference in people's lives.

Enjoy the read… and be the difference.

Tessa

MAGAZINE INFORMATION

Edition 1- 2023

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RESPONSIBLE TRAVELLER PUBLISHED BY
Spotted Mongoose Media CC
(CK 2008/178482/23)

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COVER IMAGE:
Tropical Attitude, Mauritius
pic -Tessa Buhrmann

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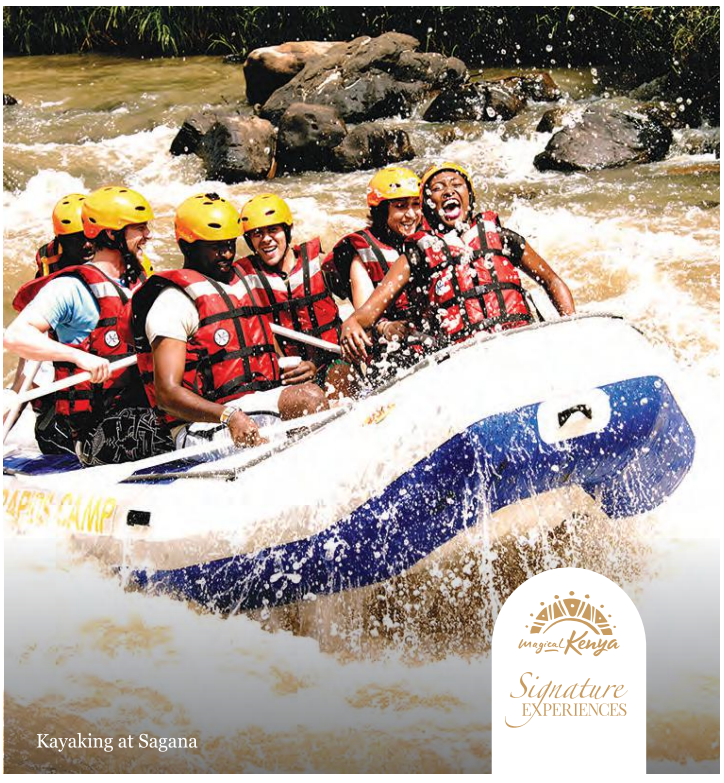

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Mauritius

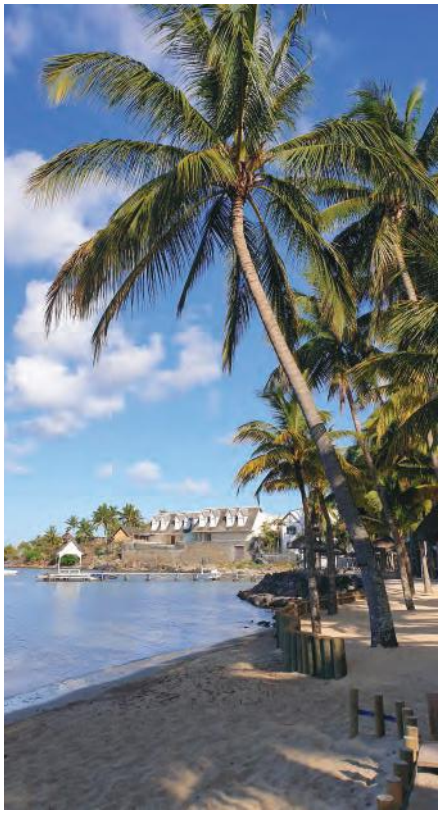
Words & pics - Tessa Buhrmann

to experience the best of a Mauritian holiday, be sure to do it 'like a local'

THE BEAUTIFUL ISLAND nation of Mauritius is a popular beach destination located off the east coast of Africa and surrounded by the warm tropical waters of the Indian Ocean. It is known for its stunning beaches, clear aquamarine waters, rich culture, and warm hospitality.

For those looking to experience the best of an authentic Mauritian holiday, be sure to do it 'like a local'.

We were a group of international travel industry professionals and media invited by Attitude Hotels, a Mauritian owned hotel chain, to experience Mauritius Like a Local, and to learn first-hand about their Positive Impact movement and their commitment to sustainability.



Our experience began at the Ravenala Attitude, situated on the north-west coast of Mauritius, and tucked between a river and the sea and surrounded by lush tropical gardens with soaring palm trees and a massive pool. It's a family friendly space but with enough space to escape to should the need arise. The long stretch of lagoon beach is perfect for early morning walks, sipping cocktails at sunset and about everything in between.

The rooms are spacious and well appointed with wonderfully comfortable beds – mine had a wonderful view through the lush

palm fronds onto the pool, whilst others have garden or sea views. Local scenes adorn the walls giving a distinct sense of place.

One of the highlights of the Ravenala Attitude is the dining experience. With a vast selection of restaurants to choose from, each with its own unique cuisine and atmosphere, you're certainly spoilt for choice. There are wonderful spaces and options for large groups and special occasions – as a group we enjoyed sushi at Lime, with its relaxed beachside vibe, partied the night away at Kot Nou with its classic Mauritian cuisine, reimagined as an event space with local musicians to entertain, and enjoyed the challenge of a fun cooking competition to see which group could make and present the best samosa, all under the watchful eye of exec chef Ravi Aukhaj.

A highlight from a previous visit was the invitation to dine with a local and enjoy an Otentik Dinner (authentic) in the home of one of their Family Members (the staff, almost all of whom are Mauritian, are very much part of the Attitude family). We were warmly welcomed the

home of Ved Bhujun, one of the Ravenala Attitude bartenders, and his family to share a home cooked traditional meal with them and to learn about their traditions – read about my experience HERE. An experience I would definitely recommend! (read about my experience **HERE**).

For the adventurous amongst us the Ravenala had plenty of activities to keep them entertained, with a range of water sports, including kayaking, snorkelling, and paddleboarding. Most however opted for relaxing at the sparkling pool or at the beach, cocktail in hand.

But for those of us who chose to just relax and unwind, the Ravenala Attitude spa, POZ offered the perfect ambiance with its tropical gardens and flowing waterfalls, and wonderful fragranced space. From the lemon grass fragranced cloth and deliciously cool lemon water to the Gran Mama massage with Moringa oil, geranium and neem, and tranquil relaxation

PREVIOUS PAGE: The pool and the beach at the Ravenala Attitude

THIS PAGE: Local street food at Taba-J ; group cooking competition; Mazaïk, the main restaurant at the Ravenala Attitude

space with healthy nibbles that followed, I felt as though all cares of the world had just vanished. The treatments, which include massages, body treatments and facials, are all designed to rejuvenate both body and soul done by highly trained therapists using locally made products and sporting the Made in Moris label.

Conservation is high on the priority list for Attitude Hotels so a visit to the Marine Discovery Centre located at the Lagoon Attitude was for me, essential. Nina Svensson Dubois, the scientific programme manager, shows us around and explains that in addition to being a valuable research centre and a resource for educating local kids about the importance of protecting the environment, it is also there to educate guests about their impact on the natural environment – and to experience the wonders of the ocean, which we get to experience first-hand. We head to the dive centre with

resident marine biologist Marine Malen to get kitted out with snorkel and fins before heading to the glass-bottom boat and out into the ocean. We slip into the warm water and head down, follow her on the snorkelling trail to discover the marine life beneath us. She points out the markers of the trail, the various

THIS PAGE: The Marine Discovery Centre at the Lagoon Attitude; Marine biologist Marine Malen

NEXT PAGE: Tropical Attitude; blue net bag for picking up rubbish

GUESTS CAN PICK UP A BLUE NET BAG BEFORE HEADING OUT SO AS TO PICK UP THE RUBBISH THEY FIND IN THE OCEAN

species of fish, coral, and other marine organisms as well as the threats facing the lagoon, such as overfishing, pollution, and climate change. Guests can also pick up a blue net bag before heading out so as to pick up the rubbish they find in the ocean and on the beaches – a small way to help keep Mauritius clean and our oceans garbage free.

In 2019, the newly renovated, Lagoon Attitude, became the first eco-committed hotel in the brand by going 100% plastic free – something they have subsequently rolled out in their other hotels.

Located on the shores of the beautiful Anse la Raie lagoon in the north of Mauritius, the adults only Lagoon Attitude offers guests not only an idyllic beachside location but the knowledge that all the environmental and social responsibility boxes have been ticked.

After a morning of snorkelling what could be better than some time relaxing in the sea and the sun, with a little barbeque lunch on the side. After exploring the fabulous Zilwa Attitude we made our way to the jetty for a quick ride across to the exclusive island of Gran Zil. The smoky aroma of seafood, fish and chicken cooking over the coals greeted us on arrival, and a quick inspection indicated that there would be time for some sun and a quick dip in the ocean.

I was soon helping myself to all the deliciousness of an island barbeque accompanied by salads, bread, and a glass of chilled litchi wine – yep, you read correctly, Takamaka Boutique Winery create a range of beautiful wines suitable for any occasion. Their off-dry lychee Aquarel wine paring wonderfully with barbequed seafood. Sitting at wooden tables under shelter while a brief shower cooled the air, eating off enamelware with my wine in a tin mug, felt ever so authentic. It's what one would do on the beach as a local.

Zilwa Attitude, also located on the north coast of Mauritius, is the only Attitude hotel to be built from scratch and was designed by award winning Mauritian architect Jean-Marc Eynaud. Zilwa (Creole for 'islander') is inspired by traditional Mauritian homes and seaside bungalows - there are even Creole riddles on the bedroom walls, and it offers a relaxed, rustic chic style that fits perfectly with its beach location. In addition to offering guests a

THIS PAGE: Coconut juice at Gran Zil; chilling in the hammocks; barbeque lunch being prepared

NEXT PAGE: The stunning views at the Paradise Cove Boutique Hotel

fabulous beach destination, it offers unique ways to experience the island's traditional way of life with a range of cultural activities and experiences, including the opportunity to explore local fishing villages and markets.

From lunch on a secluded island one day, it was breakfast at the romantic adults only Paradise Cove Boutique Hotel the next - its secluded location and intimate atmosphere, perfect for a romantic getaway. Whilst not owned by Attitude Hotels, they manage it so it has the same attention to sustainable detail that one would expect from the brand.

Walking beneath towering palms, past a picturesque lagoon and along a wooden walkway lined with bougainvillea we head towards a beautiful peninsula jutting out into the ocean.

The restaurant, aptly named Peninsula, with its stunning ocean views and elegant decor, was the perfect place to enjoy brunch, the buffet featuring an array of freshly prepared dishes, including a selection of tropical fruit, pastries, cold cuts, cheeses, and a variety of hot dishes. All washed down with a glass of bubbly or a tropical cocktail while taking in the stunning ocean views and being serenaded by the rich, mellow sound of a saxophone.

Attitude Hotels' ethos of good for the environment, the local

WE VISIT THE SUCCESSFUL MARKET GARDENING BUSINESS OWNED AND RUN BY MAYAVEN POINEN AND HIS LOVELY WIFE

economy and good for the local community is epitomised with our visit a bit later to MP Green Life, a market gardening business owned and run by Mayaven Poinen and his lovely wife.

He has always loved growing vegetables he tells us, but wasn't always a farmer, instead for decades he worked as a bus driver. But all that changed with a new government scheme to aid small businesses - the problem was that he needed to already have a market. A conversation with Attitude Hotels has, seven years later, resulted in a successful family business

supplying them fresh fruit and vegetables. A business that not only enables him to employ a team of ten but now includes a network of other farmers that he sources from – and when there is an excess of a particular fruit, say pineapples, he chats to the chefs and see if they can adjust their menus to suit. A win-win for all.

We are privileged to lunch at the privately owned historic Chateau de la Villebague, built in 1740 in the French colonial architecture, on the very first sugar estate in Mauritius - the ruins of one of the first sugar mills can be seen nearby. Walking through the traditional sugar plantation residence its architecture and heritage clearly evident with its traditional furniture and décor – complete with a rear staircase for the 'staff,' I am grateful that times have changed, and social justice and democracy is no longer something we have to fight for quite as fervently.

From rum tasting on arrival, and an elegant picnic under the trees to delightful conversations and the lyrical sound of a violin, followed by a stroll through the expansive garden that's a wonderful showcase of Mauritian biodiversity.

The rolling hills of sugar cane fields are testament to its importance for the growth of this island nation, and witness to its cultural diversity by way of the thousands of indentured labourers that arrived from India to work in the plantations – in addition to those brought in as slaves, thankfully slavery in Mauritius was abolished in 1835. We drive through quaint little villages, past volcanic stone walls adorned with the purple blooms of bougainvillea, avenues of flamboyant trees heaving under the weight of their bright orange blossoms and roadside traders selling watermelons and litchis. I smile as I see the name of a streetside restaurant – Roti Dholl Puri Chez Nous, the cultural diversity of this wonderful country summed up in a name.

PREVIOUS PAGE: Inside the one of the tunnels; Mrs Mayaven

THIS PAGE: Chateau de la Villebague; a picnic lunch in the expansive gardens

We drive along the quiet beach road separating the stunning Belle Mare beach, said to one of the most beautiful in Mauritius, and the Sunrise Attitude, our home for a couple of nights. I loved its contemporary design and lush tropical gardens, my lovely room overlooking the pool and lagoon on one side and fields and hills on the other, offering a gorgeous sunset view.

A beach party beckoned and tossing my shoes aside I delight in the feel of soft sand between my toes, and the chilled bubbly in my glass. As one would expect, it was a beach party Mauritius style, with local band and Sega dancers, a bonfire and traditional savoury snacks, my favourite being the bhajas, vegetable fritters made with chickpea flour. As the evening progressed the beach party became a pool party, with more Mauritian deliciousness.

An early morning Secret Sunrise session blew away the evening's cobwebs with each of us donning headphones and dancing away in apparent silence – it took me out of my comfort zone, but hey, isn't that what travel is all about?

Moving on from a fun hour or so on the beach, I had the opportunity to enjoy a delicious breakfast at the main restaurant, whose offering of gluten-free crepes had me going back for more. I cheekily asked for the recipe – chef told me that it's a regular recipe but made with rice flour, milk and egg.

No visit to the east coast of Mauritius would be complete without a visit to the popular Flacq Market, a vibrant and bustling hub of local culture and commerce, located in the heart of Flic-en-Flacq.

From fresh fruit and vegetables to handmade crafts and souvenirs, the market is a one-stop-shop for everything you need to experience the local

PREVIOUS PAGE: Belle Mare beach opposite the Sunrise Attitude

THIS PAGE: The pool and main restaurant at the Sunrise Attitude; Kot Nou dining; Secret Sunrise on the beach

culture and flavour - the sheer diversity goods, and people, was astounding.

I walk through the crowded aisles, there are vendors of all ages and backgrounds, selling everything from locally grown spices to handmade jewellery. The stalls piled high with colourful fruits and vegetables, the air filled with the scent of exotic spices and freshly baked bread. Everywhere you turn, there's something new and exciting to discover. From fresh produce and handmade crafts to street food vendors selling everything from samosas, dholl puri (which I'm told is the perfect remedy for a hangover

THESE PAGES: The colours and vibrancy of the Flacq Market is evident in the assorted produce on sale

Pic - Wikimedia

THE STALLS ARE PILED HIGH WITH COLOURFUL FRUITS AND VEGETABLES, THE AIR FILLED WITH THE SCENT OF EXOTIC SPICES AND FRESHLY BAKED BREAD

– not that I needed one), and gateaux piments, all made fresh and served piping hot, as well as vendors selling freshly made coconut water and refreshing sugarcane juice. A wonderful way to while away the morning while taking in local Mauritian culture and supporting the local economy.

Another way that Attitude supports the local economy is with their Otentik Bazars aka laboutik. They are a dedicated space for local artisans and entrepreneurs to display their wares and is also the best place to buy authentic Mauritian craft, local designer clothes and souvenirs whilst supporting the local economy - 100% of the profits go back to the local makers of the products that stock the shelves. In addition to this the Spa Poz uses locally made products, the tea bar, or in local Creole, 'Teabaz', is stocked with local tea from Corzon, also a Made in Moris certified label.

But enough retail therapy, the beach beckoned. Sunrise Attitude has a section of beach where you can lounge on the sand and enjoy the stunning views and the warm waters of the Indian Ocean. Not one for sunning myself I walk along the beach… kids swim in the shallows others make sandcastles; men tend their fishing boats and young boys' fish off the rocks.

I head to the Flight SA 295 Memorial, a monument erected by South African Airways in memory of the passengers and crew that lost their lives when the Helderberg SA 295 crashed into the ocean off Belle Mare beach on November 28, 1987. The sadness of the memorial lifted by the sound of music and families having fun beneath the casuarina trees that line this stretch of beach. The island's volcanic origins clearly evident by a fort-like structure nearby, a crevice in its aged volcanic stone walls offering a growing space to a wild fig tree.

A variety of activities are on offer to keep guests entertained: from kayaking, paddleboarding, or snorkelling in the lagoon to opportunities to experience the local culture – download the Otentik App and explore nearby Belle Mare or join in on the weekly walk through the neighbouring fields for insight into the life of a market gardener.

INCLUDED IN OUR OCEAN EXPERIENCE IS A VISIT TO THE BEAUTIFUL ILE AUX CERFS, WITH ITS WHITE SANDY BEACHES, LUSH VEGETATION AND INVITING SEA

With a week of much exploration and activity we were pretty much 'partied out,' so when the offer of a day on a catamaran was offered, we jumped at the opportunity! Costumes on and sunblock applied, we head out aboard a luxury catamaran, the sun warm, the scenery stunning and the sea an azure blue. On-tap Mauritian craft beer and soft drinks accompany the besan (also known as murukku), a

PREVIOUS PAGE: Catamaran cruise on the ocean

THIS PAGE: Enjoying the sunshine; local Phoenix beer; Mauritian Dodo flip-flops on board

deep-fried Indian snack made with gram flour.

We pause to slip on fins and snorkel and slip into the warm, clear sea to go snorkelling, but in truth it was the opportunity to cool off that was most welcome. Back on-board we enjoy a traditional barbeque and salads for lunch.

Included in our ocean experience is a visit to the beautiful island Ile aux Cerfs, with its white sandy beaches, lush vegetation, and inviting sea. I laze on the beach for a while, enjoy a cooling dip in the sea and head off to explore a little of this tiny island. It's a popular spot with both tourists and locals so you're never really alone – local guides offer all manner of water sports, the most popular it seems being the parasailing. As we head back to our 'mother ship,' I watch brightly coloured parasails fill the sky.

On our slow cruise back to mainland Mauritius I sit, sun-kissed and happy, and reflect on our wonderful week. I sip on my refillable, reusable Dopper water bottle, which we were all presented with on arrival, and consider the cumulative effect of Attitudes' Positive Impact movement, and realise that it goes beyond what one sees on the surface – a hotel group offering a fabulous holiday experience.

But to one that really makes a difference in so many ways, both to the environment, to the local community and to the sustainability of the Mauritian economy. Definitely a win-win for all!

Don and Mame behind the bar at Sunrise Attitude

people

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Q&A with Vincent Desvaux de Marginy, Deputy CEO, Attitude Hotels

Q&A with Vincent Desvaux de Marginy

Deputy CEO, Attitude Hotels

Before we get into talking about Attitude Hotels specifically, can you share with me where your personal journey into sustainability began?

Growing up on Mauritius I spent much of my childhood in or on the ocean and I love sailing. It was on a visit to the beautiful islands of the St Brandon archipelago, that I realized how important conservation and environmental sustainability is. The beaches of these largely unpopulated islands were covered in plastic, much of it from Asia brought in by the ocean currents. We saw turtles and birds suffering from this plastic. We tried every time we visited to remove as much as we could, but it was a losing battle. This is what started my desire to go plastic free, an ethos that we have proudly incorporated into Attitude Hotels.

So, let's backtrack to when the Attitude brand was launched. Was sustainability always going to play an important part of the Brand?

Before we launched the Attitude brand, we spent time fine tuning the positioning of the brand. We knew it was crucial for a new brand in the hospitality industry in Mauritius to care about sustainability. When I talk about sustainability is not only about the environment, but the total sustainability ecosystem, which is obviously our people, our country, and our communities. So, from day one the DNA of the brand was to progress in this direction.

Obviously, it happens step by step, but always having this foundation of sustainability in mind.

We started by developing the people, then we developed experiences around the Mauritian way of life and then our work with the local communities, all this developed around the concept of localism.

From the beginning this philosophy was part of the DNA and foundation of the brand, and as we open new doors with new opportunities, we get deeper into the philosophy of sustainability as our long-term tourism goal. This is why we launched our Positive Impact movement, where we decided to have all our hotels single use plastic free, which is worldwide quite a major step. The movement also encourages and educates guests to actively choose responsible travel.

How does operating sustainability impact on the profitability of the Attitude brand?

As a family-based company, and talking with Jean-Michel Pitot, Attitude Hotels CEO, and the representative of the owner and from the family, we said that money and making a profit is not a direct objective, but it would be the result of this commitment to sustainability. As a well-managed organization when we talk about sustainability, financial sustainability is key, but we don't put that as our forefront objective, we put that as the end result of a good and well managed strategy.

From 2010, when we really started promoting the brand and its DNA, we moved to being what we today call a purpose company, and this opened us to new areas, and new thinking, to develop further and to have stronger pillars in our brand.

Your people are an integral part of your brand, can you share some insight into this please?

Yes, our employees are our family members and are an important part of the Attitude team, with 98% of whom are Mauritian. We have a trust-relationship within our Attitude family, and we are committed to seeing them happy and growing in their careers and their lives. In addition to their salaries, our family members become part of a profit-sharing scheme, where they can earn an extra percentage of their salary, based on the results of each individual hotel.

I noticed that you support local artisans and craft in your gift shops and experiences. Can you tell me more please?

Many curios found in the regular shops are imported, often made in China, so we have committed to transforming all our shops in authentic bazaars stocking only locally made products and handicraft. In this way our guests can buy local products and support the local community. We don't make any profit from these suppliers, so everything they get is profit for them. We just source the goods and display them in our authentic bazaars. We also have a fund to help support local entrepreneurs, but they have to be producing products in line with Attitude's philosophy and values. For example, we have a business that is making chemical-free sunblock that doesn't damage coral reefs.

Culture and art are also very important to us, and part of our sustainability is to showcase local musicians and artists at our hotels.

From a food perspective, how do you manage to support local when you are a small island and obviously rely on imports to a certain extent?

We have to be clever, and we have to produce and grow what we can here in Mauritius. And where products are not grown in Mauritius, or not produced in Mauritius, we encourage people to produce what we need, such as herbs and vegetables, so that we can short circuit the need for imports.

We use seasonal vegetables, and our chefs adapt our menu to what is available locally. It goes back to the value chain, and this has forced us to work in a very transversal environment where we are sustainable as well as customer centric. And obviously behind this customer centricity, there's this focus on sustainability.

It's back to the why chose Norwegian salmon when you can have fresh from the ocean dorado!

Exactly, it's about training our people as well as educating our guests. We have a fantastic food culture in Mauritius with people from many ethnicities, and our Mauritian cuisine is a fusion of tastes that we have encapsulated to the European taste. It is something to be celebrated.

As a company, how do you measure your level of sustainability?

As a purpose driven company, and when we launched our Positive Impact movement, we knew we needed to measure what we were doing, and B Corp certification offered us the most comprehensive system to measure our social and environmental impact. B Corp gives you a structure to measure in tangible terms the impact of being a purpose driven company.

What I mean by that, as a quick example, is that by having sustainability written into our company business plan, when we meet at executive board level management can see our specific objectives and make decisions accordingly. It takes us from just making declarations about our sustainability to being accountable to our purpose driven philosophy and helps us prove it in a tangible manner.

I know that one of your key pillars is to 'support local', how do you go about this?

From the start we have committed to employing locally, purchasing locally as much as possible, and sharing our local Mauritian culture. We are proud that since 2019 all of our hotels have been accredited with the Made in Moris label, a label that authenticates the Mauritian roots of a product.

The Made in Moris label fits in with our objectives to promote Mauritian culture, prioritizing our island's businesses and valuing our fellow citizens. And in this we have committed that 50% of our procurement must be locally produced, and when we have to import, we do so through locally owned businesses. We also encourage our suppliers to be plastic free. And we cannot avoid the plastic we partner with local businesses that recycle and turn the plastic into pellets for reuse. We also make use of upcycled products where we can.

It must be difficult from a procurement perspective as plastic is such a 'go-to' for packaging, so how do overcome this with your suppliers?

We can do many things without using single use plastic and are developing an ecosystem where we engage with our suppliers and partners as well as local communities to be free of single use plastic by educating them and helping them choose alternative options. By working together to go single use plastic free, we are able to deliver a better experience for our guests.

How do you get this plastic free message across to your guests?

When they come to our property, they must experience it. An example being that we also give our guests a reusable water bottle when they arrive that they can refill at the water stations found throughout the properties. And by having our bulk shops, where we stock local products in bulk and guests come to get their coffee, tea and anything else in small jars instead of supplying them in plastic in the rooms. This also enables us to engage with our guests as they start asking questions.

It is about how we do this journey together. Our guests have a fantastic holiday, we get to operate sustainably, our employees grow and develop, and on another level, we create more value from a shareholder perspective, which is not the priority, but the result. And with this philosophy the owners will tend to even put more money into the business. It becomes a sustainability cycle, which is very exciting. The more we see, the more we can do, and the bigger difference we can make.

It's the big question, it's the 'why' to you being in the hospitality business…

It is the big question. Why are we in hospitality? Why are we in the hospitality business in Mauritius? The question seems very simple, but when you act on your why, you push it to the next level. It's a process that we are in. There are a lot of other hospitality companies out there whose why is 'how can we make the most money out of this'? But we say, 'how can we do better'? For us, our why is key and something on which we are actually working. We have always had the basic answers, but now we are working towards more structured answers and from those answers we will derive a fine-tuned strategy for the way forward. So, this is exactly where we are now.

You mentioned the plan to expand the Attitude brand to Africa, can you tell me more?

It's back to our why. Why should we? Should we go to Zanzibar, for example? I mean, there are already hotel groups there, but we said if we go there, we have to have a purpose for doing so. Helping the local communities, bringing, for example, an education project we are working on with a top international hotel school. If we bring that along with us, then we know that Attitude can bring something else to the destination, something that will benefit the local communities.

For us, it's not the operation that will be the key success factor, it's the integration of our brand within the local communities. We are looking at buying an existing property and transforming it into something that fits our brand. This will have less of a carbon impact, especially as we will be able to build lightly as Zanzibar doesn't experience the cyclones that we do in Mauritius.

There's new thinking and we are open to the opportunity to do things differently, but in a structured way and sustainable manner.

In addition to your potential expansion plans into Africa, where do you see the Attitude journey going in the future?

So, I think it's a journey where every day we walk, there's new lights in front of us and now we have to make the choice of which is the best life to continue on. And for the company going forward, we need to keep the soul of all that we are. We have a great team of people who genuinely believe in our philosophy and the Attitude DNA.

And it comes back to the origin of the company where we said we want to be a strong brand, a very human-related and sustainable brand. It's our origin but we continue to take it to the next level. So, they're very exciting times and with opportunities to strengthen the brand fervor and become a more sustainable brand for our people, for our suppliers, and for our partners. Sometimes people think we are crazy, but I think life needs to be a bit of crazy. And fun!

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Chobe Safari Lodge - pic supplied

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On the road again to...

Chobe Safari Lodge

Sedudu Bar overlooking the Chobe River
Pic - Chobe Safari Lodge

Words - Tessa Buhrmann
Pics - Tessa & Daryl Buhrmann
additional pics Chobe Safari Lodge

CHOBE SAFARI LODGE is a premier safari destination located on the banks of the magnificent Chobe River and sharing its border with the Chobe Game Reserve… and we were on our way there!

We left Nata Lodge bright and early, having spent the previous day exploring the Nata Bird Sanctuary and the Makgadikgadi salt pans (read it **HERE**) We headed towards Kasane on the A33, the main route between the Zambian border at the Kazungula Bridge and Martin's Drift, the border crossing across the Limpopo into South Africa.

Still dodging potholes and watching out for heavy vehicles we passed several small settlements and villages, with goats and a few cattle a common sight. I was amazed at the extensive agriculture around Pandamatenga, the soil rich and the crops lush. We slowed awhile to watch three Southern ground hornbills forage between rows of what appeared to be potatoes.

The closer we got to Kasane, the more wildlife we saw; giraffe nibbling on acacia leaves on our left, buffalo wallowing in a pan off to our right, a snake eagle hovering above and a couple of large elephants on the roadside. A front-scrunched white SUV, with a smashed windscreen, lay haphazardly to one side. A sobering exclamation mark to the many 'don't drive at night' warnings we had received.

Nothing beats that first glimpse of the Chobe River as it snakes its way through the verdant

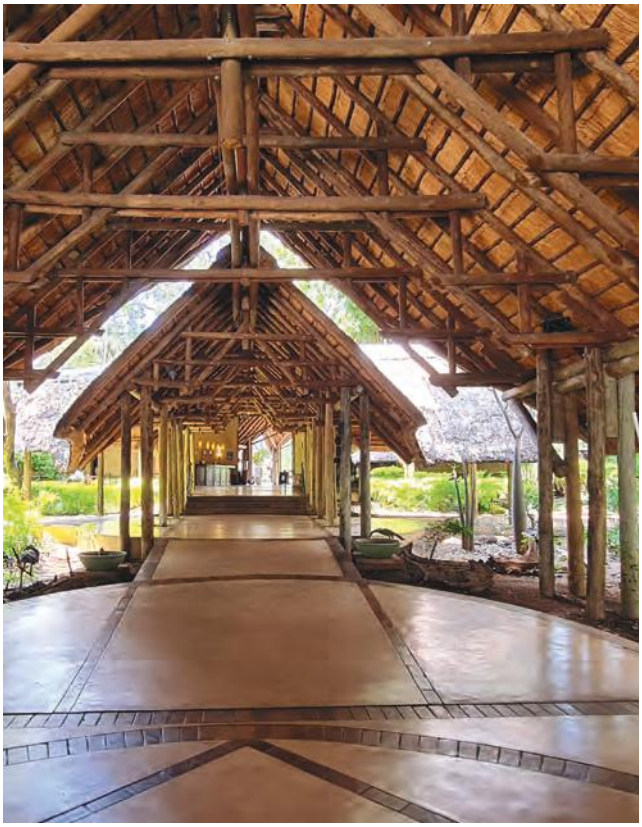
riverine bush and floodplain, the occasional tree and splashes of white water visible as it picked up speed over rocky sections. We drive through the small town of Kasane, the gateway to all things Chobe, and the point (kind-of) where four African countries meet – Botswana, Namibia, Zambia and Zimbabwe – making it a major transport hub for the region.

And at the very end of the main road that runs through Kasane we arrive at the luxurious, yet affordable, Chobe Safari Lodge…

The Chobe River is calling, and with a welcome drink in hand, we make our way to the deck for our first real view of the Chobe River. We pause a while enjoying the welcome shade and appreviating the breeze off the river, which runs slow and deep with views across to the Caprivi floodplain. The barman sees me gazing into the depths and tells me, almost reverently, about the huge resident croc that lives beneath the deck… he also tells me that this spot with its river backdrop is known as the best selfie spot on the Chobe.

An early lunch at the main restaurant is called for and we choose a spot overlooking the river. We check out the menu. My hubby opts for the pan-fried Chobe whole bream, and I choose the sesame sprinkled chicken salad… but I'm intrigued by the Seswaa, a meat dish considered by some to be the national dish of Botswana and decide in advance what my choice for dinner that evening would be. A great choice, as it turned out to be absolutely delicious!

Before going on a walk-about of the extensive property we pop into the main booking office to confirm our afternoon boat cruise – it's here that guests can book their safari game drives, an excursion to the fabulous Kazungula Bridge as well as day trips to Victoria Falls, amongst other activities.



THIS PAGE: The entrance to Chobe Safari Lodge; the obligatory bar deck photo

NEXT PAGE: The river facing safari suites; Bedroom and bathroom of our suite; drinks on the banks of the Chobe

Chobe Safari Lodge offers a range of luxurious accommodations to suit different preferences and budgets. We were booked into a safari suite, with its balcony views over the lush lawn and Chobe River, king-size bed, and luxuriously appointed bathroom, all set within a spacious open-plan design. But I was keen to see what other options were available…

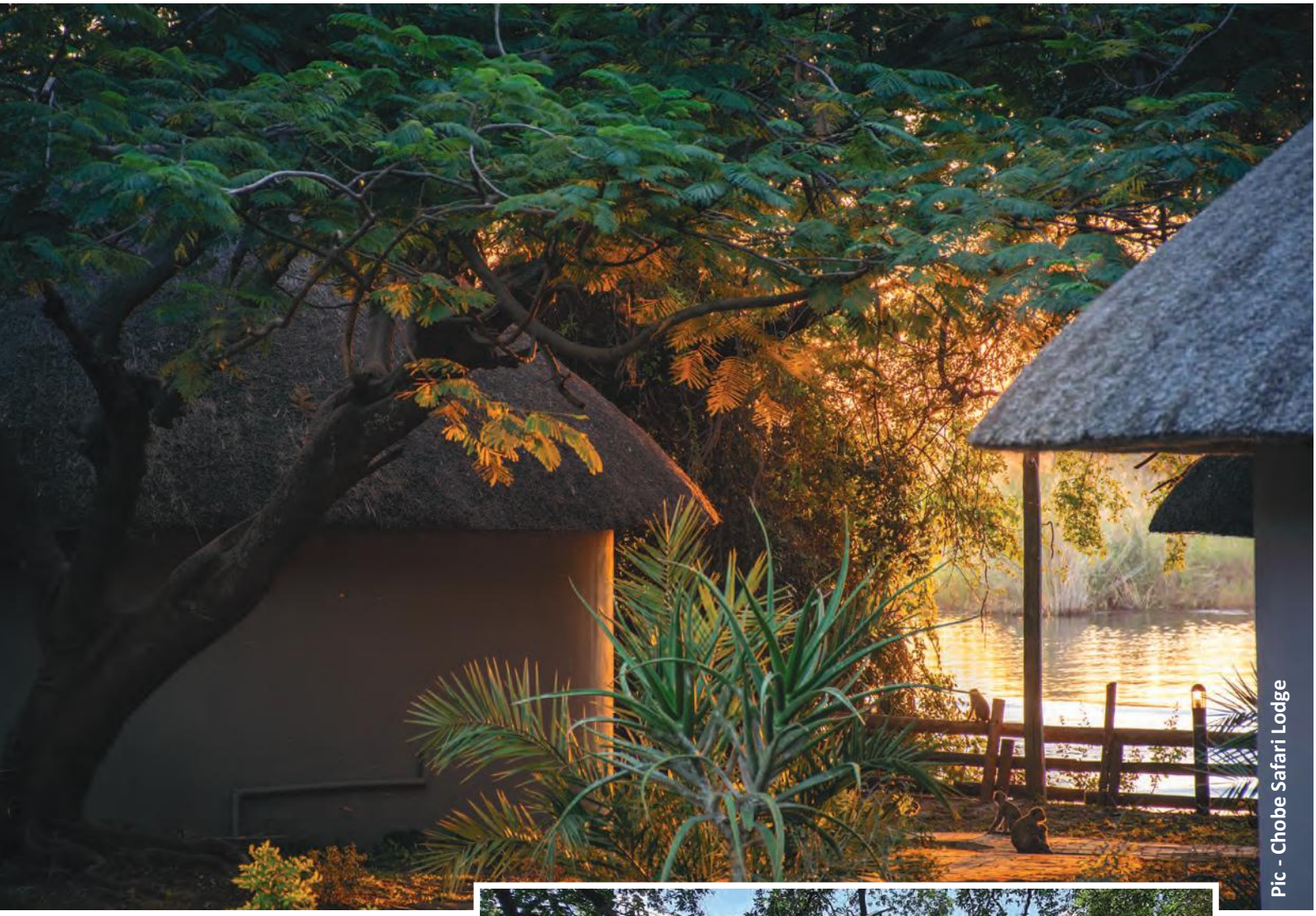
The river-facing rooms are located closest to the main lodge area making them ideal for guests preferring the close proximity of facilities - they were undergoing refurbishment at the time of our visit, and would soon be sporting sleek and more modern attire. A huge wild fig tree overhangs the glistening pool, we walk along the wooden deck, enjoying the mottled sunshine created by the canopy of trees overhead.

The classic rondavels are the original rooms of the lodge and

Pic - Chobe Safari Lodge

Safari Suite pics - Chobe Safari Lodge

A HUGE WILD FIG TREE OVERHANGS THE GLISTENING POOL, WE WALK ALONG THE WOODEN DECK, ENJOYING THE MOTTLED SUNSHINE CREATED BY THE CANOPY OF TREES OVERHEAD



Pic - Chobe Safari Lodge

date back to the 1960s and are perched in close proximity to the edge of the river. Now lovingly restored, these thatch dwellings are spacious and comfortable with en-suite bathrooms in keeping with the style of Chobe Safari Lodge. I must admit to feeling a a spot of accommodation envy and looked longingly at the directors' chairs on the small veranda and could see myself sitting with binocs in hand, watching the river came to life at sunrise.

For those unfamiliar with the term rondavel, it is a traditional round hut or house with a thatched roof, and it is a common architectural style in many parts of southern Africa.

We popped into neighbouring Chobe Bush Lodge for a quick peek. The rooms have the same open-plan elegant design, but instead of river views the overlook the Chobe Game Reserve. I imagined myself game viewing from the comfort of the terrace… the rest of the lodge with its stylish modern décor that

THIS PAGE: The rondavels at sunset; the boats ready for our afternoon cruise

NEXT PAGE: Hippos, crocodile and elephants from the boat

spoke of Africa without being over the top had me planning another visit to this remarkable region. And we hadn't even slept a night yet!

But there was no time to linger as the renowned Chobe Safari Lodge boat cruise beckoned.
We had been told that the Chobe River was one of the most scenic waterways in Africa, offering breath-taking views of the surrounding wilderness the opportunity of seeing elephants, hippos, crocodiles, and other wildlife as they come to the water's edge to drink and bathe. A previous visit for me had proved this true, but it was a delight seeing the look of wonder on my hubby's face as we cruised along the river.

There are several different boat cruise options to suit different preferences and schedules. The morning and afternoon cruises are the most popular, but there are also sunset cruises that offer

Pic - Chobe Safari Lodge

a magical view of the African sunset over the river. We had opted for the afternoon cruise as I wanted to get back in time to catch sunset from the Sedudu Sunset Bar located in the Chobe Safari Lodge campsite grounds… which are a great option for those inclined to roughing it a bit.

The boat, with its comfortable seating and an upstairs viewing platform ensured that we would have the best possible views of the wildlife and scenery, and the onboard restrooms and refreshments ensured our comfort throughout the cruise.

Not that there was much time to worry about comfort, because as soon as we got going Isaac our knowledgeable guide, with over 20 years of experience on the Chobe, had us enthralled from the moment we left the shore.

He had us appreciating the amazing camouflage of a young water monitor on a tree stump, the long yellow wattles of a white-crowned lapwing and the iridescent turquoise of a woodland kingfisher, all the while sharing valuable insights into the flora and fauna of the region. We watch hippo graze in the shallows of an island, while an African jacana flits across waterlilies and a little egret peck for insects.

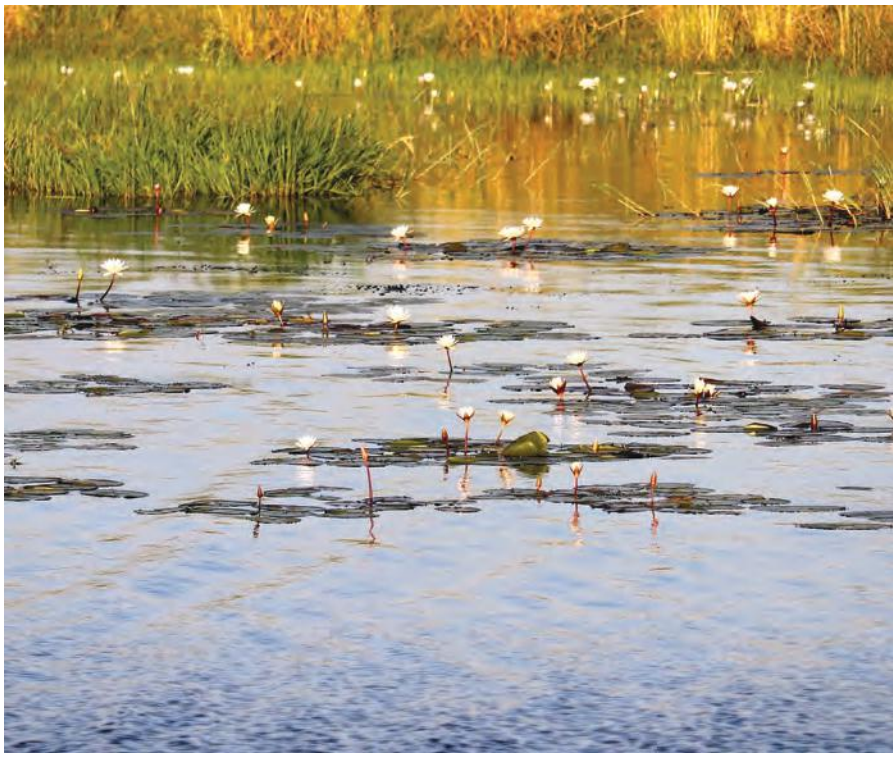
Isaac spots a small herd of elephants in the distance; they walk purposefully past a herd of impala, intent on their destination. Making an educated guess, or more than likely from his years of experience, we change course to get closer to where they are heading… we pause for a large crocodile, its mouth open and teeth bared – not in aggression, but as a cooling mechanism, which I'm sure would have changed in a blink if it thought we would be a tasty meal.

We arrive at Isaac's chosen destination for a close-up view of the elephants, and with a young one in tow, they purposely walk past not even giving us much of a glance. In the distance Isaac point out another elephant – he's large and clearly following them. 'One of the females must be in oestrus' Isaac tells us, a fact that becomes evident as the large, and clearly amorous, male strides past.

The Chobe River is also home to a diverse range of bird species, and gliding along the river, Isaac points out the different bird species and provide insights into their behaviour and habitat. We meander slowly past the islands; Isaac explains that some of them would be submerged soon with the rising water levels. But for

PREVIOUS PAGE: Islands on the Chobe; our guide, Isaac

THIS PAGE: (clockwise) African jacana; hippo feasting; yellow-billed oxpecker; reed cormorant



THIS PAGE: Penty of water lilies; young elephant; white-crowned lapwing

NEXT PAGE: African fish eagle; buffalo on the water's edge

now they were the ideal spot for ticking off more species on our growing bird list…

A water thick-knee bathes on the edge and an African darter perches on an exposed tree stump as it dries its wings, its long slender neck the reason for its nickname of snakebird. A flock of pygmy geese take off in alarm as we round a corner of an island, and a reed cormorant stands in readiness to catch an unsuspecting fish as it swims past. We unexpectantly see what we think could be a Curlew sandpiper, and delight at the sighting of a long-toed lapwing and even a squacco heron.

I was hoping we would see African skimmers, the tern-like bird with their distinctive bright red-orange bill, the upper mandible being shorter than the lower, a characteristic that enables them to feed by skimming the water to scoop up small fish. Isaac explains that they arrive in the Chobe around mid-year when the river's sandbanks become exposed and move north again after breeding and once the water levels once again start rising early in the new year. They are a big birding tick, one that we'll just have to come back for to achieve.

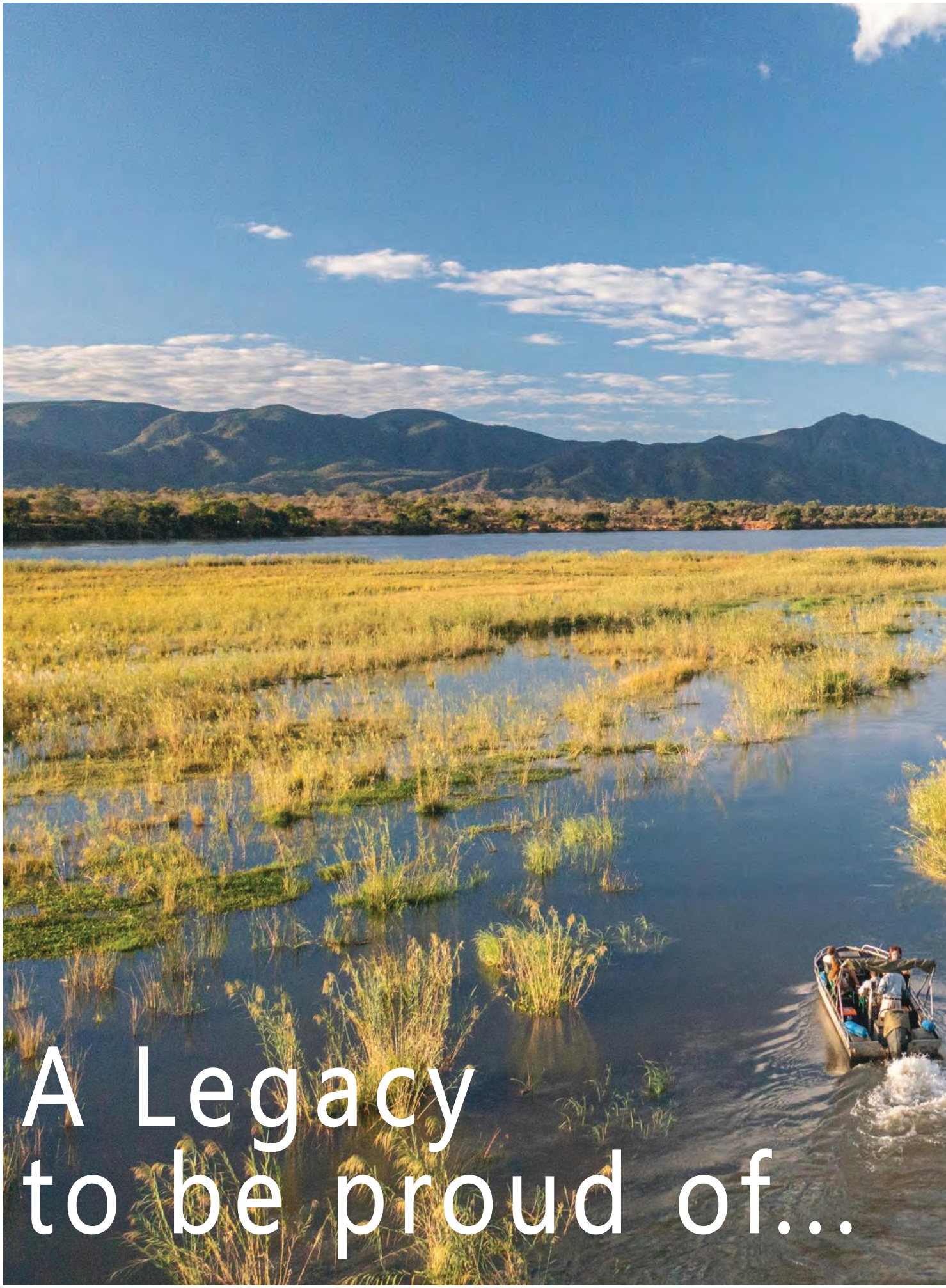
Buffalo graze on the water's edge as yellow-billed oxpeckers feast, an African fish eagle perches on a branch of an overhanging tree, before taking off gracefully then delighting us with its characteristic call – we were hoping for the iconic fish-catching moment, but to no avail. A flock of white-faced whistling ducks fly low over an island bordered by water lilies, and Egyptian geese strut along oblivious of their surroundings. Giant, malachite, and pied kingfisher are soon

added to the list, as is the pretty wire-tailed swallow.

And just when we think it can't get any better, Isaac says 'puku', pointing towards an island on our right. Not seeing anything we rush to the upper deck for a better view, and there she is, almost hidden from view in the long grass, she allows us a fleeting view and a not-so-great photograph. But I am happy to see this wonderful near-threatened antelope even if just for a moment. The puku is found only in wet grasslands in southern Democratic Republic of Congo, Namibia, Tanzania, Zambia and the floodplains of the Chobe River.

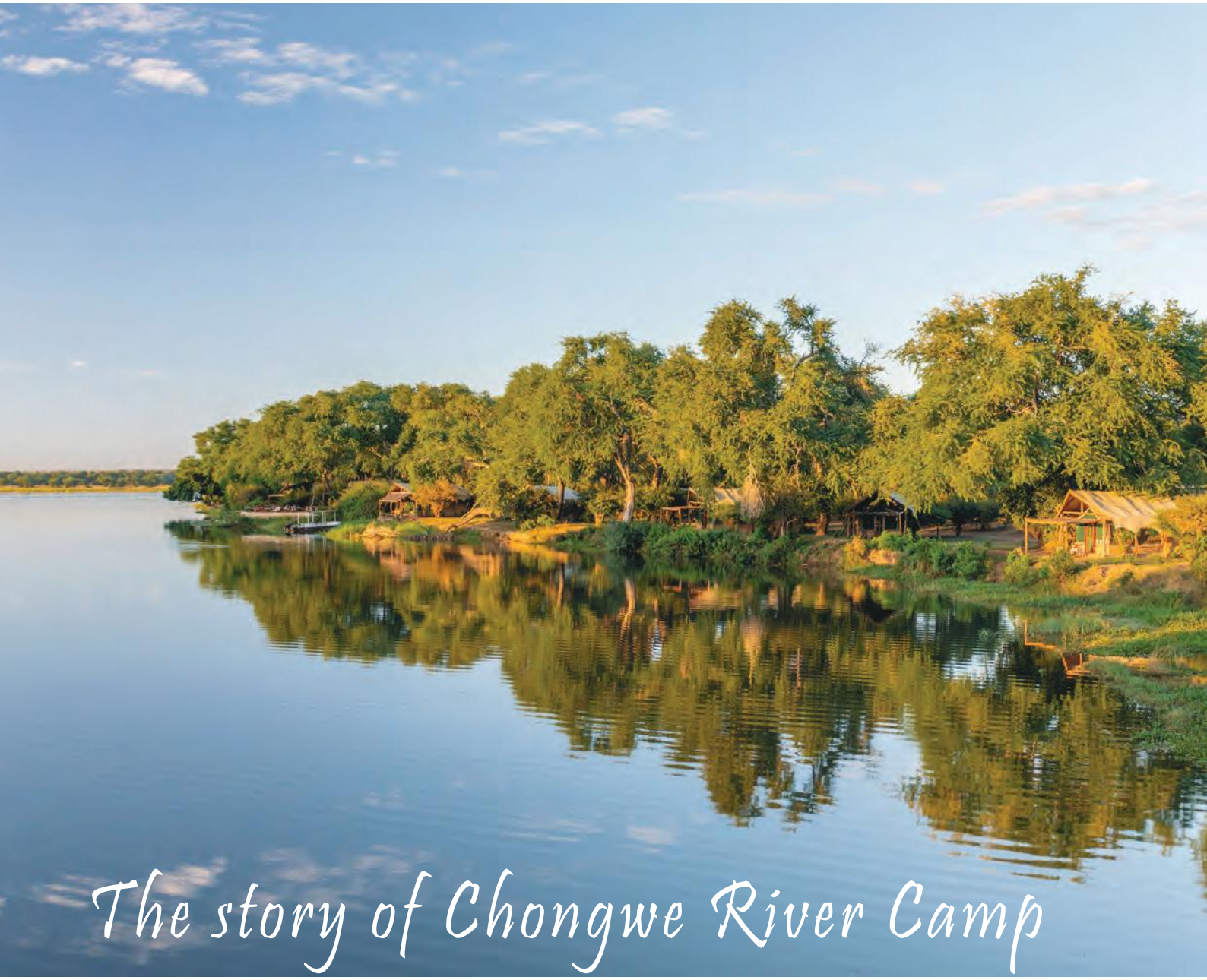
We arrive back at the lodge as the colour of the sky softens to a milky blue and the horizon, tinged pink… just in time to hurry to the Sedudu Bar - the anticipation of a chilled G&T and another African sunset just the motivation we needed.

BUFFALO GRAZE AT THE WATER'S EDGE AS YELLOW-BILLED OXPECKERS FEAST, AN AFRICAN FISH EAGLE PERCHES ON A BRANCH



A Legacy to be proud of...

Words - Sharon Gilbert-Rivett
Pics - Sharon Gilbert-Rivett & Time + Tide Africa



The story of Chongwe River Camp

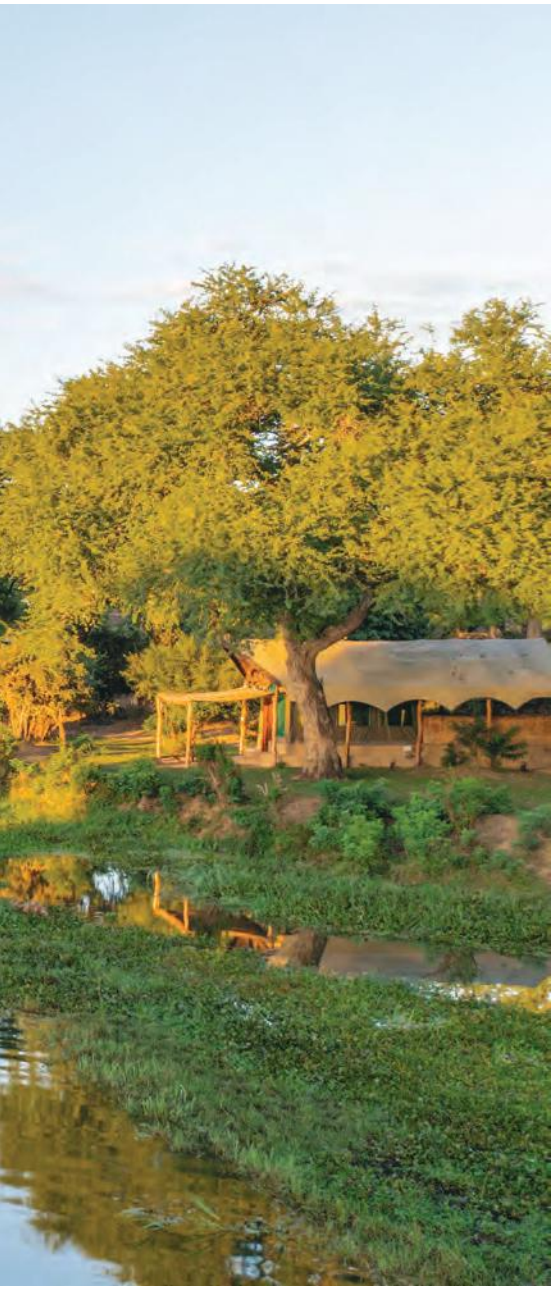
TOLD THROUGH HER decades-long first-hand experience of this renowned safari camp, Sharon Gilbert-Rivett looks at the journey Chongwe has taken and the changes that have shaped its legacy, good and bad.

Legacy. It's something that's often spoken of in the safari industry, especially by those of us who have been "doing" safaris for what seems like forever and have witnessed the sometimes stellar trajectory of lodges and camps across Africa that have become phenomenal global brands.

It's always interesting to chart their progress but sad to note that many relinquish the things that made them special along the way to superstardom, inevitably outgrowing the uniqueness that set them apart and adopting a kind of corporate slickness that's far removed from the spirit in which they were conceived.

When you are privileged enough to be a part of that progress, that long path from anonymity to recognition, you understand better what goes into creating a destination that people have on their bucket lists the world over and how important legacy really is. So it is for me and Chongwe River Camp, a small, intimate bush camp in Zambia's breathtaking Lower Zambezi Valley that has been my "go to" place - my special somewhere - for more than 20 years.

Today, it's part of the Time + Tide Africa portfolio and far removed from its humble beginnings as a camp site where the Chongwe River meets the mighty Zambezi. And yet, it has managed to maintain its



PREVIOUS PAGES: Chongwe boat on the Lower Zambezi River; Chongwe River Camp

THIS PAGE: Elephant visiting the camp; sunrise over the Zambezi River; relax alongside the river

THIS PAGE: Chongwe River Camp (2006); early days in camp (2007); river and mountain views

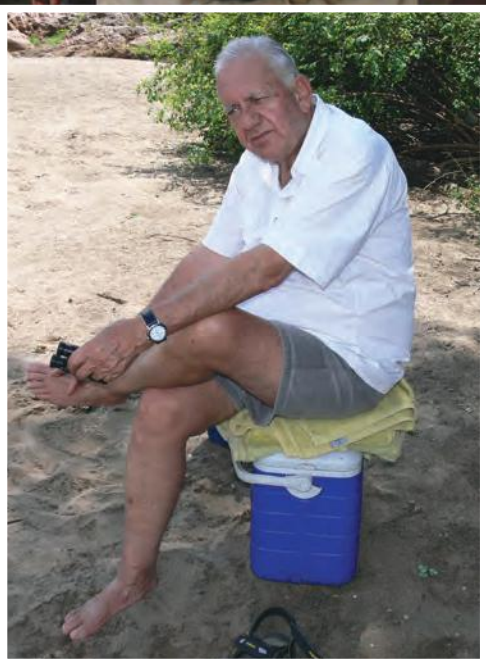
NEXT PAGES: Michael Farao and Allan Shawa (2010); Chongwe founder Boet Liebenberg (2007)

"secret sauce" - that magical ingredient that makes it stand out from the crowd and remain, in my opinion, one of the best safari destinations in Southern Africa. How? It all boils down to people, and in particular, Chris Liebenberg and his late father, Boet, who in the late 1990s took a chance on what they thought was the most beautiful spot in Zambia they'd ever seen...

A CAMP IS BORN

In those days the Lower Zambezi was truly wild and woolly and beset with challenges, not the least of which was a sky-high level of poaching that threatened to wipe out the area's elephant population. Young Chris had graduated from Rhodes University in South Africa and had returned to his homeland filled with zeal, becoming a qualified safari guide in this rugged, remote and impossibly beautiful place.

His family came from Zambia's Copperbelt and had always



IN THOSE DAYS THE LOWER ZAMBEZI WAS TRULY WILD AND WOOLLY AND BESET WITH CHALLENGES, NOT THE LEAST OF WHICH WAS THE SKY-HIGH LEVEL OF POACHING THAT THREATENED TO WIPE OUT THE AREA'S ELEPHANT POPULATION

worked in the mining industry, supplying equipment and logistics. But their deep love of the African bush made for exciting holidays, camping out in the middle of nowhere. On one occasion, that nowhere was the confluence of the Chongwe and Zambezi rivers, on a patch of flat ground in the middle of a grove of albida trees with the mountains of the escarpment that forms the northern border of the Lower Zambezi National Park as a backdrop.

Cue divine intervention, rolls of Biblical-style thunder and a parting of clouds. The seed of an idea began to germinate in Boet and Chris and they returned on several father and son camping trips before eventually buying the camp site that had so captured their hearts and a considerable chunk of land around it and along the Chongwe River. They returned as landowners and established a commercial camping site.

Chongwe River Camp was born, created by guts, grit and an overwhelming love for a small piece of African heaven.

In those days there was a small central "reception" area for campers and little else. Chris would guide people on safari and they did the rest. Gradually, the camp grew as permanent tents were introduced and camping was done away with.

Chris employed local guides to help guests explore the area and staff to prepare simple meals around the camp's fire. Dinner took place under the stars and revelry around the camp bar, made from an old mokoro.

So it was that I first visited Chongwe some 22 years ago, scouting for locations for a documentary and writing a feature on the Lower Zambezi for Africa Geographic in the process. My Chongwe story began there, on the sunlit floodplains opposite Mana Pools National Park, surrounded by elephants, listening to Chris tell his story.

DEATH OF AN ICON,
BIRTH OF A MOVEMENT

The history of Chongwe and the Lower Zambezi is framed quite

THIS PAGE: Filming at Chongwe; camp decor and elephant visits (2013)

NEXT PAGE: Moody skies; Sharon with Michael Farao (2013); impressive kudu male (2013)

simply by the story of one of its most impressive "sons" - a magnificent tusker elephant named Big Boy. This gentle giant was known and loved by all at Chongwe and at the many other camps and lodges that were springing up along the river in the Lower Zambezi in the late 1990s. Chris and Boet both recounted tales of close encounters with Big Boy and the indelible impact he had on both their lives. Indeed, Big Boy saved Boet's life, but only after losing his to the poacher's gun.

When shots were heard on that fateful day towards the end of the 20th century, Boet and other safari operators took off with national park rangers to investigate. They found the fallen Big Boy, freshly slain, along the Chongwe River and walked into an ambush in the process, hiding behind the behemoth's body as AK47 rounds pumped into it. They returned fire and routed the poachers, who took off into dense thicket.

The death of Big Boy galvanised Chris and Boet and the other operators to form Conservation Lower Zambezi (CLZ) - an NGO tasked with reducing the slaughter of wildlife in the valley that quickly gained traction, achieving a 92% reduction in poaching incidents within its first decade of operation. Today, CLZ is a world-class conservation organisation recognised globally for its achievements in bridging the gap between conservation and communities, both founding strands of Chongwe River Camp's DNA.

There is no doubt that the death of Big Boy was a catalyst for meaningful change - not just at Chongwe, but in the surrounding communities of the Chiawa Game Management Area - a vast swathe of land that forms a conservation buffer zone on the western edge of the Lower Zambezi National Park.

BUILDING A BRAND WITH PEOPLE

The Chongwe River Camp I first visited was fairly typical of its kind - a neat, rustic bush camp with Meru-style tents strung out along the riverbanks and a communal bar, dining and lounge area overlooking the confluence. In those early days "rustic" meant simple pine framed beds, outdoor en-suite facilities and zip-up tent flaps. The ethos was authenticity and complete immersion in the surroundings. In that respect Chongwe has always under-promised and over-delivered. Its location is virtually unbeatable, but it took a while to perfect its other secret safari weapon - a fantastic team of people.

While core staff from the local Chiawa community stayed put, in those early years managers and many senior staff came and went on a regular basis. Such is the ebb and flow of the safari industry and Chris, understanding that it sometimes takes time to find a dream team, kept a steady hand on the wheel, spending a lot of time in Camp and commuting between the Lower Zambezi and his home in Lusaka, a full day's drive or a short, 25-minute flight away.

Reservations manager Caroline Jenkins (CJ) joined the Chongwe team in 2006, emigrating to Zambia from her native Wales after reading about the camp in the article I wrote for Africa Geographic - something I am proud of to this day. You never know the impact your words are going to have on lives until you find out first hand!

THE ETHOS WAS AUTHENTICITY AND COMPLETE IMMERSION IN THE SURROUNDINGS. IN THAT RESPECT CHONGWE HAS ALWAYS UNDER-PROMISED AND OVER-DELIVERED

Chris slowly groomed a great core team of local Zambian guides, training them to the highest standards, and then, in 2009 he found the final pieces of the staffing puzzle in Florence Mulenga Shawa, hailing from Zambia's Northern Province and educated in Scotland with a background in hospitality and hotel management.

"Flossie" and her husband, Allan, traded the urban life

PREVIOUS PAGE: Chongwe River Camp (2019)

THIS PAGE: Chiza Sakala and elephants; lunch along the Zambezi (2019); the lovely 'Flossie' Mulenga Shawa (2010)

in Lusaka for the wilderness and the wonderful winds of destiny blessed Chongwe with a match made in heaven. Some 14 years later they are still at the helm, with Flossie the first black Zambian woman to be appointed as a general manager of a major safari company, inspiring a whole generation of Zambian women to enter the safari industry.

Today, 80% of Chongwe's staff are from the local Chiawa community. The rest are from other parts of Zambia, predominantly Lusaka. Many, like front-of-house supervisors Michael Farao and Watson Chinyama and safari guide Bob Kamambo have been at Chongwe for well over a decade. Others, like spa therapist Twatasha Chibanga,

have only just started their Chongwe journey, becoming the newest members of the Chongwe family.

ONWARD AND UPWARD

In 2005 work began on Chongwe House - an exclusive safari villa on the banks of the Chongwe River a short distance from Chongwe River Camp. With four en-suite bedrooms, its own chef, private guide and staff, "House", as it became known, introduced the Chongwe brand to a new, emerging market - small groups of friends and extended families looking for a highly personalised safari experience.

A couple of years later, Boet and Chris partnered with investor Thierry Dalais to help steer Chongwe on the next stage of its evolution, and so, the Albida and Cassia Suites came into being. These luxury tented villas added another dynamic to Chongwe's

PREVIOUS PAGE: Bob Kamambo at the wheel on the water and land; Twatasha Chibanga spa therapist; Nezzy Banda, Caroline Jenkins and Florence Mulenga Shawa (2022)

THIS PAGE: Baobabs, elephants and albida seed pods

existing nine standard tents, which were upgraded to meet the demands of an ever increasingly discerning international clientelle.

The addition of "luxury" to Chongwe's tradition of down-to-earth authenticity was subtle and done with due homage to the brand's humble origins. Luxury for its own sake was avoided and the new-look Chongwe managed to retain its bona fides without surrendering to the gods of décor, opting for an understated practicality instead of over-the-top frippery. A potential sell-out to the vagaries of the luxury safari market was cleverly avoided.

Dalais eventually went on to form Time + Tide Africa and Chongwe River Camp became part of this extended family, marketed under the Time + Tide brand.

CHONGWE THEN AND NOW...

From 2001 to the present day, I have spent considerable time at Chongwe, researching stories, making documentaries, helping to manage the front of house on a relief basis and generally helping out where needed. It became an integral part of me and my life and a personal bolt hole to retreat to when life ganged up on me. The Liebenberg family became my second family, and together we navigated this thing called life. Along the way we weathered tragedy and triumph alike, like most families do.

We have lost Chris's dad Boet, his mum Sue and wife, Juwayhir, along the way. Chongwe is where we remember them, where we can still hear their voices and the laughter we shared with them. I fell in love with the Lower Zambezi on my first visit to it in 2000. It reminded me then of the wilds of the Okavango Delta and Linyanti regions of Botswana, with the added bonus of a mountain backdrop.

Driving through the Lower Zambezi National Park in those days was jaw-dropping, moving through diverse biomes that ranged from Afro-montane thicket on the slopes of the mountains to open savannah and dense riparian forests. Dissected by seasonal riverbeds and channels of the Zambezi, forming large islands and peninsulas in the process, one minute you'd be driving through pristine woodland and the next you'd find yourself in a vast wetland filled with oxbow lagoons...

Nothing has changed in terms of the park's beauty in the intervening decades, although the spectre of greed has descended in the form of a planned open-cast copper mine just 15km above the river, in the western section of the park. The Zambian Government, like most African governments it has to be said, has surrendered to the apparently bottomless coffers

offered by China, selling out natural resources quicker than you can say "Africa".

Having a 24-hour mining operation a few kilometres down the road is bound to affect Chongwe River Camp and all of the tourism businesses in the Lower Zambezi, but its future is largely out of the hands of mere mortals and sits firmly in the realms of politics, with all of the hoopla and baggage that entails, accompanied by no small amount of corruption for good measure.

In 2019 I spent a few weeks at Chongwe investigating the mine story. It had not lost any of its magic and remained the same, precious place that took possession of my wanderlust-filled heart all those years ago. Then COVID hit and I couldn't go anywhere, let alone Chongwe.

IT HAD NOT LOST ANY OF ITS MAGIC AND REMAINED THE SAME, PRECIOUS PLACE THAT TOOK POSSESION OF MY WANDERLUST-FILLED HEART ALL THOSE YEARS AGO

PREVIOUS PAGE: Watching elephants from the river

THIS PAGE: View over the river; magnificent leopard

WHAT'S IN A NAME? EVERYTHING.

I eventually returned to Chongwe in November 2022 to celebrate my 60th birthday. Landing in the valley, I experienced the familiar sense of peace and calm that the place brings.

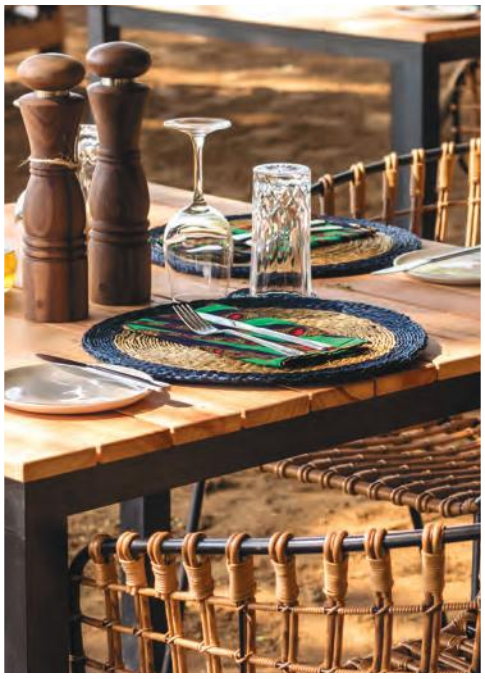
A few tears were silently shed on the short route from the airstrip to camp, for people lost, for the incredible memories forged here in this beautiful land. But as I arrived in camp and Flossie's arms wrapped around me and my friends surrounded me with love and laughter all sadness disappeared. I was in Chongwe, and the birds, trees and river were all shouting their welcome. The place was unchanged. The people unchanged.

In March this year (2023) Chongwe moved into its next phase of life with a makeover that has filled it with vibrant colour. Perhaps it was time. Judging by the pictures, the new

IT IS A PLACE WHERE HOPE LIVES - HOPE FOR TODAY, HOPE FOR A BETTER FUTURE, HOPE THAT AS A SPECIES WE WILL SEE THE DAMAGE WE ARE DOING BEFORE IT IS IRREPARABLE

look seems great, but without having popped my bum on the new couches and chairs, eaten at the new tables or slept in the new-look tents, I can't really say "yay" or "nay"!

In any event, one thing I am sure of... The Chongwe experience is still very much alive and kicking and centred around people, and its the same as it always was - relaxed, laid back, beautifully spontaneous, effortlessly professional but Fun, with a capital F. It is still the most beautiful place I have ever laid eyes on and still the place where I talk to God and hear God talk back. It's a place where hope lives - hope for today, hope for a better future, hope that as a species we will see the damage we are doing before it is irreparable. If that's not the epitome of a fantastic legacy, I don't know what is.



THESE PAGES: Recent soft refurbishment incorporating Africa's vibrant colours

Giving back, and looking forwards

When Chongwe River Camp took its first steps as a fully fledged commercial safari camp it implicitly understood the relationship between conserving pristine wilderness areas and the rural communities alongside them. Through its relationship with Conservation Lower Zambezi (CLZ) and helping to fund its outreach and educational programmes, and through its own community development initiatives, Chongwe remains at the forefront of the upliftment and empowerment of people through sustainable, responsible tourism.

Working with CLZ and the other safari operators in the Chiawa Game Management Area (GMA) and inside the Lower Zambezi National Park, Chongwe has helped the park to achieve carbon neutral status - no small feat considering the challenges of operating in such a remote and fragile environment. While this does not mean that Chongwe and the other lodges and camps in the valley do not produce carbon emissions, it does mean that they worked together to attain carbon neutral status through conservation programmes and the purchase of verified carbon units, representing the reduction or removal of a ton of carbon dioxide equivalent generated by greenhouse gases. This makes the 4,000 square kilometre national park the first to achieve carbon neutral status in the world.

THROUGH TIME + TIDE FOUNDATION, CHONGWE WORKS TIRELESSLY TO IMPROVE CONDITIONS FOR MARGINALISED RESIDENTS OF LOCAL COMMUNITIES AROUND THE CHIAWA GMA, HELPING TO FACILITATE ECONOMIC AND EDUCATIONAL OPPORTUNITIES

Through the Time + Tide Foundation, Chongwe works tirelessly to improve conditions for marginalised residents of local communities around the Chiawa GMA, helping to facilitate economic and educational opportunities. It helps to design and manage academic and development

programmes for both children and adults with a focus on adolescent girls and women without formal education.

Indeed, female empowerment is high on the priority list for Chongwe, which with the Time + Tide Foundation offers extracurricular lessons, training, workshops and mentoring for women with the goal of improving their income generation capabilities. Community excursions to Mugurameno village are also offered to Chongwe guests and directly benefit members of the community.

Through these guests get to see the work Chongwe is doing in home-based education programmes, female empowerment and the Mugurameno Farming Project which is growing vegetables for the local community with the potential of supplying safari lodges as well.

PREVIOUS PAGE: Game viewing on a walking safari

THIS PAGE: elephant, hippo and buffalo

Lemala's untold story

Words - Warren Green
Pics - Lemala Camps & Lodges

Lemala Nanyukie

YOU WOULD THINK that a business operating lodges in the heart of Africa's richest wildlife destination would begin and end its story in a game drive vehicle. Think again because Lemala's story has many layers that are touched by the rich diversity of wildlife spread across its areas of influence, which is just the beginning of the story.

When I made my first tour of Lemala's Camps & Lodges assessing its suitability to be a member of the coveted Warren Green & Associates portfolio, I was expecting some hard core well-used 4x4's along with crusty guides who spoke pidgin English and drove like the clappers to get you between sexy sightings.

Well, not quite as dramatic as that, there is a fair amount of poetic license in my description, but I wasn't that sure that the company would pass muster. I had known the previous owners and wasn't convinced that their commitments lay in the field of sustainability, but rather the field of financial sustainability and margin management.

I was quite blown away by everything that Lemala, under the direction of CEO Leanne Haigh, had touched. I set off from Arusha with an overland guide headed for the Tarangire National Park.

The vehicle, brand new, equipped with communication radio, outlets throughout the vehicle - charging ports for the many devices carried by the modern traveller, ox tail swishes discretely placed behind the seats - their intention to be used as fly swishes as one passed through the cattle herds of the Maasai and the occasional tsetse as

you bumbled around the south-western edge of the Silale swamp and beyond.

A large box nestled between the rear seats gently rumbled away keeping an assortment of beverages chilled for consumption during a dusty day of adventures. Bird, mammal, insect, and tree books were on hand as were a few pairs of 10x42 Bushnell binoculars for some of the further away species or tricky to identify LBJs that you run across along the way. The seats draped in Maasai cloth for comfort were a colourful addition to the neutral toned khaki colours synonymous with safari.

Leaving Arusha and the cloud veiled Kilimanjaro in the rear-view mirror I was eagerly anticipating rolling into the Tarangire, but instead of heading into the main gate we veered off the road pursuing a dusty track that narrowed into a footpath ending outside the

CHIEF LUBOLU IS A VISIONARY LEADER, HE HIMSELF CAUGHT UP BY AGE OLD TRADITIONS, BUT EXCITEDLY DETERMINED TO MAKE CHANGES TO HIS CULTURE FOR THE BETTER OF A NEW GENERATION

Acacia (ok, and yes I know the names have changed, but for now I think you'll appreciate and understand Acacia better than Vachellia or Senegalia) clad cattle and goat enclosures of Chief Lubolu's manyata.

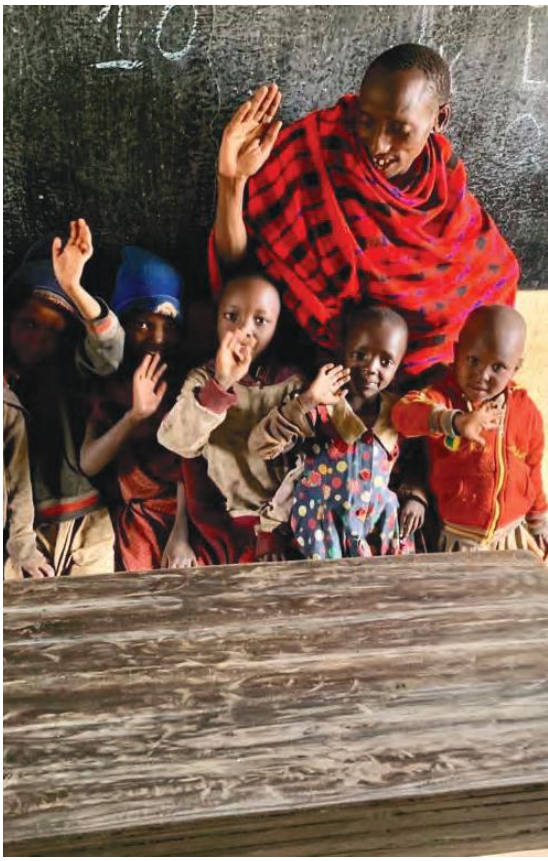
I was there because Lemala had teamed up with the chief to finically assist him develop education programs for his community. In return he'd walk tourists through his village, introduce his family, which included four wives and he wasn't yet 50 years old and some of his fifteen children. Extrapolating, he

could well expand his family to double that should circumstances favour him. But the point isn't about his virility, rather about his intention to educate the youth and give young girls the opportunity to grow beyond early marriage and a hard life of Maasai domesticity. Chief Lubolu is a visionary leader, he himself caught up by age old traditions, but excitedly determined to make changes to his culture for the better of the new generation.

His efforts aren't appreciated: After hearing of his intentions the villagers pushed back, threatened him, and ultimately took action. He woke one morning to find that his precious water tanks - those black ones that are mounted high to deliver gravity drawn water, were empty, punctured by Maasai assegais and drained into the parched dry soil. Undeterred he vowed to replace them with indestructible concrete tanks, which he did and like his resolve to get things done, the changed tanks remain, and the kids now go to school.

It's an impressive story - Lemala's participation ensures that he meets and welcomes tourists in a non-commercial and interactive way. Guests are encouraged by the women of the community to engage in a little beading, some get their hands dirty with mud and dung learning an ancient Maasai skill of wall plastering, learning the art of homemaking, while the guys get a healthy dose of Maasai chauvinism and watch while the women work - because a man's job is to tend the cattle and goats, figure out and resolve community issues and create the foundations of the new home, shaping the branches to build the walls and fashion the roof.

They do dance, leaping higher than any other human being not competing in the Olympics, their car tyre shoes slapping the earth in clouds of dust as they come down and dance away to the delight of the brightly coloured ladies in waiting. Chief Lubolu's visits have earned his community around $1600 per annum with funds contributing to the construction of a classroom and part funding of the teacher's salary.



PREVIOUS PAGE: Heading out with lemala; visiting a manyata while at Lemala Mpingo Ridge

THIS PAGE: Enjoying a meal on a Sunday day trip; local kids; teacher at school with desk made from recycled plastic

The first lodge stop was the spectacularly positioned Mpingo Ridge, which as its name suggests, sits high above the Tarangire Valley with sweeping views across the park toward Kili (Mt. Kilimanjaro) way off in the distance. At first the lodge leaves you with a feeling of a tented camp on steroids, which it is. High roofed, every creature comfort from double king beds, through to plumbed bathrooms, hot and cold indoor and outside showers, private spaces, and outlets to power a myriad of devices. Minibars, tea and coffee machines and filtered water in carafes, fluffy bathrobes,

oversized towels, soaps, gels and salts for the tub and, and… and. Yes, the rooms are tents on steroids, as is the main lodge structure with all its obvious five-star lodge amenities.

What caught my eye was the less than discretely placed water urns where guests are encouraged to replenish their water bottles before heading out on drive. But before I dive into the water, the buildings are their own story, made from recycled and repurposed material while the footpaths and decks are all made for recycled composite material with equal parts plastic

and bamboo. The lodge, blending into the crest of the ridge, is made pretty much entirely of recycled product setting the bar high for lowering its own carbon footprint. At Mpingo Ridge 49 tons of motor vehicle steel was recycled into the lodge structures. But construction and materials aren't enough to claim the badge of honour in the field of sustainable practices - these ask many more questions, and as I dug many were answered.

So back to the water. How do you get a supply of fresh water in a bone-dry park without importing pallet loads of shrink wrapped, single use plastic bottles? It's well water, but for a tourist this is not entirely palatable, many fear that the water in Africa is contaminated, which is half the reason why so many anxious travellers want to break the seal on a bottle of water.

Problem is Lemala has a strong zero tolerance policy for plastic, amongst other pollutants, and so manufactures its own water. The same systems occur throughout the company's Lodges in Tanzania. Reverse osmosis process render the purest drinking water possible, which is piped throughout the camp to the water urns and other consumable outlets. The reverse osmosis plant produces around 15,000 gallons of water annually arguably saving around 170,000 plastic bottles from the landfill.

That story ends well. Actually on diving deeper the water story has an even better ending. In each room and every dinner table is a unique carafe for water. The carafes might differ from one to the other, maybe the colour, the shape and design. Each is special, hand blown and made from recycled glass generated by the bottles discarded after a night of Bacchus celebrations around dinner. The wine bottles are sent off to Arusha and return in a new shape along with batches of glasses to match. Now that's a better story...

PREVIOUS PAGE: Lemala Mpingo Ridge; guest water bottles

THIS PAGE: Visiting a manyata while at Lemala Mpingo Ridge

Oh, and did I mention that the smaller tented camps, without the same infrastructure are all supplied water from the nearest Lemala lodge such as Nanyukie in the central park and Kuria Hills in in the North! Lemala has bought back around 180 pieces of recycled glassware from the Shanga in Arusha, however as all glass generated from Lemala is recycled this is a tiny return with the balance going toward glassware sold directly to the public from the Shanga itself. Sustainability goes beyond mere environmental factors, which include energy generation and waste, which is an area where Lemala seems to continue its acceleration with each camp surviving off its own solar farm. Vehicle parking garages, staff accommodation roof tops, warehouses and storerooms all coated in solar panels, which charge banks of batteries with rich watts of super solar energy.

SUSTAINABILITY GOES BEYOND MERE ENVIRONMENTAL FACTORS, WHICH INCLUDE ENERGY GENERATION AND WASTE, WITH EACH CAMP SURVIVING OFF ITS OWN SOLAR FARM

Just in case, there is a backup generator, which appears to have only run during the early construction phase of the lodges and is drawn upon after long cycles of cloud cover and rainfall, which in this part of the world is seldom, if ever.

And so, satisfied with Mpingo Ridge I moved on to check out the other lodges to make sure that I wasn't being shown a staged property while the rest sucked power off the grid and churned out plastic waste faster than a monsoon river in India.

Mto wa Mbu is a slowly sprawling village just beyond the shores of Lake Manyara and in the shadow of Ngorongoro, the ancient extinct volcano. It lies on the road that connects the Tarangire with the southern Serengeti and probably sees every vehicle that is headed to the safari Mecca from Arusha.

It doesn't enjoy much of the tourism economy as the vehicles passing through seldom stop and if ever, it's to find a potty or for a tourist to claim a coveted Maasai blanket or hand carved figurine. Behind the main road are rice paddies, maize fields, industrious wood workers, banana breweries, plantations with over 25 varieties, and slowly built handmade homes, transitioning from the mud and dung clad structures to cinder block and zinc roofing.

In these dusty streets lie the heartbeat of Mto, seldom seen and felt by the traveller. Once again Lemala's hand can be noticed. The blue three-wheeled tuk tuks have a Lemala sign and carry a driver and guide. These vehicles do not belong to Lemala, but they do to Mr Sunday, whom I like to refer to as the mayor of Mto…

This is a special story… the original guides were young women, living in squalor, and encouraged to improve themselves joined Mr Sunday as fledgling guides in training. Their purpose, to escort tourists around the backstreets of Mto showing off the vibrancy of the village while diving into Tanzanian community culture. I was escorted around by a guide, who spoke softly, wasn't that confident and

PREVIOUS PAGE: Lemala nanyukie

THIS PAGE: Sunday Group tuk-tuk tours; driving through the backstreets of Mto

was continually prompted by Mr Sunday; she was new, nervous at sharing her knowledge with a foreign audience, but she was proud and stood upright and dressed smartly.

Nine months later I was privileged to join her on a tour through Mto with a group of travel trade members learning about East Africa. Her demeanour had changed, her confidence was palpable while her repertoire was virtually unblemished. The flower had bloomed and while she had grown her colleague, Mary Chopin, had grown even further.

The Sunday group now employs eight guides with three more currently in training. Thirty-five ladies are employed to manufacture banana boxes, of which Lemala has purchased 4462 boxes, generating an income of $13,387 for the enterprise over the past year.

Lemala works with Mr Sunday, not just assisting with tourists on his tours, but also developing guides beyond the dusty streets of Mto wa Mbu.

Mary passed muster and was scooped up by Lemala to join their in-house training programme. A year long immersion into the fundamentals of the Serengeti ecosystem, insights into guest empathy along with safari skills required by the modern field guide and today she is Lemala's first woman guide successfully plying her newly learnt trade from the Nanyukie Tented Lodge in central Serengeti.

One would think that the story ends there... well it doesn't Lemala continues to innovate, striving to reduce its footprint and create a better environment for its stakeholders and shareholders alike. The opportunity to take a disadvantage and turn it into something good and beneficial prevails. Think about the other safari companies that aren't as diligent in addressing the issues such as single use plastic, which gets dumped at Lemala's Lodges when guides pass through.

Instead of sending the trash out those plastic bottles are recycled and turned into composite materials, most commonly school desks that are donated to the communities occupying the marginal areas around the parks where Lemala is invested. To date 75 school desks have been distributed to Chief Lubolu and the Nainoanoka (Ngorongor) community, with more to follow.

www.lemalacamps.com

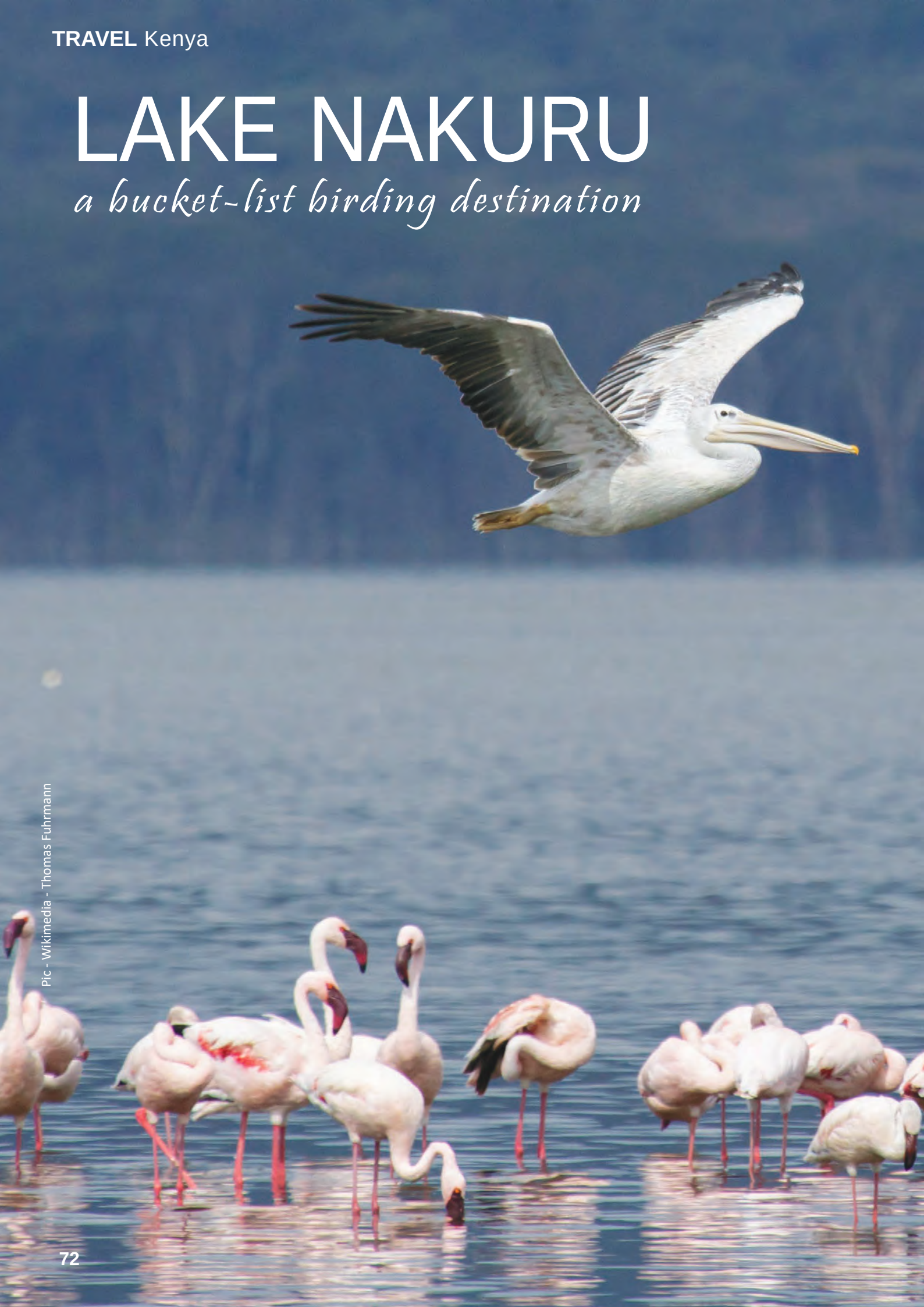
PLASTIC BOTTLES ARE RECYCLED AND TURNED INTO COMPOSITE MATERIALS, MOST COMMONLY SCHOOL DESKS THAT ARE DONATED TO COMMUNITIES

PREVIOUS PAGE: Lemala banana boxes; decking made from recycled plastic

THIS PAGE: Mary, Lemala's first woman guide; mounds of plastic waste gets made into school desks

LAKE NAKURU

a bucket-list birding destination



Pic - Wikimedia - Thomas Fuhrmann

Words & pics - Tessa Buhrmann
(unless otherwise indicated)

KENYA'S RIFT VALLEY region is situated about 160 kilometres northwest of Nairobi, and we were heading there... a road trip from Samburu land in the dry North to the lush green landscapes of the Nakuru National Park and shimmering waters of Lake Nakuru, home to thousands of flamingo, pelicans, and several other water bird species.

We drive past flat plains with extensive cattle and game ranches and pause for the obligatory stop at the Equator – and yes, the water does swirl in opposite directions depending which side of the invisible line you are on. Skirting the top edge of the Aberdeen National Park, I breathe deeply as the fresh fragrance of the Aberdeen Forest fills the air.

ANOTHER PAUSE HAS US TAKING IN THE VIEW OF THE GREAT RIFT VALLEY, THAT EXTENDS FROM ETHIOPIA IN THE NORTH, THROUGH KENYA AND ONWARDS TO TANZANIA IN THE SOUTH

We sweep past fields of wheat and maize, and row upon row of tea bushes – both green and purple, the purple colouring apparently due to the presence of super-antioxidants called anthocyanins, as well as several coffee plantations.

Another pause has us taking in the view of the famed Great Rift Valley, the intra-continental ridge system that extends from Ethiopia in the north, through Kenya and onwards to Tanzania in the south. Distinctly visible from outer space, this extensive valley is dotted with series of lakes, loosely strung together like an aged pearl necklace. And we are heading to one of them, Lake Nakuru!

It is said to have been formed about two million years ago,

PREVIOUS PAGE: The Subukia view point on route to Lake Nakuru

THIS PAGE: Obligatory stop at the Equator; entry to Lake Nakuru National Park; the dull skies that welcomed us

during the volcanic activity that created the Great Rift Valley. Lake Nakuru, which covers an area of approximately 45 square kilometres, is famous for its pink flamingos, a sight that has made it one of Kenya's most popular tourist attractions – and one I was exceptionally excited to experience.

A rain shower welcomes us to the city of Nakuru, the informal traders on the outskirts rush to cover their wares and pedestrians hurry to escape the rain. The streets are busy and John (our driver and guide from Paws Africa Safaris for the duration of our Kenya trip) tells us that Nakuru is the transport and commercial centre for west-central Kenya. We head away from the busy city centre, past a selection of small shops,

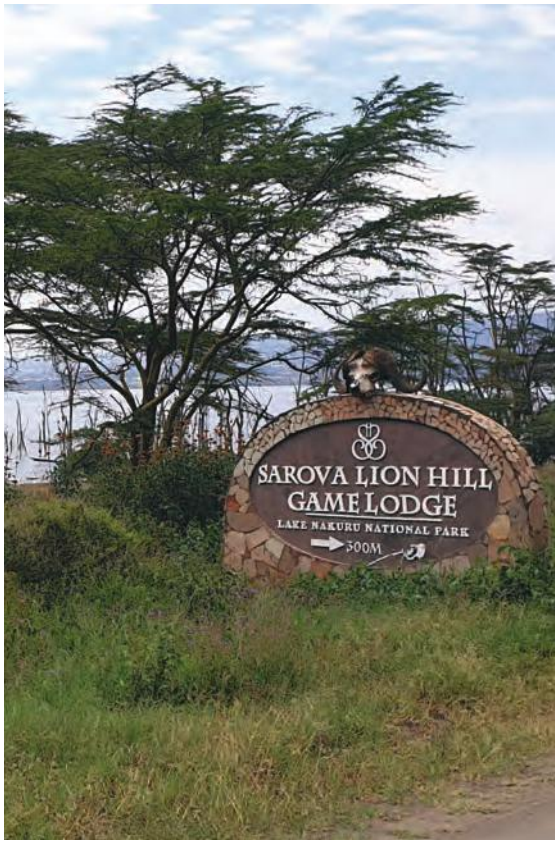
homesteads and agricultural land and before long reach the entrance to the National Park.

Lake Nakuru National Park is one of only two fully fenced national parks in Kenya and was established as a rhino sanctuary in 1984 in an attempt to address the drastic decline in numbers across Kenya due to poaching. Several black and white rhino were donated and relocated to the sanctuary, and as their population has grown many have been able to be relocated to other parks within Kenya and beyond.

In addition to almost being guaranteed a rhino sighting, most visitors head to Lake Nakuru to explore the park's incredible avian diversity, and is home to over 450 bird species, making it one of the best birding destinations in East Africa. And nestled in the heart of Lake Nakuru National Park, the Sarova Lion Hill Game Lodge offers the perfect base from which to do both.

Upon arrival we were greeted by breath-taking views of the surrounding bush and the glittering waters of Lake Nakuru – the rain had passed, and the sun's rays were breaking through the clouds. Perched atop a hill overlooking the lake, we had the perfect vantage point from which to spot the park's incredible birdlife, but our immediate task was a quick late lunch before heading out on an afternoon game drive.

The scenery is spectacular, and the varied terrain – from the vast soda lake with its shallows, mud flats and swamp to the forests of fever trees (Vachellia xanthophloea) and surrounding woodlands interspersed with grasslands. Added to this are the impressive cliffs that tower over the lake offering fantastic lookouts. But it was the 'same but different' wildlife and bird species that had me peering into the bush with much anticipation!



We drive along the lake edge, a raft of great white pelicans' glide between the drowned trees, glades of fever trees glisten in the late afternoon sun and defassa waterbuck graze the lush grass beneath – they seem woollier than the common waterbuck, and instead of a conspicuous white ring, they have wide white patches on either side of the rump. Flamingos, pelicans, and a myriad of other water birds

PREVIOUS PAGE: A male defassa waterbuck; the entrance to Sarova Lion HIll Game Lodge located within the national park

THIS PAGE: Forests of fever trees lined the dusty road; a raft of pelicans on the lake

line the shallows of the lake, a crash of white rhino laze under a tree and a pair of grey crowned cranes prance around in a mating dance. Egyptian geese squabble and masked weavers build frenetically and a speckled mousebird lands clumsily on a bush.

Back at the lodge we finally check in to our spacious well-furnished rooms with all the modern amenities one would expect for a comfortable and relaxing stay. I notice the Sarova branded glass water bottle – straight from their state-of-the-art water filtration and bottling plant, just one of the many Sarova environmental sustainability initiatives – they work closely with the local community to support conservation efforts in the park, and the lodge uses solar energy to power its operations, conserves water, and supports local communities through various initiatives.

THIS PAGE:
My room at Sarova Lion HIll Game Lodge; the restuarant

NEXT PAGE:
A bedraggled lion; the road with its pink swathe of flamingos

After a delicious buffet dinner, complete with local favourites like sukuma wiki, made from a green leafy veg similar to kale, yummy mutheri, a stew of delicious beans and maize, and of course delicious chapati (flatbread) a Kenyan staple derived from Indian cuisine. A nightjar serenades as I head back to my room… it's a different call to the fiery-necked nightjar from home, and a spot of Googling later has me deciding on the Eurasian nightjar, its call serenading me to sleep.

The best way to experience the flamingos and pelicans on Lake Nakuru are from the water, so that's where we were heading – a morning breakfast cruise with Cliff Boat Safaris. But not before a brief sighting of a slightly bedraggled lion before he sauntered off into the thick bush.

THE BEST WAY TO EXPERIENCE THE FLAMINGOS OF LAKE NAKURU IS FROM THE WATER, SO THAT'S WHERE WE WERE HEADING

The lake was first gazetted as a bird sanctuary in 1960 and was later designated as a national park in 1968. In 1990 it was

declared as a RAMSAR site, in 2009 as an important Bird Area, and in 2011 as part of the 'Kenya Lake System in the Great Rift Valley' World Heritage site.

Over the years, Lake Nakuru has become an important conservation area, and I felt exceptionally privileged to be crossing its waters in the luxurious Seaduction, fully kitted with swivel seats and binoculars,

to get an up-close view of the lake's magnificent birdlife. The park is particularly famous for its flamingos, which are attracted to the lake's algae-rich waters, but they aren't the only birds that can be seen at the lake; over 450 species of birds have been recorded in the area…

From the jetty we see dozens of great white pelicans, in formation and going tail-up

PREVIOUS PAGE: The cliffs and drowned trees; the Seaduction,our boat cruise; great egret

THIS PAGE: Great white pelicans; bubbly and snacks aboard the Seaduction

as they fish for tilapia, a great egret poses elegantly on a dead stump, marabou stork give us the hairy eyeball, and the iconic call of a fish eagle pierces the air. Aah, I do love Africa!

We glide along the water's edge, a striated green heron on a low branch waits patiently, as does a black-crowned night heron; pied kingfishers pierce the water and resurface, in one fluid motion and a great cormorant suns itself, wings widespread. Sulaiman, our skipper, heads us into the open waters of the lake and Mary our guide sets out our brunch – delicious sweet and savoury snacks accompanied by a glass or two of bubbly.

I ask Mary about all the submerged and dead trees, and she explains that this is because of the higher water level due to movement in the plate tectonics,

that is resulting in underground cracks and the subsequent water seepage. Adding to this is the rising silt brought into the lake from erosion upstream. It is also why the flamingo numbers are reduced from the millions of yesteryear to the thousands in more recent years as they need shallow algae-rich waters to feed.

We transfer into a smaller craft to enable us to navigate the shallower waters to get closer to the action – thousands of flamingos create a sea of pink on the shallow sand banks, accompanied by the swathes of great white pelicans. Within their numbers are grey-headed gulls, egrets, more cormorants,

THIS PAGE: Flamingos and pelicans

NEXT PAGE: A Senegalia in flower; Rothschild giraffe

Pic - Wikimedia

THOUSANDS OF FLAMINGOS CREATE A SEA OF PINK ON THE SHALLOW SAND BANKS, ACCOMPANIED BY SWATHES OF GREAT WHITE PELICANS

and several smaller aquatic species. The blue grey of the distant hills a contrast to the starkness of the dead trees and the colour on the lake's edge. It is a spectacular sight!

We glide by slowly, there is much flapping of wings and squawking from the pelicans, the flamingos seem to march in step, their spindly cerise legs supporting their pale pink bodies. I smile as a few outliers remain with their heads down, determined to feed. A few fly off and settle again on a distant sandbank. Too soon we head back to the Seaduction for a slow cruise back to the jetty. Mary tells me that Cliff Boat Safaris offer a selection of other cruises – a popular one with birders being their birding and photographic safaris, available as half, or full-day experiences, both with early morning departures to make the most of the light and when the birds and other wildlife are most active.

John meets us back at the jetty and we take a slow game drive back. We pause on a rocky outcrop to admire the view over the lake, buffalo, and eland graze together on the grasslands, Rothschild giraffes nibbles on the tender new growth of an acacia (now called either Senegalia or Vachellia depending on the shape of its seed pods), and an Auger buzzard circles overhead.

THIS PAGE: White rhino; olive baboons; grey crowned cranes

NEXT PAGE: An African fish eagle; yellow-billed stork; marabou stork

Plains zebra graze in the distance and warthogs scamper past us, their tails in the air like aerials.

Our afternoon drive is all about the birds. We pause on the lake's edge for a different perspective of the flamingos and pelicans – both great white and the smaller pink-backed. We watch marabou storks, spoon bills and several yellow-billed stork, grey herons, an assortment of plovers as well as black-winged stilts and a couple of pied avocets – and I'm sure there were several more species that we missed. We pause for a white-browed coucal perched ungainly in a thorn tree, we see both the long-tailed and greater blue-eared starlings, and a flock of gregarious green wood hoopoes ferreting around in the bark of a tree looking for grubs.

Not being one to ever miss a game drive, I was determined, despite our 10am departure to be up and out early. We had barely left the lodge when John points out a spotted hyena on the water's edge, a short distance away a black rhino

barges in to disturb a lion as he tugs on the remains of his buffalo kill... his brother, already satiated, lies alongside the lake. We watch their interactions and after a while the black rhino, loosing interest saunters off. A troop of olive baboons huddle together in the cool morning air, babies cling to their mums and amorous antics take place on the side. Thompsons gazelles stand alert as a pair of black backed jackals scamper past.

A pair of grey crowned cranes (perhaps the ones that we had seen previously) take umbrage at their presence, as do a flock of Egyptian geese. A trio of white rhino awaken from their overnight resting spot and lumber down to the lakes edge to slake their thirst.

What more could I ask on my first visit to this spectacular birding, and wildlife destination in Kenya?

WE WATCH MARABOU STORKS, SPOON BILLS, GREY HERONS, AN ASSORTMENT OF PLOVERS AS WELL AS BLACK-WINGED STILTS AND A COUPLE OF PIED AVOCETS – AND I'M SURE THERE WERE SEVERAL MORE SPECIES THAT WE MISSED

BIRDING IN THE BERG RIVER REGION

Birding is a healthy, happy hobby that has more and more South Africans of all ages calling themselves 'Twitchers'.

EXPERIENCED BIRDING enthusiasts know that this pastime is something to twitter about. There is something special about spending your spare time immersed in nature, quietly taking in picturesque rivers and mud plains, beautiful ocean landscapes, lush forests, sweeping grasslands, rugged mountain wildernesses, or rolling rural countryside - all while observing the myriad of feathered friends to be found in these varied habitats, and enjoying their antics as they flit, flutter, forage, feast, nest, swim, wade and sing their way into your sightings records.

Birds of a feather flock together - where to go birding

For those who may be keen to embrace bird-watching, or for the more experienced twitcher who is looking for multiple memorable sightings, a must-visit birding hotspot which is right on Cape Town's doorstep is the hugely popular West Coast village of **Velddrif**, which hugs the banks of the Berg River, just a few kilometres from where the river enters the ocean at St Helena Bay.

This lovely town is one of the most popular bird-watching sites in South Africa, with the tidal mudflats and salt marshes presenting more than 250 species of birds – that is 25% of

Berg River birding (pic JMM Sonya)

Words & pics - supplied
Additional pics - Tessa Buhrmann, JMM Sonya

all the bird species that have ever been recorded in the entire Southern African region.

The estuary, floodplain, and saltpans cover a large area, extending 40km inland along one of the Cape's biggest rivers. This area encompasses a wide diversity of habitats, including sandy beaches, mudflats, reed beds, riverine channels, strandveld and floodplain, and it is famously rich in birdlife – with the highest density of waders along the eastern Atlantic seaboard.

THERE IS SOMETHING SPECIAL ABOUT SPENDING YOUR SPARE TIME IMMERSED IN NATURE

"The estuary is the third biggest in SA and is rated as one of the most important birding areas in the world. It has also been declared an Important Bird Area (IBA) by BirdLife South Africa and BirdLife International and declared a wetland of importance by the Ramsar Convention (referred to as a Ramsar site)," explains Nomonde Ndlangisa, CEO of Bergrivier Tourism.

"Visitors can expect to spot many resident bird species – with the river and reed beds teeming with bird life. The sight of hundreds of greater and lesser flamingos in a large swathe of pink is always an incredible sight. Egyptian geese, yellow-billed ducks, Cape and red-billed teals, Cape shovelers, red-knobbed coots, spur-winged geese, moorhen, warblers, weavers, southern red bishops, kingfishers, and the African fish eagle are just a very few examples of what can be spotted here."

Ndlangisa goes on to advise that the iconic **Bokkom Laan**, the oldest road in the town (and a heritage site) which snakes up the edge of the Berg River is a must-visit for anyone to the area – especially birders.

This quaint dirt road is dotted with jetties on the water's edge and historic fish-drying sheds – many of which have been converted into eclectic coffee shops, restaurants, art galleries and gift shops. Park your car and stroll along to spot Greats white pelicans, the African marsh harrier, kingfishers, grey herons and many more different species. You can also visit the ''Bokkomhuise'' and taste Bokkoms, pop in at the

Pic JMM Sonya

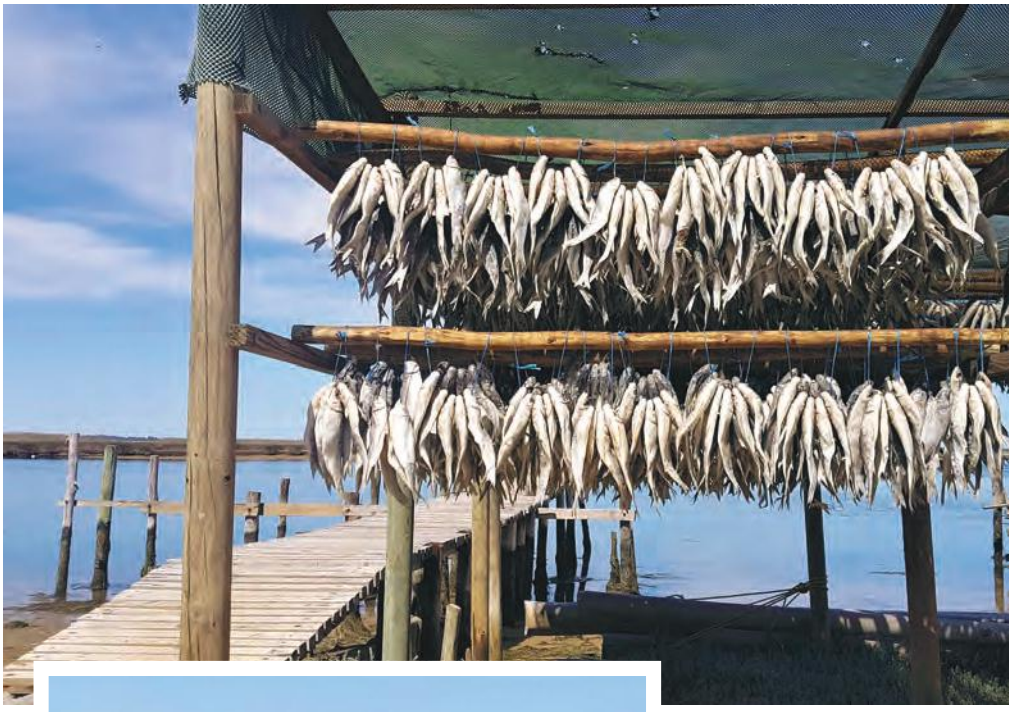
Riverstudio to see the work of local artist Marina Clunie art, or Die Vishoekie art studio to see Saralize Tolken's art. Enjoy a meal at the Avoo Health Café which specialises in locally produced produce.

A wonderful way to spot birds is on, and alongside, the Berg River – and make memories and have fun - is to book a river cruise with Cracklin' Rosie River Tours or Knot Xtreme Bergrivier Boat Cruises. Alternatively, you can rent a kayak or small boat from Canoe & Kayak World and take yourself out onto the water of the Berg River for a leisurely bird-watching paddle.

Next to Velddrif, on the border between Laaiplek and Port Owen is **Rooibaai** – a great bird-watching site where visitors can sometimes be surprised by rare waders at low tide. A wooden walkway nearby takes you closer to the hundreds of flamingos, as well as the chance to experience the more than 100 000 Cape cormorants flying past Rooibaai just before sunset. **Laaiplak harbour** is another good bird-watching location that offers a glimpse of kelp, Hartlaub's and grey-headed Gulls.

The nearby **Rocherpan Nature Reserve** is well worth the 25 minutes it will take to drive from Velddrif. One can choose to drive through the reserve or hike along the footpaths. Numerous bird hides and picnic areas offer you the chance to spot birds such as the African black oystercatchers, African hoopoe, kelp gull and so many more – in fact over 180 different species can be spotted at the Rocherpan Nature Reserve.

Another wonderful bird-watching location is the **Draaihoek Private Nature Reserve** which reaches from the Atlantic Ocean inland to Sandveld's mountain range and across to the Verlorenvlei, a RAMSAR classified site south of Elands Bay. The coastal border of the Reserve stretches along an undisturbed sandy beach, hugged by rugged dunes and favoured by flocks of birds typical to the West Coast. The uninhabited bay area is frequented by whales, seals and dolphins.



PREVIOUS PAGE: On the vlei; Marina Clunie in her art studio

THIS PAGE: The iconic Bokkom Laan; bokkoms drying; a gull perched on a pole in the Berg River estuaty

"Velddrif and its surrounds also offer an abundance of water sports and are a foodie's paradise. Whether your appetite is calling for a hearty breakfast, wood-fired pizza, hamburgers, crispy fresh salads, artisanal baked treats and cakes, vegetarian dishes, traditional country fare or anything in between – this area offers it all, from eclectic and rustic to fine-dining or takeaways enjoyed as a picnic while you watch birds."

"Like everything else in Velddrif – there is a wealth of accommodation options available to appeal to everyone. Many glorious locations up and down the Berg River provide accommodation which ranges

THIS PAGE: A heron in the sedge grass; a pelican on Bokkom Laan

NEXT PAGE: Bokkom Laan birds (clockwise) - African darter; great white pelican; snowy egret; black-winged stilt

from rustic to luxury, as well as various camping sites which enjoy exceptional views and offer great bird sightings. In the town itself, visitors can choose from self-catering apartments, cottages, and holiday homes, as well as B&Bs, guesthouses, and hotels," says Ndlangisa.

So, for those starting on their birding journey – buy a bird book, a pair of binoculars and a small pocket notebook to begin cataloguing all of the birds you see when you visit Velddrif and its surrounds. For the experienced twitcher, be sure to purchase a new notebook to make room for the multitude of bird species you will be able to list after a trip to the area. For families wanting to bird-watch together and get the younger members excited and on board, pop in at the tourism offices in Velddrif and pick up a full-colour photographic bird spotting list for the kids to tick off.

www.bergrivertourism.co.za

FOR THOSE STARTING ON THEIR BIRDING JOURNEY – BUY A BIRD BOOK, A PAIR OF BINOCULARS AND ENJOY TICKING OFF THE BIRDS YOU SEE

Bird pics JMM Sonya

Blooming Perfect

the Cape West Coast's Spring Wild Flower spectacle

THE ANNUAL SPRING flower display put on by mother nature is a spectacle that has become world-renowned and is touted as being an experience of a lifetime.

A riot of colourful indigenous blooms carpeting the landscape from the Cape West Coast up to Namaqualand and inland to the Cederberg draws visitors from near and far who flock to marvel at this botanical masterpiece.

For those who are keen to relish and immerse themselves in the spring wildflowers in August and September, a highly recommended and unique three-day tour is available that offers a front-row seat to the best of the flowers in chauffeur-driven, guided comfort. The 3-day West Coast Spring Flower Tour takes you on a whirlwind journey through the Cape West Coast, the Cederberg and the Klein Namaqualand – visiting all of the very best flower-spotting locations along the way.

The tour in a snapshot

On day one, guests are collected

Words & Pics - Supplied

from The Lodge at Atlantic Beach in Melkbosstrand, and after breakfast the tour departs towards Citrusdal, where the flower show begins. Following a stop off in the Piekenierskloof Passrthasthsths for coffee and refreshments, guests will then enjoy lunch in Clanwilliam and a visit to the Ramskop Garden before heading off to the spectacular Biedouw Valley with its blankets of flowers. The first night of the tour is spent in Vanrhynsdorp at Letsatsi Lodge where dinner will be served.

On day two, after a hearty breakfast, guests are taken to the succulent nursery in Vanrhynsdorp before travelling up the spectacular Vanrhyns Pass to Nieuwoudtville where the tour explores the Quiver Tree Forest, and then the Nieuwoudtville Waterfalls. The rest of the morning is spent discovering the flower farm in Matjiesfontein, followed by lunch at Matjiesfontein farm. The day is rounded off with a visit to the remarkable Hantam Botanical Gardens before returning to Vanrhynsdorp for the second night and dinner.

The third and last day of the tour travels back via Clanwilliam, Leopoldtsville, Dwarskersbos, and then from Velddrif to Langebaan. In Velddrif, the tour visits the famous Bokkomlaan, which is a dirt road that snakes along the beautiful Berg River and is a heritage site and living museum.

Following this, guests are chauffeured to the Postberg Flower Reserve for spectacular flower sightings and a picnic lunch – this is definitely a

highlight of the day, and tour, as this part of the park is only open for two months of the year!

In the late afternoon the tour will make its way back to the Lodge at Atlantic Beach in Melkbosstrand where the flower journey comes to an end. The tour includes two nights at The Lodge at Atlantic Beach (before and after excursion dates), two nights at Letsatsi Lodge in Vanrhynsdorp, four breakfasts, three dinners, three lunches, water and snacks on the bus, coffee stops and wine tastings, as well as transport in modern air-conditioned vehicles by a registered Cathsseta guide.

There is also the option to be collected and returned from and to the Cape Town International Airport for guests who wish to fly in to do this excursion.

“Nowhere else in the world can you experience such a dramatic, exciting and exuberant awakening to spring, and West Coast Way is extremely excited about the 3-Day West Coast Spring Flower Tour and to be able to offer people the chance to see and intimately experience this annual natural spectacle. Visitors can look forward to being immersed in a kaleidoscope of colour as well as culture, exciting activities, warm people and beautiful scenery, where at every corner there is a new and intriguing offering,” says Carmen Lerm, founder and CEO of West Coast Way.

Tour departures are scheduled for Sunday 13 August, Thursday 17 August, Sunday 27 August and Friday 1 September. The cost per person sharing is R12 000.00 (Incl VAT), with a single supplement of R2 300.00 (Incl VAT) if travelling alone. For those who do not require accommodation in Cape Town, the cost is R10 235.00 (Incl VAT) per person sharing.

For more information or to book visit Book: 3 DAY WEST COAST WILD FLOWER TOUR - WEST COAST WAY

Pic - Christa Bohmer

Bush & Beach at MAKAKATANA BAY LODGE

Words - Tessa Buhrmann
Pics - Tessa & Daryl Buhrmann
(unless otherwise indicated)

THE ISIMANGALISO WETLAND Park Eastern and Western Shores is one of our favourite places to visit... we've been often, (read about that **HERE**) usually staying outside the park in one of the many self-catering options available in the town of St Lucia. But this time around we had the privilege of staying at the beautiful Makakatana Bay Lodge which is nestled within the coastal forest on the shores of Lake St Lucia in the Western Shores part of the park.

And besides the luxurious accommodation, delightful décor and absolutely delicious cuisine, the real privilege is the fact that it is the only privately owned lodge in South Africa's first UNESCO World Heritage Site!

The Greater St Lucia Wetland Park, as it was known as at the time – and now known as the iSimangaliso Wetland Park, was inscribed as South Africa's first World Heritage Site in December 1999. Since then, the iSimangaliso Wetland Park has expanded significantly and stretches from Maphelane in the south to the Mozambique border in the north, with its marine protected area (MPA) joining Mozambique's protected waters. As a result, the World Heritage Site is now 1,328,901ha in extent (marine and terrestrial combined) and is now South Africa's second largest protected area after the Kruger National Park.

Owned by Hugh and Leigh-Ann Morrison, an 'old' Zululand family with a rich history in Zululand, Makakatana Bay Lodge, which has been in the Morrison family for over 100 years, certainly sets the bar high when it comes to warm welcomes and hospitality.

From the moment we stepped into the main lodge, we were greeted with warm smiles and friendly faces. The wonderful staff dedicated to ensuring that every guest has a comfortable and memorable stay, taking care of our every need.

Much of the lodge is elevated and accessed by raised wooden walkways, which is just as well with the excessive rain the region has been having! The main lodge, blending seamlessly into the surrounding coastal forest, is inspired by the natural beauty of the area, with earthy tones, natural materials, and plenty of wood accents. Its décor stylish with an African flair having been decorated by Leigh-Ann herself, stunning original art adorns the walls (much of it Leigh-Ann's own work), several of which are available to purchase, with quite a few added to my wish list!

THE MAIN LODGE, BLENDING SEAMLESSLY INTO THE SURROUNDING COASTAL FOREST, IS INSPIRED BY THE NATURAL BEAUTY OF THE AREA

The stylish décor continues into our suite, which is beautifully appointed with comfortable furnishings, luxurious linens, and stunning views over the wetlands and the forest. The décor is understated yet elegant, creating a sense of calm and relaxation - just what you need for a restful night's sleep, with an outdoor shower and bathtub privately nestled within the

PREVIOUS PAGE: The verandah

THIS PAGE: Painting by Leigh-Ann Morrison; our suite - bedroom and outdoor bath

forest. A red duiker was the only company I had whilst under the warm spray of the shower – had I woken a bit earlier I would have had a troop of vervet monkeys eyeing me out.

The open-plan design of the main lodge creates a sense of space and airiness, allowing guests to feel connected to the environment around them through the floor-to-ceiling windows. The dining room and the surrounding veranda is set against a backdrop of lush greenery providing a panoramic view of the surrounding coastal forest. The tables are beautifully adorned, the woven

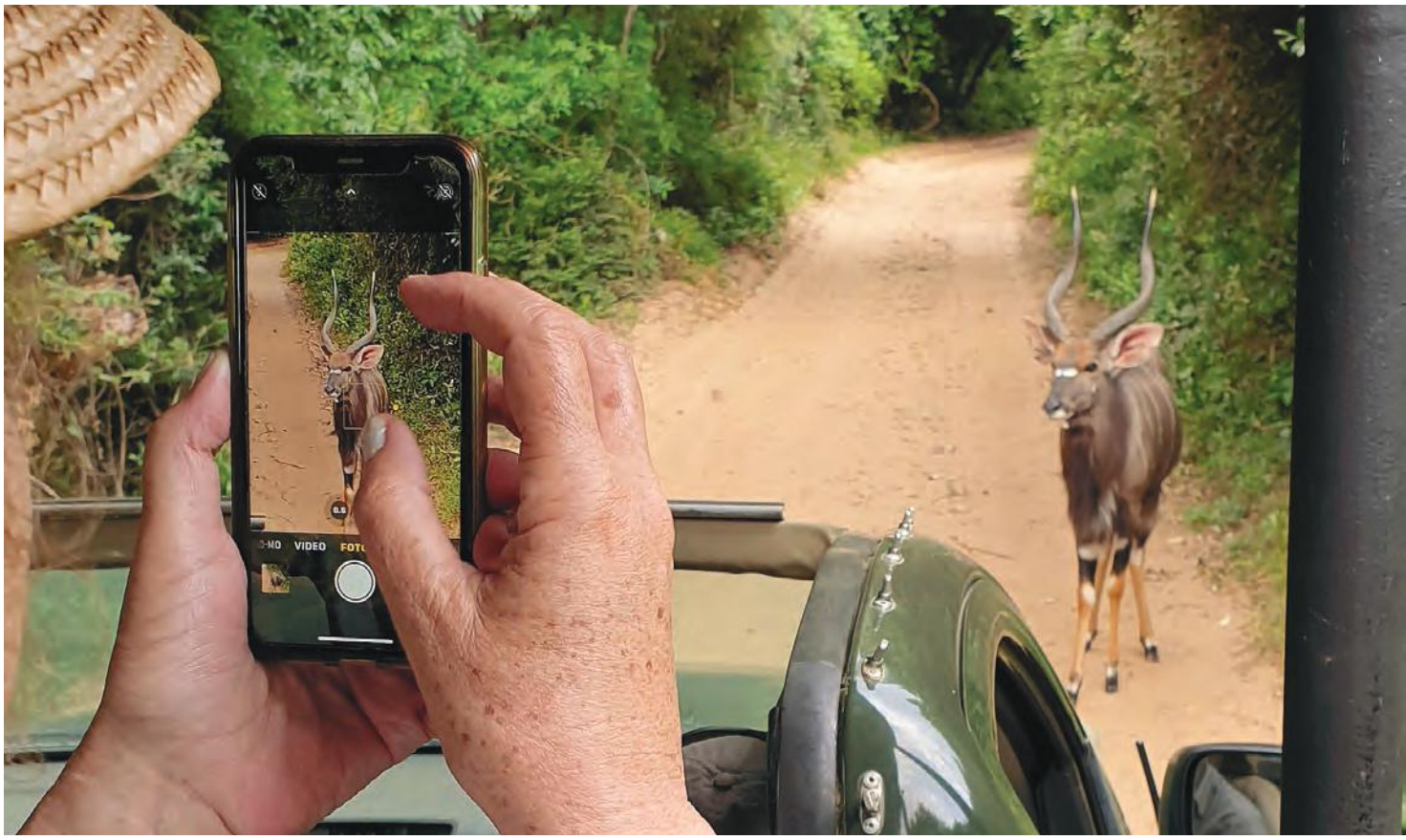
THIS PAGE: The outdoor dining area; smoked salmon salad for lunch; our waiter, Mnonto

NEXT PAGE: A photogenic male nyala; my early morning cappuccino

grass placemats giving a sense of place to the otherwise elegance of shining silverware and beautiful glassware, setting the stage for an unforgettable dining experience. We linger long over our meals, all enjoyed on the veranda, a basket of blankets nearby should there be a chill in the air. Such is our enjoyment of the space, and of course, the delicious cuisine!

Our meals, expertly created by chef Nadia and her team, are a fusion of flavours that tantalise the taste buds and are a feast for the eyes. All are beautifully plated and delivered with a compelling smile by Mnonto our waiter/bartender/barista (he made the best cappuccinos) – he was chuffed to tell us that he is also from eThekwini and loves working at the lodge, which is so much better than his previous position as a waiter at a Durban restaurant.

Nadia chooses local and seasonal produce where possible, sourcing the freshest ingredients from local farmers and fishermen to create a menu



THE AMBIANCE THROUGHOUT IS ONE OF TRANQUILITY, AND A ONENESS WITH NATURE. AND THANKS TO ITS REMOTE LOCATION OFFERS THE PERFECT ESCAPE TO RECONNECT WITH YOUR INNER SELF

that showcase the best of South African cuisine. From succulent grilled seafood to hearty game meats, every dish is a masterpiece of culinary artistry, bursting with flavour and colour.

A few of my favourites were the smoked salmon salad, a scrumptious mussel pot, and cardamom and star anise infused creme brûlée. The gluten free breads and cake she made for me an absolute treat. The ambiance throughout is one of tranquillity, and a oneness with nature. And thanks to its remote location and the sights and sounds of nature, Makakatana offers the perfect escape to reconnect with your inner self. It was quite tempting to pass on the game drives and just curl up on the deck of our suite with a book… or take a nap on the wonderfully comfortable king-size bed! But game drive time was calling.

The safari options offered to guests depend on the length of their stay, and include western shore safari drives, a boat cruise and a full day beach and bush safari drive through both the eastern and western shores.

The Western Shores side is appreciated for its spectacular views over the St Lucia Estuary and its drier palmveld vegetation with its diverse mammal species and abundance of raptors. Receiving only half of the rainfall of its eastern neighbour, it offers a completely different experience, with giraffes in abundance, great herds of waterbuck and plenty of buffalo.

THIS PAGE:
A journey of giraffe which are only found in the Western Shores; zebra, waterlilies growing in a hippo path

NEXT PAGE:
The vast and expansive Lake St. Lucia; a vervet monkey

It is also a great example of successful land rehabilitation. These open palmveld grasslands were once a forestry plantation, which by nature is a severely degraded eco-system. In the short space of a decade, iSimangaliso had removed thousands of hectares of alien trees and rehabilitated the natural landscape – the amazing thing is that no new vegetation was planted, nature did what it does best… grow, with dormant seeds sprouting forth.

This rehabilitated landscape has seen the reintroduction of historically occurring game including elephant, serval, tsessebe, giraffe, nyala, white and black rhino (which unfortunately have since been relocated due to the high poaching threat), buffalo, zebra, red and grey duiker, and wildebeest. And the numerous pans and wetlands offer visitors the opportunity of seeing hippos, crocodiles, an abundance of bird life – with over 500 species listed, and several species of waterlilies.

On the eastern shore, you'll find the Indian Ocean, picturesque bays, and long sandy beaches, where you can soak up the sun, swim in the clear waters, and even spot dolphins and whales.

The range of wetland habitats, including estuaries, mangroves, and swamps, are teeming with birdlife and other wildlife.

The iSimangaliso Wetland Park Authority is committed to conservation and sustainable tourism and has implemented several initiatives to protect its wildlife and ecosystems. These include anti-poaching patrols, reforestation programs, and waste management systems as well as working closely with the local community, supporting education and development projects. Makakatana Bay Lodge, through their concession fees and contribution to the park, support iSimangaliso in these initiatives.

I spend some time chatting to Leigh-Ann about Makakatana's conservation and sustainability initiatives, and she tells me that in addition to this they are very conscious about the environment and the effects that they have on it. She tells me that they control and monitor their water usage and wastage and have implemented a recycling program for their waste bottles, tins and plastics. The sorted waste is taken to a holding area outside the reserve and from there is collected for recycling by the local community – which in addition to dealing with the waste provides and income for the community members involved. They are hoping to expand this to include paper in the near future.

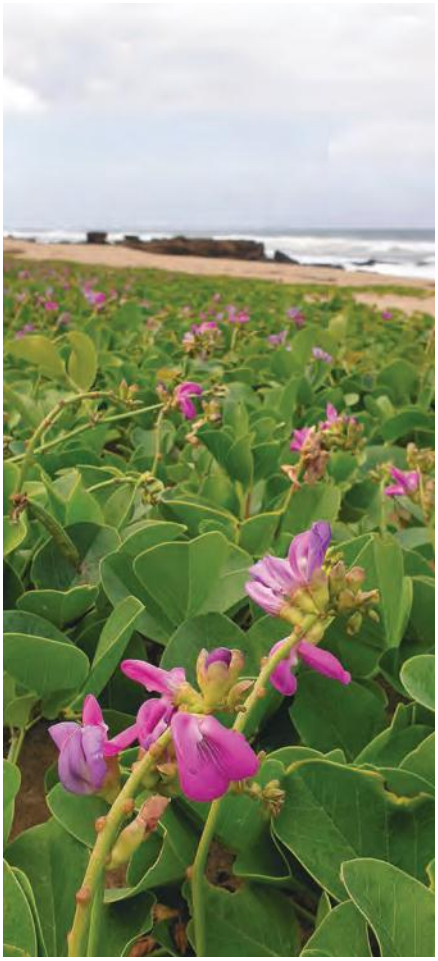
Makakatana has an energy saving system in place, and as we speak, Leigh-Ann tells me that their new solar system is being installed - this will not only make them less

reliant on the power grid, but also add to the reduction of their carbon footprint.

Being in a conservation area they are very aware of keeping their light pollution to a minimum, they have their own beehives, and are active in removing alien vegetation. There is a water filtering system on site, and

they serve filtered water in glass jugs to ensure that they don't use plastic bottles. And of course, they have a no plastic straws policy, with paper straws available on request.

The conservation levy that the lodge charges goes towards organisations and projects that 'are very close to our hearts' she tells me – these include African Wildlife Vets which is a non-profit veterinary organisation in Zululand, the Ezemvelo anti-poaching unit (the funds raised go towards purchasing equipment like binoculars and trap cameras) as well as Destiny House Children's Ministries in Mtubatuba, which exists to empower and enable children to fulfil their God-given destiny. They provide a loving home for 24 orphaned and abandoned children and



provide an Early Childhood Development Programme to the wider community.

Besides the game drives within the Western and Eastern Shores, there are a couple of experiences that are exclusive to Makakatana Bay guests… a picnic lunch and beach time at one of the many bays within the Eastern Shores and a boat cruise that takes you beyond where the general public go along the narrows.

We drive along a narrow road through pristine coastal vegetation to a clearing in the forest, here Megan our guide shows us the steep sandy track down to the beach and the beautiful bay – a momentary shower passes and for the next couple of hours we explore the rocky shores, walk on the

beach, and brave the cooler temperature with a quick dip in the bay.

A delicious lunch under mottled sunshine follows, washed down with a Hunters (cider) or two. Many of the roads are water-logged, some accessible to 4x4 vehicles only and a few of them completely impassable.

The following morning, after a hearty breakfast, we set out for the boat cruise, which under normal circumstances would start at a private launch spot within the western shores but due to the excessive rain the road was inaccessible which meant a drive through to the main boat launch site in St Lucia. We are welcomed aboard the Makakatana boat by our skipper and boat guide Warwick Kriege, and safety drill done, we set off to explore the lake hoping to be greeted by the array of wildlife, birds, and trees that call this place home.

Gliding through the still waters, we keep your eyes peeled for hippos and soon spot a pod of them near the lake shore, they bob up and down in the water, their beady eyes and fleshy pink faces peeking above the surface – a baby stays close to its mother, braving the open water on occasion to check us out, or at least that's what I told myself. These herbivorous beasts might look docile and relaxed in the water but are among the most dangerous in Africa. We keep our distance so as to not disturb them.

As we make our way through the channels of the lake, we see stark tree trunks and leafless branches where once lush mangroves lined the banks. Mangroves, with their twisted roots and branches, provide a vital habitat for many species of

PREVIOUS PAGE: Exploring one of the beuatiful little bays in the Eastern Shores

THIS PAGE: A picnic in the forest after our beach visit; enjoying the boat cruise; a pod of hippos

birds and fish, making them an essential part of an estuarine ecosystem. Unfortunately due to excessive rain and higher water levels over an extended period of time, as well as subsequent silting, they are dying.

And speaking of birds, we keep a look out for water birds such as the goliath heron, which can often be seen standing like a sentry in the shallow waters, and the African jacana, whose long toes allow them to walk on lily pads. But again, the higher water levels put paid to us seeing them, but we do see a brown-hooded kingfisher, its white and blue wing feathers quite distinct as it takes off from its perch, propelling itself upwards in preparation for a dive into the murky lake waters to catch small fish.

Drifting along slowly, the iconic call of an African fish eagle breaks the silence, we pause for a coffee break, opportunistic barbel swim around the boat taking advantage of what our presence might bring. A chunk of deliciously sweet honeycomb is our dessert – from the hives at the lodge, Megan tells us.

We spot a few more hippo but they high-tail it into one of the many channels leading out of the lake. There are far fewer hippos than normal, Megan explains that this is due to the higher water level in the lake… hippos need to be able to stand so most had moved to shallower water bodies, which are plentiful after the rain. The same applied to the Nile crocodiles as the sandy banks that they would usually be basking on were submerged. But, she said, don't be fooled, as we could have past several lurking just out of sight waiting for their next meal. These

Pic - Jaco du Plessis

PREVIOUS PAGE: An inlet into the lake showing the dying mangroves; Makakatana Bay honey

THIS PAGE: Hippo and crocs - what one would normally see; the hippos that we did see; brown-headed kingfisher

prehistoric creatures are known for their stealth and ferocity, making them a formidable predator, and with an estimated 1200 plus of them in and around the estuary I wouldn't be surprised!

The weather during our stay at Makakatana Bay Lodge wasn't the greatest, starting off with strong winds – which of course had both birds and beasts heading for cover. During the course of our few days we had everything from gloomy skies and patches of sunshine to the

THIS PAGE: Red-billed teal;Senegal lapwing

NEXT PAGE: clockwise - butterflies; bushbuck; kudu; waterbuck; blue-cheeked bee-eater; little grebe, malachite kingfisher

glorious sunshine of our last day and the wind-driven soft rain of the day before that had us choosing to head for 'home' to enjoy sundowners in comfort. Together with Swiss guests, we had at least enjoyed an authentic African Spa, a game drive bush massage, and a fresh rain facial.

The game viewing and birding may not have been as prolific as usual due to the weather, but we still saw zebra, giraffe, buffalo, wildebeest, nyala, kudu and a sizable herd of waterbuck, amongst others. Red-billed teal, Senegal lapwing, and malachite kingfisher were plentiful, and we even watched the drama of a western osprey being persistently dive-bombed by a pied crow.

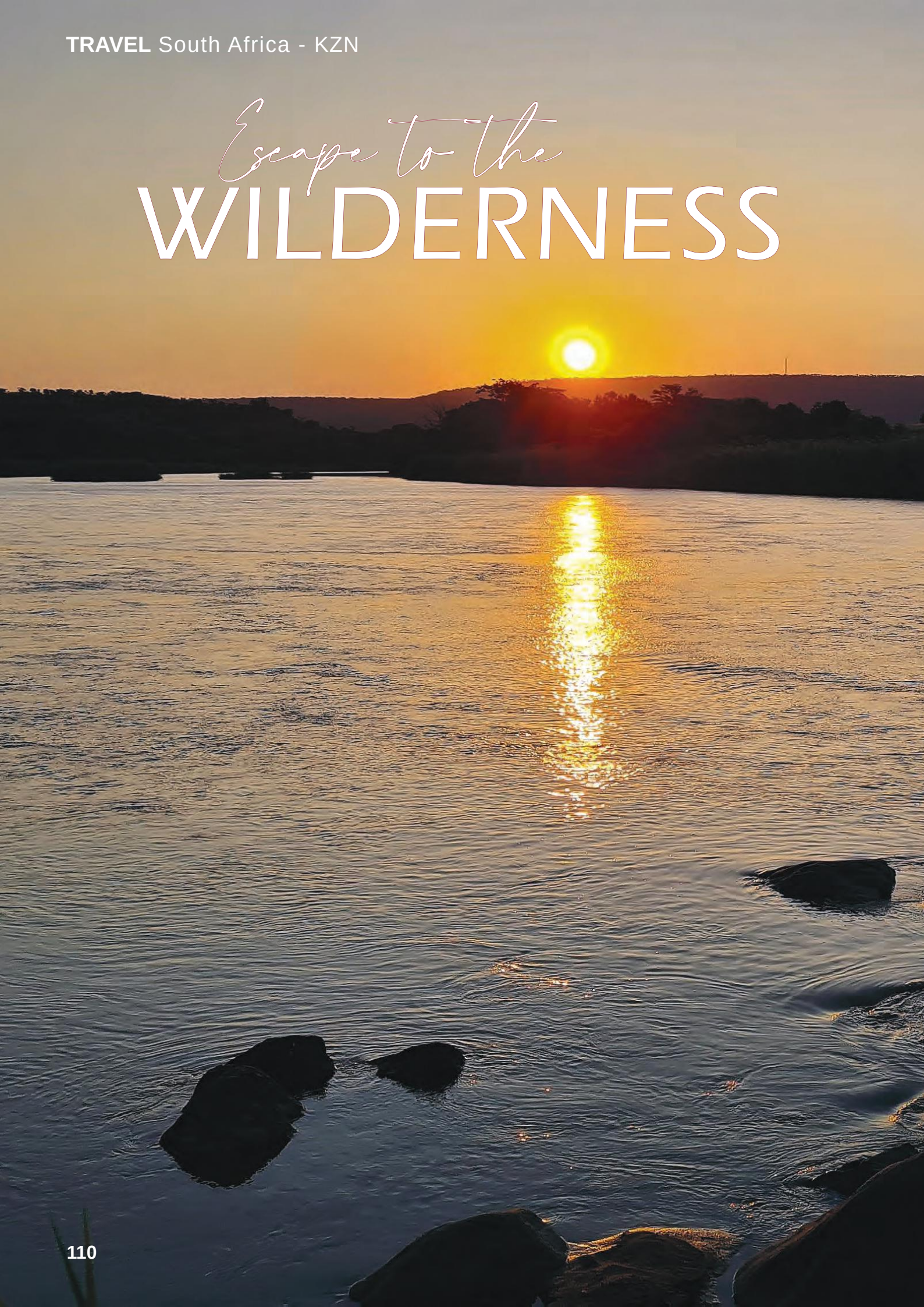
The vegetation was lush, and all shades of green, the hippo trails through the wetlands were resplendent with the blooms of waterlilies. A 'butterfly bush' – for lack of a botanical identification, was amass with butterflies, either laying their eggs or feeding, we weren't sure, but a delight to see all the same.

GRAB YOUR SUNSCREEN, YOUR BINOCULARS, AND YOUR SENSE OF ADVENTURE, AND GET READY TO EXPLORE THIS INCREDIBLE DESTINATION

So, whether you're exploring the eastern or western shores of iSimangaliso Wetland Park, you're in for a treat. With its stunning landscapes, diverse wildlife, and rich history, the park is a true gem of South Africa. So grab your sunscreen, your binoculars, and your sense of adventure, and get ready to explore this incredible destination.

www.makakatana.com

Escape to the WILDERNESS



Words - Tessa Buhrmann
Pics - Tessa & Daryl Buhrmann

...at iMfuleWozi

The White iMfolosi was bathed in warm amber light as the setting sun cast its final rays across the water, suffusing everything with a sense of magic and wonder. I marvel at this wild and natural place, gazing across a river that elephants have crossed for centuries, and still do. A place where the Big 5 roam freely and conservation a priority. But it is also a place where the well-being of the local community and the Zulu culture is of utmost importance.

I HAD VISITED mFulaWosi Wilderness before, spending a couple of days in their uber-chic and more sophisticated **Biyela Lodge**, located in the heart of Zululand in KwaZulu-Natal. But being more of a bush girl, and wanting to escape from the hustle and bustle of city life, I chose to immerse myself in the stunning natural surroundings of Mthembu Lodge.

The lodge itself is off-grid and a marvel of modern design, seamlessly blending traditional African style with modern amenities to create a truly luxurious and comfortable experience – one that started with the beautiful smiles of assistant lodge manager Chennai Ndemera and butler Nomthi Khanyile, welcoming us with refreshing lemon grass fragranced facecloths and a chilled beverage on our arrival.

MTHEMBU IS OFF-GRID AND A MARVEL OF MODERN DESIGN, SEAMLESSLY BLENDING TRADITIONAL AFRICAN STYLE WITH MODERN AMENITIES

The wilderness beyond drew me like a magnet, the delightful décor, with its warm woods, rich fabrics, and vibrant pops of colour a feast for the eye. The expansive lounge with its plush sofas and armchairs comes complete with a fireplace for cooler evenings and the dining space, both indoors and out, offers stunning views of the surrounding wilderness – as

does the stunning infinity pool and nearby bar, the perfect spot to enjoy a cold drink and swap stories with fellow travellers. Mthembu Lodge offers a variety of luxurious rooms, each designed to provide guests with the ultimate in comfort and relaxation, and ours was no exception.

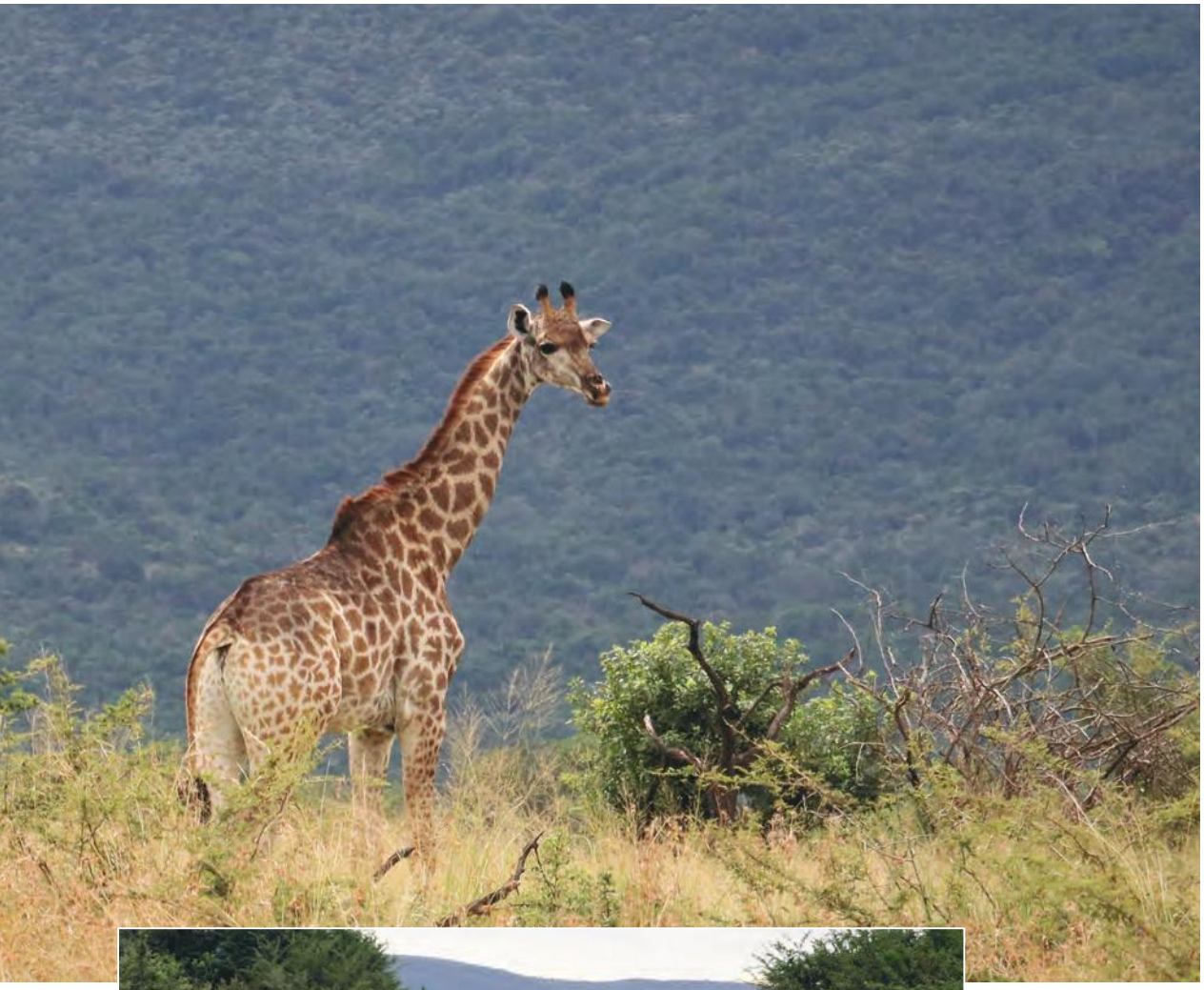
I walk through our spacious and elegantly appointed suite onto our private deck, two chairs perfectly positioned to take in the panoramic views of the surrounding wilderness and for my hubby to capture the antics of the resident crested barbet. The unique décor has a modern aesthetic with the finest bespoke furnishings and traditional Zulu accents – with the grass mats and baskets sourced locally. From the king-size bed with its voluminous mosquito net to the free-standing bath and the outdoor shower, the floor to ceiling glass ensures that the splendour of

PREVIOUS PAGE: Mthembu Lodge deck, perfect for outdoor dining

THIS PAGE: The spacious and beautifully appointed suites; welcome drinks; Chennai Ndemera welcoming us to Mthembu Lodge

the natural environment is just a glance away.

The exquisite décor throughout the lodge bears the unique trademark of Ballito-based designer Michele Throssel, the niece of the late Dr Ian Player, who decades before had essentially saved the white rhino from extinction with his Operation Rhino initiative. The rudimentary rondavels that he and Magqubu Ntombela, his friend and wildlife guide, stayed in during this period are now home to the Mthembu Lodge



PREVIOUS PAGE: Stylish interior décor; the old rondavels that are now the spa

THIS PAGE: Giraffe; and zebra

spa. And the derelict stables a little further away are destined to be reimagined too.

But the real highlight of a stay at Mthembu Lodge is the opportunity of taking in this expansive wilderness area, a true conservation legacy. Led by our experienced guide, Aidan Hill we explore the riverine forest, thick bush and expansive grasslands of the mFulaWosi Wilderness in search of the incredible wildlife that calls this area home. From majestic elephants and graceful giraffes to stealthy lions and elusive leopards, the mFulaWosi Wilderness is home to an incredible array of wildlife – but with all real safari experiences seeing the Big 5 is no guarantee.

A dazzle of zebra enchant us, we watch as their tails swish and with barely a glance they continue head down to graze, a nearby herd of impala aren't quite as nonchalant, the ram very aware of our presence and ready to snort a warning should the need arise. Aidan has a wealth of knowledge and shares interesting facts continuously – I learnt that a young zebra has long thin legs and a shallow belly to give it the same profile as an adult, which enables it to be concealed easily within the herd at times of threat from a carnivore.

Sundowners beckon and we head to a spot on the river's edge. There's nothing better than a G&T in the African bush, Aidan shows us tracks in the sand and tells that this is a favourite crossing spot for the elephants, and that there is also an old hyena den nearby. It's getting dark so we head back

on our night drive. Fiery-necked nightjars dot the road in front of us, and we spot an eagle owl in the trees beyond, he peers at us for a few moments then flies off into the darkness.

A dark form comes lumbering towards us out of the night. We stop a good distance away, but the young elephant bull keeps coming, Aidan speaks to him gently, he pauses in front of our vehicle – just asserting himself dominance in a non-aggressive manner Aidan tells us. Deciding that he's made his point he saunters off into the bush. A memorable night drive moment with a flutter of adrenalin.

We enjoy an equally memorable moment the next morning… Our wakeup call is followed by freshly brewed coffee and rusks in the dining room, and with a snug blanket over my legs we set out on our morning drive. A small herd of buffalo give us the hairy eyeball, Aiden points out the tracks of a black rhino, I scan the thick bush expectantly. The sun gradually makes its appearance through the wispy clouds, and the grasslands glow in the golden light, and an elephant stands silhouetted against the milky sky.

I watch as it walks slowly towards us, nonchalantly

AN ELEPHANT WALKS SLOWLY TOWARDS US, I CAN SEE EVERY DETAIL OF ITS WEATHERED, WRINKLED SKIN AND ITS DELICATE EYELASHES

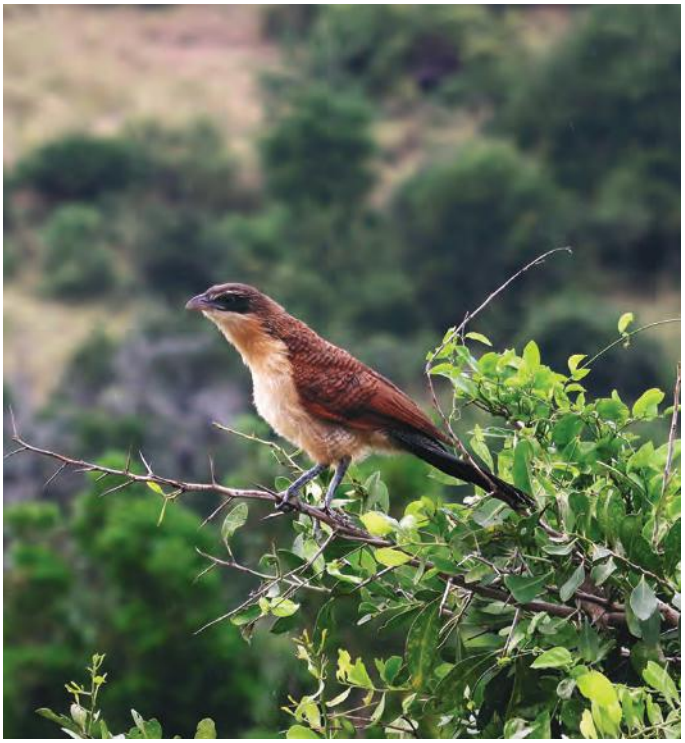
pulling up tufts of grass, it barely pays us any notice whilst continuing to come closer. The sunlight reflects off its ivory tusks, it raises its trunk as if to sense our intent. I can see every detail of its weathered, wrinkled skin, the delicate eyelashes and the deep rich glow of its golden eyes. An earthy musk emanates from its massive body, and I am struck by the incredible presence of this gentle giant.

It's the same young male as we saw the night before… he is completely relaxed, and I sit in awe as he looks at me with his gentle, intelligent eyes then continues to feed alongside our vehicle – if I stretched out my hand, I could almost touch him. I forget to take photos, and just enjoy the moment.

We stop for our coffee break alongside the river – there's nothing better than Amarula coffee with homemade cookies and muffins. I raise my mug in a toast to our magnificent elephant encounter and the riverine bush alive with birdsong.

mFulaWozi is home to a wide variety of plains game, we pause to watch as a herd of impala leap and bound through the golden grasses, their long slender legs carrying them effortlessly as they graze on the tender green shoots. In the shade of a nearby thicket, a small family of warthog snuffle and snort as they search out roots and bulbs, their bristly hides and distinctive tusks a reminder of their rugged resilience, and their tails straight as an aerial as they scamper off.

A pair of secretary birds stride across the plain, and a Burchell's coucal, calling incessantly, suns itself on a bush, hopefully it



PREVIOUS PAGE: Sundowners overlooking the White iMfolosi; African elephant

THIS PAGE: Coffee stop on the iMfoloso River; Burchell's coucal

won't be living up to its name as a rainbird! In the distance, a group of zebras can be seen, their sleek black and white stripes shimmering in the sunlight as they graze, wildebeest snort and grunt, their shaggy manes and broad shoulders a symbol of their formidable strength.

Dining at Mthembu Lodge is an absolute treat, with a wide selection of scrumptious cuisine coming from exec chef Prince' Msimangas kitchen – he tells me that many in his team come from the local community and started off with little to no kitchen experience, but under his watchful eye and careful tuition now excel in creating all manner of deliciousness. William Ntokoza, he tells me

THIS PAGE: Breakfast with a view, Exec Chef Prince Msimanga

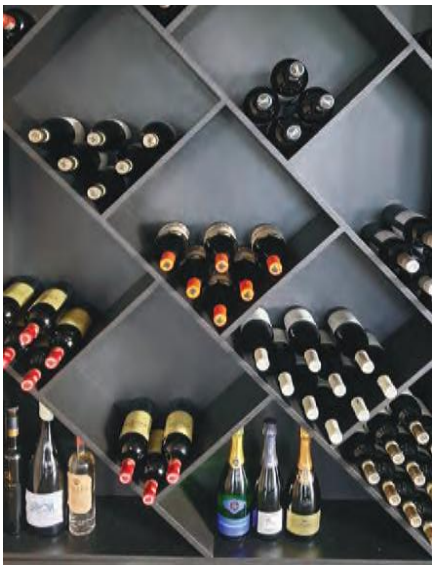
NEXT PAGE: The dining room; lunch on the deck; my Mnandi Stack; the delicious pavlova

proudly, started off in the scullery when the lodge opened, but has progressed to sous chef, and is now second in command. He jokingly tells me it's the Mthembu cooking school!

A few of my favourites during our stay were the yummiest gluten-free cookies I enjoyed on our game drives, the Mnandi Stack for breakfast (French toast, gluten-free for me, with brûlée bananas and caramelised apple, maple syrup, bacon and wild basil cream – your mouth watering yet?) and the beautifully presented and equally delicious platters for lunch on the deck, to international favourites and traditional African cuisine for dinner.

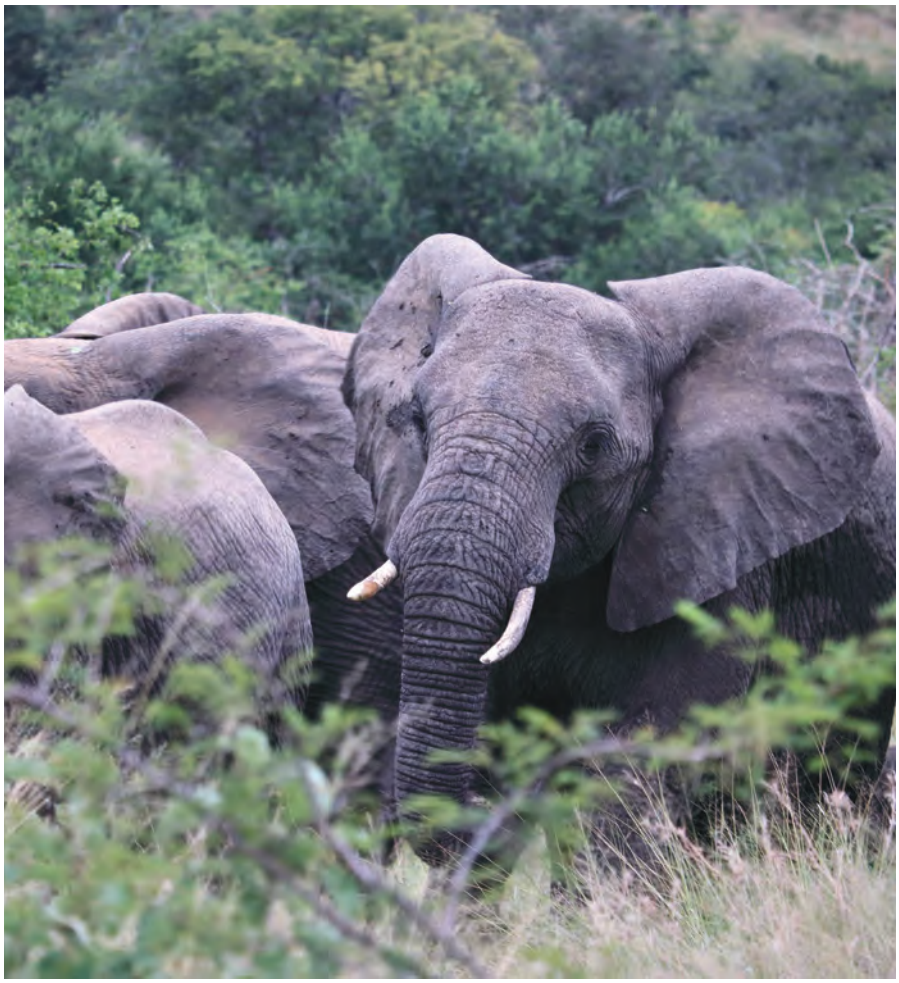
But the most memorable was the deliciously decadent pavlova he and his team created for me – along with a beautiful rendition of happy birthday. I pop into the walk-in wine cellar off the dining room – it's a chilled environment, so offers the perfect escape on a sweltering Zululand day. The

DINING AT MTHEMBU LODGE IS AN ABSOLUTE TREAT, WITH A WIDE SELECTION OF SCRUMPTIOUS CUISINE COMING FROM EXEC CHEF PRINCE'S KITCHEN



selection is vast, and I spot several wonderful South African wines - our barman, Nkanyiso Dlomo, aka 'The Doctor', kept us well hydrated with perfectly created G&Ts and wine paired perfectly with whatever chef Prince had created.

Guests from Biyela Lodge had spotted a subadult lion cub dashing through the bush earlier in the day when they were heading out for a guided walk, so that afternoon we headed out to look for tracks and try and find it. With almost military precision, the game viewing vehicles form both lodges traversed the roads in the area looking for tracks… but as with any safari experience, one goes with the flow, and instead of a young lion we were treated to wonderful sighting of a large herd of elephant.



We hear the breaking branches before we see them, and watch as they gradually come into view, munching their way towards us. There are several tiny ones, most in close proximity to the adults, except for one brave soul who rushed towards us, ears aflutter and trunk waving in the air – his bravado quickly failed, and he scampered back to the safety of his mom's legs.

A sundowner surprise saw us welcomed into a clearing to a table laden with a wide choice drinks and an assortment of snacks. Solar lights and safari chairs completed the 'out of Africa' scene, but unfortunately the sun didn't get the memo and we gazed at a moody, darkening

sky instead. Perhaps that rainbird knew a thing or two. Doctor tells us that they had seen an African rock python on their way there, and in the hopes of finding it we head off before night sets in, but to no avail. A white rhino hurries off, perhaps to find its companions, wildebeest snort and nyala scatter, Aidan dims the lights so as to not disturb them, a herd of impala who take their time moving off the road.

Heading out early the next morning we spot leopard tracks in the soft sand, they were just a stone's throw from the lodge, so perhaps unbeknownst to us we'd had a nocturnal visitor. I had heard the deep resonating call of a lion during the night, so I was still hopeful that we would find one. But for now we were till looking for the elusive black rhino.

There is plenty of evidence, but no rhino. What we do see is a determined leopard tortoise forging its way up the road and a bark spider whose web almost blocks our path; some nifty manoeuvring leaves its web undisturbed. I learn that a bark spider's web takes up to about six months to regenerate if it's destroyed – no wonder Aidan went to such lengths to avoid it. A martial eagle surveys the surroundings from its lofty perch, white-backed vultures sun themselves on treetops, waiting for thermals to develop and white-throated sunbirds flit around as they feast on bugs, and several more coucals tell of possible rain.

Pausing for coffee on Ndleke viewpoint, we take in the expansive view of the Wilderness area which stretches as far as the eye can see in an easterly direction. I smile as I hear a rooster crowing, its sound carrying from the Mthembu community.

PREVIOUS PAGE: The wine cellar; hred of elephants; eco sundowner lighting

THIS PAGE: The lovely Nomthi Khanyile; expansive views over the wilderness at Ndleke viewpoint

It is a gentle reminder of the incredible commitment that the Zulu chiefs from the surrounding communities made – all descendants of the Shaka dynasty, to extending the footprint of this conservation area by partnering with Barry and Sonja Theunissen and KZN Ezemvelo wildlife to create this incredible wilderness area.

Barry and Sonja's model with mFulaWozi, is one that champions a sustainable model for socioeconomic development within the local communities. The upliftment of these communities has enabled them to run various initiatives, from building projects in the community to the establishment of community gardens, which in turn has enabled them to create a resilient economic environment. Additionally, Barry and Sonja's commitment extends to the preservation and conservation of the rich Zulu heritage and culture that still runs deeply through these rolling hills.

MFULAWOZI'S MODEL IS ONE THAT CHAMPIONS SUSTAINABLE SOCIOECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT WITHIN THE LOCAL COMMUNITIES

We pass an old watering trough that was once used by the community to water their cattle and traverse the hills that were once the hunting ground of the Zulu King Shaka; and stop at the historic and culturally significant Ngomani spring. Aidan tells us that it's a natural spring that

never dries up where Shaka and his hunting party would stop to be refreshed and collect water during one of their hunting expeditions – it was also used by him to anoint his valued Zulu warriors when they became his indunas. Rumour has it that both King Cetshwayo and Ngomani, a close associate of both Shaka and Cetshwayo, are buried within 200m of the spring, something not everyone believes though.

Heading back for breakfast we spot fresh lion spoor on the road, a pair of them, and judging by the size, two large males. I wonder if it was them that I heard during the night. A little further on, are the tracks of a hyena… they are on top of our early morning tyre tracks so we must have just missed it. Aidan laughs, telling us that on our morning drive we saw the Big 5 by their tracks.

That, I think to myself, epitomises what a true wilderness experience is all about – it's about being out in the bush, never quite sure of what's around the next corner and never guaranteed what you'll see. But at the same time, relishing the expectation whilst still appreciating the wonder of the surroundings and all the creatures and critters that call it home... and the local communities that benefit from its existence.

PREVIOUS PAGE: The culturally significant Ngomani spring

THIS PAGE: Barman Nkanyiso Dlomo, aka The Doctor; a homestead in the local Mthembu community

Hiking with the Amphitheatre, Sentinel and Eastern Buttress in the background

Conquering Mountains

The Cavern's Big5Hike for education

Words - Tessa Buhrmann
Pics - Tessa Buhrmann (Little5Hike)
& Grant Pitcher (Big5Hike)

Some did it for fun, some for the challenge, but I'm sure all did it because they believed in the cause – making a difference in children's lives through education.

AN EDUCATION THAT begins with the inspiring work of the Royal Drakensberg Education Trust and their support of early childhood development, from infancy to 10 years in this rural and disadvantaged area of the northern Drakensberg.

Their mission is to provide quality educational opportunities so that young children can #learn2read and in turn #read2learn, starting from infancy with the carer and baby programme, BabyBoost, to early childhood development with the Khanyisela Project which supports several creches in the amaZizi community, and the Royal Drakensberg Primary School (RDPS) which provides a quality foundation to learning for children from age four through to ten. (Read more about these inspiring projects on page 144).

PREVIOUS PAGES: The Amphitheatre, Sentinal and Eastern Buttress

THIS PAGE: The Cavern kids; early morning start; incline up towards the coffee stop; teacher Mam Idah showing the effort it takes

But to understand the heart behind the cause, we need to go back to the beginning. To when a young Bill Carte proposed to his darling Ruth, and together, 80 years ago, their dream to build a life together and to make a difference, to the land, and to the people around them began. Bill's reason for being can be summed up in the words he uttered in 1941; "Our work is to create beauty, to make the land more fertile, to make our living, to leave the world better than when we came into it".

But as we all know, life tosses curve balls, and Ruth was widowed after 13 short years of marriage and left with a small guest farm, four children, gravel roads and no power. But she stuck to it and continued the vision of building a farm and leaving the world a better place.

To Megan Carte Bedingham, Ruth's granddaughter and owner-manager of The Cavern, she is her inspiration and her 'ultimate warrior'. And in the same way that Ruth's success and fortitude came from the support of those around her, Megan attributes the success of the Big5Hike, and by extension support for the Royal Drakensberg Education Trust, to the wonderful Cavern community and the greater community of sponsors, hikers and supporters that surrounds them.

A few weeks before the Big5Hike Megan was approached by some past RDPS pupils about joining the hike. She asked them each to send her a letter of motivation for sponsorship, which she then shared on social media and sent to their Cavern database. She included the stories of Idah, who has been with them since

the school began and Teacher Thoba, who in his 33rd year is living his purpose. Added to this was Lucy the spaniel "to mix to bring in a little bit of cuteness and tug at the heartstrings".

Megan was astounded at the way the greater community had responded this small fundraising drive, which resulted in about R114k being added to their fundraising amount. "It was a global village that donated… we could do this" she said, "and as we raise these important Rands and challenge ourselves to long walks and scrambling up mountains we begin to feel like the warriors of Ruth's legacy".

Arriving on an unexpectedly wet autumn afternoon each of

PREVIOUS PAGE: Early start at the Cavern; all kitted out for the Big5Hike

THIS PAGE: Hiking is a family affair; The Carter clan - Steve, Georgie, Tony, Simon & Paul

the hikers, who had each raised nine thousand rand – some even more, registered for the event and collected their goodie bag, filled to the brim, thanks to the generosity of sponsors. There was much laughter and conversation as friends and families united, some travelling from all corners of the country, and many having done several of the Big 5 Hikes over the years.

Most of the 93 hikers were doing the Big5Hike, a fairly strenuous hike with steep sections and some scrambling summits the five peaks around the Cavern and is approximately 18kms in distance and usually takes about eight hours to complete. The slightly less challenging and no less spectacular Little5Hike is for those who aren't quite as fit or have a couple of health issues.

Wine tasting, thanks to Spier Wine Farm and Meander Fine Wines, set the tone for a festive and fun weekend. As did the hike briefing from Megan and the

THIS PAGE:
HIking through the Fern Forest; Gusto keeping up with the Little5Hikers

NEXT PAGE:
Enjoying the sunshine after the forest; the welcome M&B coffee stop

encouragement of those who had hiked before… with tales of camaraderie, exquisite views and the sense of achievement that would come from it.

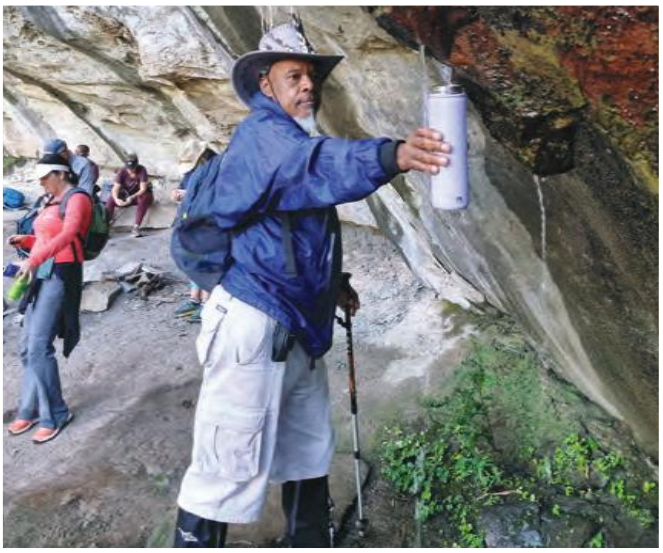
We woke to a gloriously sunny autumn day, the air still and the temperature crisp – the puffer jackets and beanies from our goodie bags were certainly being put to good use! Photographer Grant Pitcher was all kitted out to capture the moments and Marge the paramedic was on standby, just in case but thankfully she wasn't required!

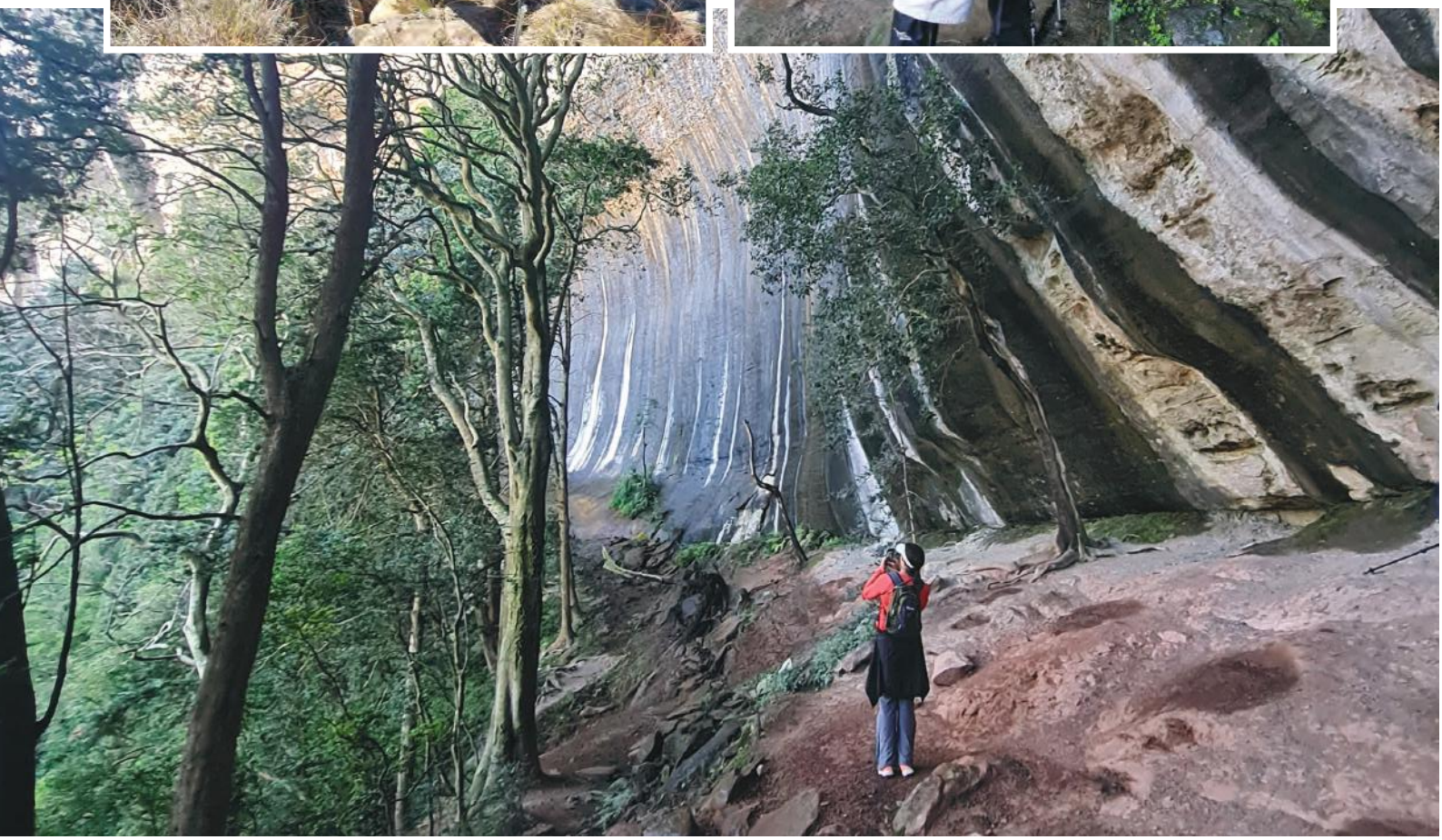
Leaving in batches, from the 'not-so-seasoned'-hikers at 06h30 to the 'gazelles' at 08h45, with the family hikers, and regular hikers in between, the Big5Hike began, with our group of Little5 hikers, along with Gusto the springer spaniel (Lucy had set off earlier to do the Big5Hike), setting off at a moderate pace at 09h00 from the Cavern front lawn.

The Little5Hike takes us beneath towering trees and along the gentle incline of the Fern Forest to greet the sunshine and the steep incline leading to the first refreshment stop - tea, coffee, hot chocolate and a M&B muffin or cookie kindly sponsored by Mugg & Bean Harrismith. All carried up before the break of day by the Cavern staff so that the kettle would be boiling on the open fire and the flasks full in readiness for the first group of hikers. Coffee and a Cavern crunchie have never tasted so good!

After a further incline takes us zigzagging to the top of the plateau and an imposing dome-shaped rock – we pause a while to appreciate the view. The path

MOST OF THE 93 HIKERS WERE DOING THE BIG5HIKE, A FAIRLY STRENUOUS HIKE WITH STEEP SECTIONS AND AOM SCRAMBLING





to the right leads up Rustlers Gap and Scillia Gulley – we take the gentle path left towards Echo Cave and the Big5Hikers continue up the steep incline.

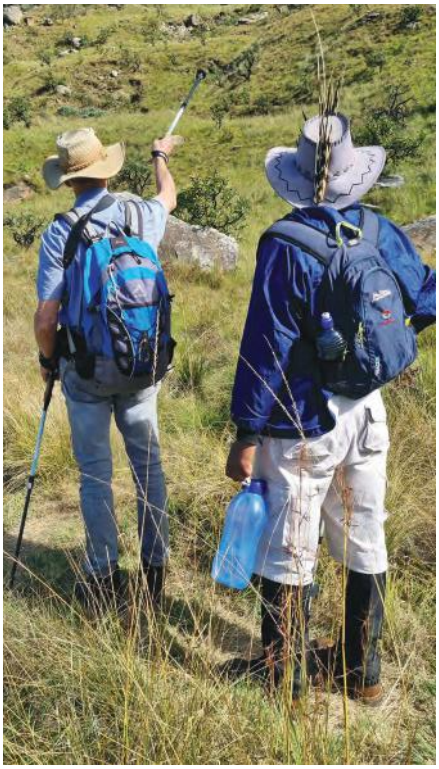
We pass moss-covered rocks and mountain streams as we head into the forest, the path hugging the vast sandstone cliffs. The Echo Cave, which is more of a shelter than a cave, towers over us like a giant wave, its walls streaked with black stripes caused by cyanobacteria growing in the water seeping over the rocks.

We fill our water bottles with chilled mountain water before setting off into the yellowwood forest. The descent is quite steep, but the abundance of yellowwood trees make useful supports. Khulu, Megan's Dad points out a small, delicate bamboo and tells us that it is rare and endemic, found only in the Berg. We pass an ancient yellowwood, clamber over rocks and cross another mountain stream. Back in the sunlight we appreciate where we've come from but cannot see where we're heading. We follow the Eland Contour, with its spectacular views, grasslands and proteas.

A steep incline has us at Lone Rock, which is not actually a 'lone' rock, but rather the only rock in the area adorned with rock art created by the San (Bushman) people giving us

a glimpse into the life of the hunter-gatherers of so long ago. We rest a while enjoying tea, and sweet treats sponsored by Out in Africa a tour operator based in the Netherlands and long-standing supporter of the Big5Hike.

From there it's a reasonably gentle meander before a not so small climb into Cannibal Cavern where we meet up with all the other hikers for a festive celebratory lunch.



PREVIOUS PAGE: Heading up the rocky trail; Filling our water bottles; Echo Cave

THIS PAGE: (clockwise) Rock art at Lone Rock; path to Lone Rock; Khulu hugging the large yellowood tree, and him pointing out a tree in the distance

The Big5Hike got serious when the hikers took the path to the right ascending up the steep incline via the Rustler's Gap and Scillia Gulley to Hlolela, which means 'a kind of beautiful', at 2,127m above sea level – this peak sponsored by Hollard.

From there hikers' contour along the summit of Hlolela and climb to Battleship, the second peak, sponsored by Dezzo Roofing. At Battleship there is a section of old rusted fence marking the boundary between KwaZulu-Natal and The Free State and offering views over the enormous Metsi Matso dam.

Despite the gloriously sunny day, I'm sure it must have been a bit

PREVIOUS PAGE: The view over Metsi Matso dam; Big5Hike hikers

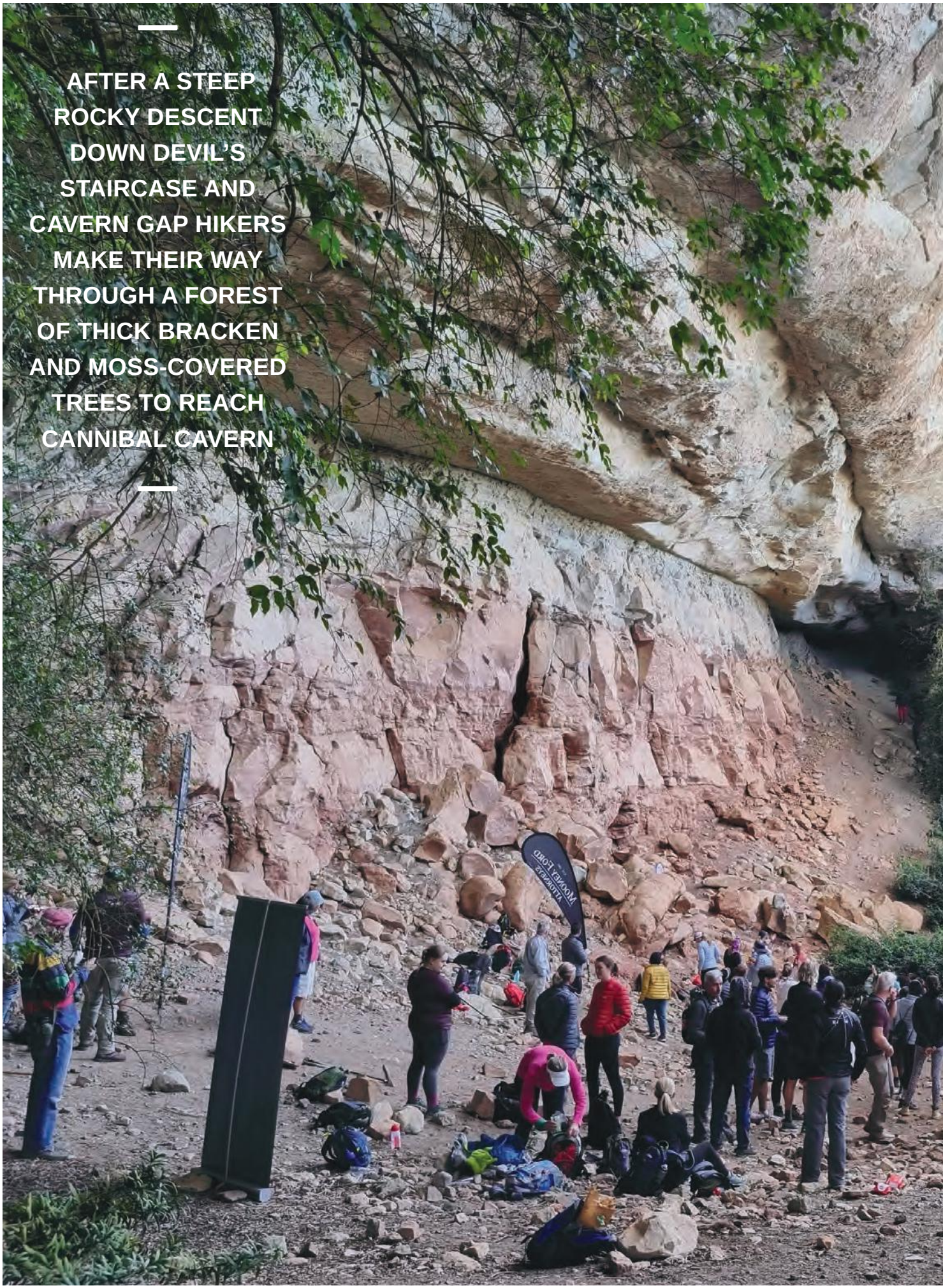
THIS PAGE: Lucy leading the way; at the top of Cold Hill; happy hikers

breezy up there, so the winter woollies would most certainly have been required! Descending from Battleship, past a collection of natural pools, which would be a great bathing spot on a hot summer's day, one reaches Sugar Loaf, the next peak.

At approximately the halfway mark, set on the sandstone cliffs and overlooking the valley below, is the ideal spot pause for a chilled water, energy drink and treats – sponsored by Sparkle Treats and then on to the peak of Sugar Loaf, sponsored by Audrey & friends', and to take in the beauty of the unrestricted views over the valley below.

From there it's on to the highest point on the hike, Cold Hill, sponsored by ClucasGray – and as the name suggests its isolation also makes it a great viewpoint offering magnificent views of the Amphitheatre including the Sentinel and Eastern Buttress.

After a steep rocky descent down Devil's Staircase and Cavern Gap hikers make their way through a forest of thick bracken and moss-covered trees to reach Cannibal Cavern, home to the ancestors of the amaZizi tribe – in earlier times it was



AFTER A STEEP ROCKY DESCENT DOWN DEVIL'S STAIRCASE AND CAVERN GAP HIKERS MAKE THEIR WAY THROUGH A FOREST OF THICK BRACKEN AND MOSS-COVERED TREES TO REACH CANNIBAL CAVERN

home to the San people with two very faded rock art paintings faintly visible. It was also where we were all welcomed at the Wimpy Stop in the Mooney Ford Cannibal Cavern for a Wimpy burger picnic lunch. It is a festive affair with hikers welcomed with cheers and Spier bubbles to celebrate the 4-down-1-to-go moment!

From here a few hikers headed back towards the Cavern – a couple had spa treatments that could not be missed! The rest made their way to the last peak, Camel's Hump. This final peak, sponsored by SORO, is tougher than it looks but the 360-degree views that it offers make it well worth the climb. From there its one long, but final downhill via the stables back to the Cavern – that final small uphill is said to be the most challenging of them all!

Royal Drakensberg Primary School learners excitedly waited for hikers to return, thanking them for their support and gifting them with a handmade shopping bag (thanks to several of the teachers) and a packet of

THIS PAGE: Wimpy burgers coming up; the lovely RDPS teachers serving Spier bubbly; the girls atop Camels' Hump

NEXT PAGE: Athandile one of the RDPS learners welcoming the hikers, Sibonelelo with the school children

ROYAL DRAKENSBERG PRIMARY SCHOOL LEARNERS EXCITEDLY WAITED FOR HIKERS TO RETURN

Epsom Salts to ease the weary muscles. Welcome home drinks on the lawn was sponsored by TOTAL Gateway, which included cold beer and G&T on tap, thanks to Notties Brewery.

This was followed by a HAPPY hour from 18h15 thanks again to Spier Wines and Meander Fine Wines for the wonderful selection of wines. Followed by heartfelt thank you speeches by Megan as well as Georgie Carter (RDPS Board Member).

“But just as in the case of Ruth, it’s the community, the friends, the supporters that come together and hold it up and so we extend our thanks to all our sponsors; Total Gateway, Melville Douglas, ClucasGray, Hollard, Dezzo Roofing, Audrey & friends, Mooney Ford Attorneys, Colenbrander, SORO Austria, Out in Africa Tours, the Netherlands” said Megan.

“Special mention to those that keep us well fed and hydrated; Bergview Wimpy, Mugg & Bean, Sparkle Treats, Spier Wine Farm, Meander Fine Wines, Ataraxia and VDP Distributors”.

What began as a commitment to 10 Big5Hikes on Megan’s 40th birthday as a means to raise funds for uplifting children has now just completed its ninth year. It has grown over the years with the number of hikers and the funds raised growing almost every year (2023 was slightly down in the number of hikers but not in the funds raised). The Cavern donates two days of trading to this cause, “one that we believe in completely”.

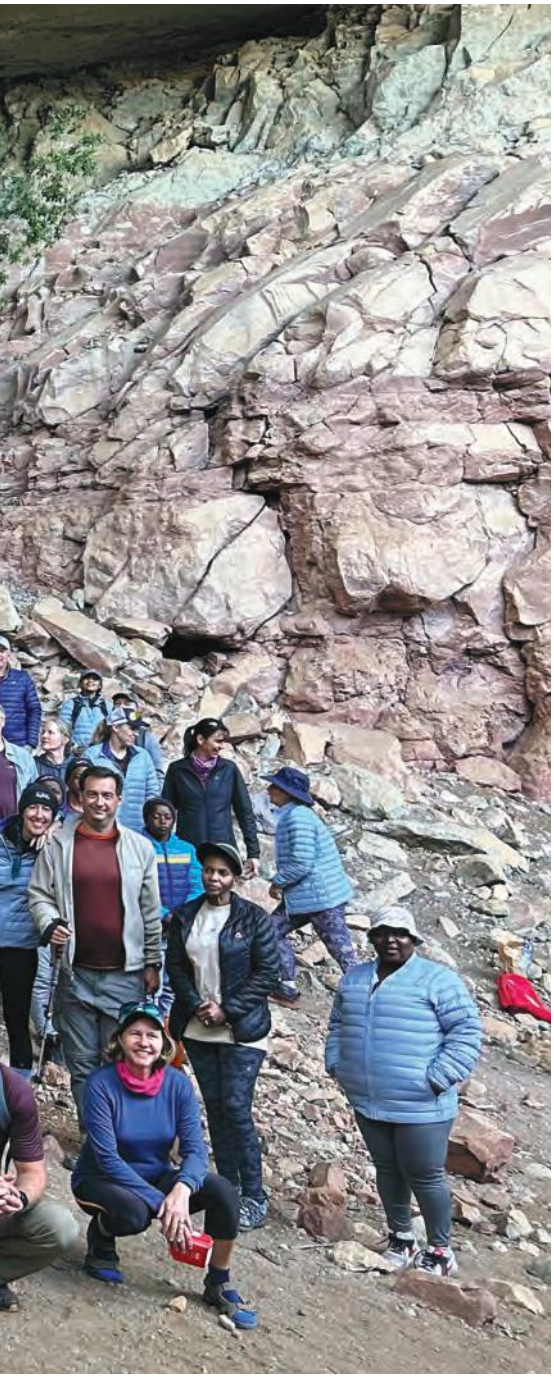
“It’s about uplifting children and turning the tide on a shocking statistic that says 80% of Grade

4 SA children cannot read with understanding" Megan says.

"Changing this begins in the first 1000 days where we stimulate neurological pathways through our BabyBoost programme. We grow and develop young children in our ECD, Khanyisela Project which supports 750 children and 50 practitioners and this all happens out of Royal Drakensberg, our hub and our heart… which incidentally has 103 little people enrolled in 2023. And our mission at Royal Drakensberg is that children learn2read so that they can read2learn".

TO EACH PERSON WHO PARTICIPATED IN THE BIG5HIKE WEEKEND, YOU ARE THE WARRIORS THAT ARE HELPING MAKE A SIGNIFICANT DIFFERENCE IN SOUTH AFRICA

"To each person who participated in the Big5Hike fundraising weekend, you are the warriors that are helping make a significant difference in South Africa. Not only have you touched the lives of 102 children at Royal Drakensberg, but you have helped us continue our work through the Khanyisela Project and BabyBoost.



PREVIOUS PAGE:
The hikers in Cannibal Cavern

THIS PAGE:
One of the RDPS learners hiking

www.cavern.co.za

"Together we impact more than 1000 children and over 50 women from our community. Together this is amaZizi reads. We are doing our best to change that terrible statistic that says that 80% of SA children in Grade 4 cannot read with understanding".

And as Megan says...

"HERE'S TO 2024 - THE FINAL ROUND!"

Read about our previous visit to the Cavern HERE – and all of the hikes mentioned here are available to do on any visit at the Cavern, some only with a guide and others unguided.

Royal Drakensberg Primary School learners welcoming Big5Hikers back

community

144
#Learn2Read
so that they can
#Read2Learn

156
The Pondo Trail Run -
a trail running
adventure with a
purpose

#Learn2Read

so that they can #Read2Learn

A recent article in Business Live states that according to UNICEF, there are no books in 43% of households with young children. And that a study by the Progress in International Reading Literacy Study 2021 found that 81% of Grade 4 children in South Africa cannot read with understanding.

With these alarming statistics, it's little wonder that the state of education is in such a shambles. A statistic that can have us just throw up our hands in despair and just walk away with a 'it's not my problem' attitude, or as in the case of Megan Carte Bedingham and her team, draw a line in the sand and say, 'not on our watch'.

We have likely all heard the quote, 'People perish for lack of vision', in various contexts. But as the Big5Hike wrapped up with speeches and celebratory toasts, Georgie Carter, Royal Drakensberg Primary School (RDPS) board member, shared in her speech that it was this quote that caught her attention on a podcast by clinical psychologist, Dr. Jordon Peterson (on the Jo Rogan Experience on Spotify). Additionally, Dr. Peterson spoke of the influence of narratives

in shaping society throughout history. These narratives, conveyed by various sources such as parents, teachers, media, and our selves (that little voice in our heads), can be perilous if blindly accepted without critical thinking.

Engaging too much with social and mainstream media can lead to a hopeless and fearful outlook. So, in Georgie's opinion it is crucial to periodically reflect and detach from our daily routines to gain perspective on the beliefs and stories that shape our identities. Georgie went on to say, "sometimes we need to challenge ourselves physically or mentally to do difficult things and in so doing find our resilience and courage. This is what Big5hike allows me to do".

"Secondly, it allows us to participate in a fundraising initiative that is genuine, relevant, effective and transformative. The narrative that is Royal Drakensberg Primary School is one that really makes a difference to little people's lives. It allows them to build a future and have an opportunity to attain work or even achieve something brilliant. It enables little people to learn to read in a meaningful way, it provides a meal for the children, and it provides a place where they can be nurtured, appreciated, and protected such that they can grow in confidence and maturity".

She went on to thank Megan Carte Bedingham and Loretta Mecklenborg (board member and co-founder of the RDPS) for "giving us a Vision in Royal Drakensberg Primary School and the education projects that extend into the amaZizi Valley".

"EDUCATION IS THE MOST POWERFUL WEAPON WHICH YOU CAN USE TO CHANGE THE WORLD" - NELSON MANDELA

And it is this passion and exemplary vision that provides the reason to gather at The Cavern each year, “to raise funds and be a part of their vision of transforming rural communities through quality education”.

“This change”, Megan says, “begins in the first 1000 days where we stimulate neurological pathways through our BabyBoost programme. We grow and develop young children in our ECD, Khanyisela Project which supports 750 children and 50 practitioners and this all happens out of Royal Drakensberg, our hub and our heart… which incidentally has 103 little people enrolled in 2023. And our mission at Royal Drakensberg is that children learn2read so that they can read2learn”.

BabyBoost carer and baby programme

BabyBoost is a program designed to support caregivers and babies during the crucial first 1000 days of a child’s life. Research shows that responsive interactions and stimulating care during this period greatly contribute to a child’s development. However, many caregivers lack awareness and resources to engage and nurture their babies effectively.

To address this need, BabyBoost was established in 2017. The program has evolved over time and now consists of a comprehensive programme that lasts approximately six months. Caregivers participate in structured workshops where they learn how to talk, read, play, sing, cuddle, and respond to their babies aged 4-18 months. Home visits provide opportunities for caregivers to apply what they have learned, while playgroups offer social interaction and practice. Additionally, toy and book libraries allow caregivers to borrow age-appropriate resources.

BabyBoost recognizes that caregivers, with the right knowledge and support, can profoundly impact their babies’ development. Therefore, the program aims to empower caregivers through trained local facilitators who provide guidance and assistance. Since its inception, BabyBoost has successfully implemented 13 programs in 11 locations, witnessing caregivers’ growth in confidence and knowledge.

The coaching groups are both enjoyable and informative, promoting and practicing key messages. Home visits enable caregivers to gain confidence within their own environment and receive personalised learning opportunities.

Playgroups offer a variety of educational toys and ample support for demonstrating and assistance. The toy and book libraries provide caregivers with essential resources to engage in talking, reading, and playing activities with their babies.

“Through BabyBoost,” says Megan, “we have found a way to make a difference to the youngest members of our community in this rural part of the Drakensberg Mountains KZN and via our fantastic BabyBoost Team and our great network of support we are creating waves of positive change. We believe that by focusing on early childhood development, we contribute to the wider impact: transforming not just the lives of children, but their communities, and ultimately their countries, making them healthier and more competitive in the global economy”.

PREVIOUS PAGE: BabyBoost mentors

THIS PAGE: BabyBoost fun time with moms and/or caregivers and their little ones

The BabyBoost programme enables local mentors to teach mothers and carers six key messages. These messages help them to interact with their babies in ways that boost their learning and communication development:

- **Talk to your baby**
- **Cuddle your baby**
- **Sing to your baby**
- **Read to your baby**
- **Respond to your baby**
- **Play with your baby**

Khanyisela Project

The Northern Drakensberg Khanyisela Project has several aims. Firstly, it strives to establish a network of educational facilities that meet national and international standards. This helps provide learners with a strong foundation for lifelong learning, fostering a community that embodies self-respect and empowerment.

Additionally, the project aims to stimulate the local economy by engaging small businesses and individuals from the community to fulfil its service requirements. Through the support of donors and funding agencies, this non-profit organization can make a positive contribution to the development of the area and the country as a whole.

One of the primary focuses of the project is teacher mentoring and training. While infrastructure is crucial, the project recognizes that the learning that takes place in the pre-schools on a daily basis is what truly transforms futures. With the assistance of corporate sponsorship, teaching practitioners have completed recognized qualifications in Early Childhood Development.

A mentoring program is in place to help with the practical implementation of the acquired knowledge. Three local teachers have been identified to mentor in the greater amaZizi Village: Sibonenelo Dlamini from Royal Drakensberg Primary School, Fikile Nene from Hlelokuhle Pre-School, and Mantombi Khoza from Sibusisiwe Pre-School. As mentors they provide guidance within classrooms, making learning both meaningful and enjoyable. Development plans, workshops, and collaborative efforts aim to improve teaching practices and provide necessary resources.

The project also contributes to upgrading facilities and ensuring ongoing maintenance at the 18 schools involved. Security upgrades, repairs, and refurbishments are carried out to ensure safe and hygienic learning environments. The provision of daily fortified porridge, in partnership with Retford Rotary from the UK, addresses the nutritional needs of the children, enabling their active engagement and stimulation.

Donations of knitwear, jumble items, books, and resources for early learning are accepted and

THIS PAGE: Happy kids at one of the community creches

NEXT PAGE: Three of the Khnayisela ladies; playtime; daily fortified poridge

sorted for distribution within the community. Lightly used jumble items are sold at reasonable prices, and the generated funds are reinvested in the projects. The project also promotes book sharing and community reading through the initiative of RDPS teachers visiting the community to read stories and distribute books to children, fostering a culture of reading from a young age and combating illiteracy.

Through these various initiatives and partnerships, the Northern Drakensberg Khanyisela Project strives to bring about meaningful change and improvement in education, infrastructure, nutrition, and literacy within the community it serves.

Royal Drakensberg Primary School

Recognizing the need for high-quality holistic education in the area, where resources and infrastructure are lacking, the establishment of an independent school became crucial. So in 2007, the Royal Drakensberg Primary School (RDPS) was founded to address this need. The school is located at the entrance to The Cavern, and as Loretta says, “was founded by much passion and the incredible grace of God”.

RDPS offers education from Grade 000 up to Grade 3 – with the possibility of adding a Grade 4 class in 2024. The school caters to a diverse range of backgrounds and abilities, reflecting the broader South African society, and its mission is to provide opportunities for every child to realize their potential, grow in confidence and empower them to take steps to act on what they have learnt.

Through a strong academic program, a beautiful natural environment, and a dedicated team of staff, the school aims to provide a solid foundation for children to thrive.

“We believe that there is a great need for holistic education of a world class standard in our area”, says Megan. “Conditions in these rural areas are poor and the teachers lack resources and infrastructure. We feel that an established independent school, which is properly staffed and managed, will go a long way to giving children the necessary grounding to reach their maximum potential”.

Spending some time walking through the school and chatting with Mam-Idah, and Teacher Thoba, one recognises the passion and commitment of each, and every person involved in the journey of this remarkable school, and the community projects that have grown from it, that continues to make a positive impact on the lives of its students.

In conclusion Georgie sums up what the Big5Hike fundraising weekend is all about…

“By being a contributor to Big5hike and thus to RDPS and the projects within amaZizi, allows us all, for a brief moment, to change our narrative particularly as it relates to us as South Africans, from one that can be pessimistic to opportunistic, from despondent to hopeful, from dark to light, from fearful to exciting, from depressing to joyful”.

Meet Thobani Ndlovu, aka Teacher Thoba and Head of School and Project Co-ordinator

Thoba arrived in July 2022, and he's been instrumental in lifting the spirits of both teachers and learners alike. He loves finding new and innovative ways of driving people forward and has a comprehensive understanding of the foundation phase of education. His favourite part of being a teacher is creating a safe space for children to thrive in being fully themselves – one of his favourite memories is singing in his grade R class. "I felt so free and uninhibited. It felt affirming to share the best parts of me without worry or care of how well I did or did not do".

Thoba's favourite number is 33, which is the age he turned in 2022, and had been looking forward to it for a long time! "It being the age that Jesus fulfilled his purpose on earth, and this made me aspire to the same. I had an idea that by this age I would realise and begin to actualise my purpose in life, which would lead to inner joy and peace. This has actually happened as the work I do now feels like such important work and that I am actually at the foot of my purpose! I am humbled by both the number and the age for the significance that it holds".

Meet Mam-Idah Radebe, Grade R teacher and 'mom' to all

Idah began her journey in the Cavern's playroom. Her enthusiasm, energy and genuine love of the children resulted in her moving to Royal Drakensberg in 2007 when the school started. She helped out, lent a hand, and began studies in early childhood development and later completed her Grade R certificate through UNISA.

Idah is a pillar in the school and has been there through each chapter. She has seen the children grow, she has celebrated their achievements and is an important connection to the amaZizi community. Idah has helped to increase the school's reach into amaZizi by welcoming Khanyisela practitioners into her classroom and sharing ideas and helping improve teaching in the region. "She has more energy than anyone we know and her enthusiasm at the Wednesday amaZizi reading afternoons is palpable!"

Meet Esihle Nkosi, former RDPS learner:

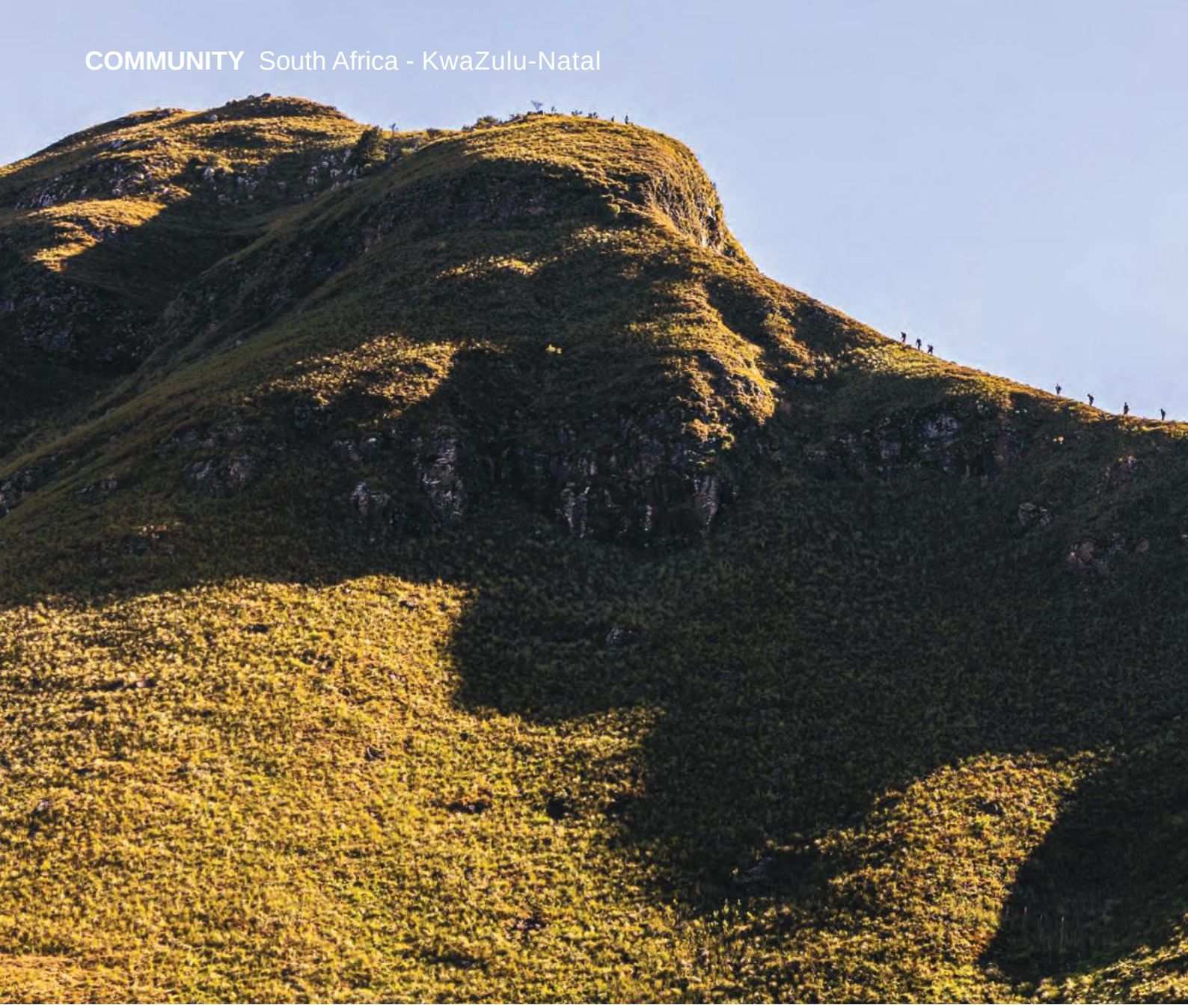
Esihle Nkosi, had a deep desire to participate in the Big5Hike for Education but couldn't afford it so he wrote this motivation to help raise the necessary funds required.

"I am a former learner and education has always been important to me. Unfortunately, due to financial constraints, I am unable to raise the required funds to participate in the event. I believe that education is the key to success and a brighter future, not only for individuals, but for our communities and country as a whole. The Big5Hike for Education provides a platform for individuals like me to make a meaningful impact in advancing education, and I do not want to miss out on this opportunity.

Participating in this event would mean the world to me. It would allow me to actively contribute to supporting education initiatives while also challenging myself physically and mentally. It would be an honour to be a part of a community of individuals who share the same passion and belief in education. I understand that there are many deserving individuals who are also seeking support to participate in this year's event, and I hope that you will consider me as a candidate.

Thank you for taking the time to read my letter.

Sincerely,
Esihle Nkosi"



Meet hiker Kate Combrink, and her reasons for participating:

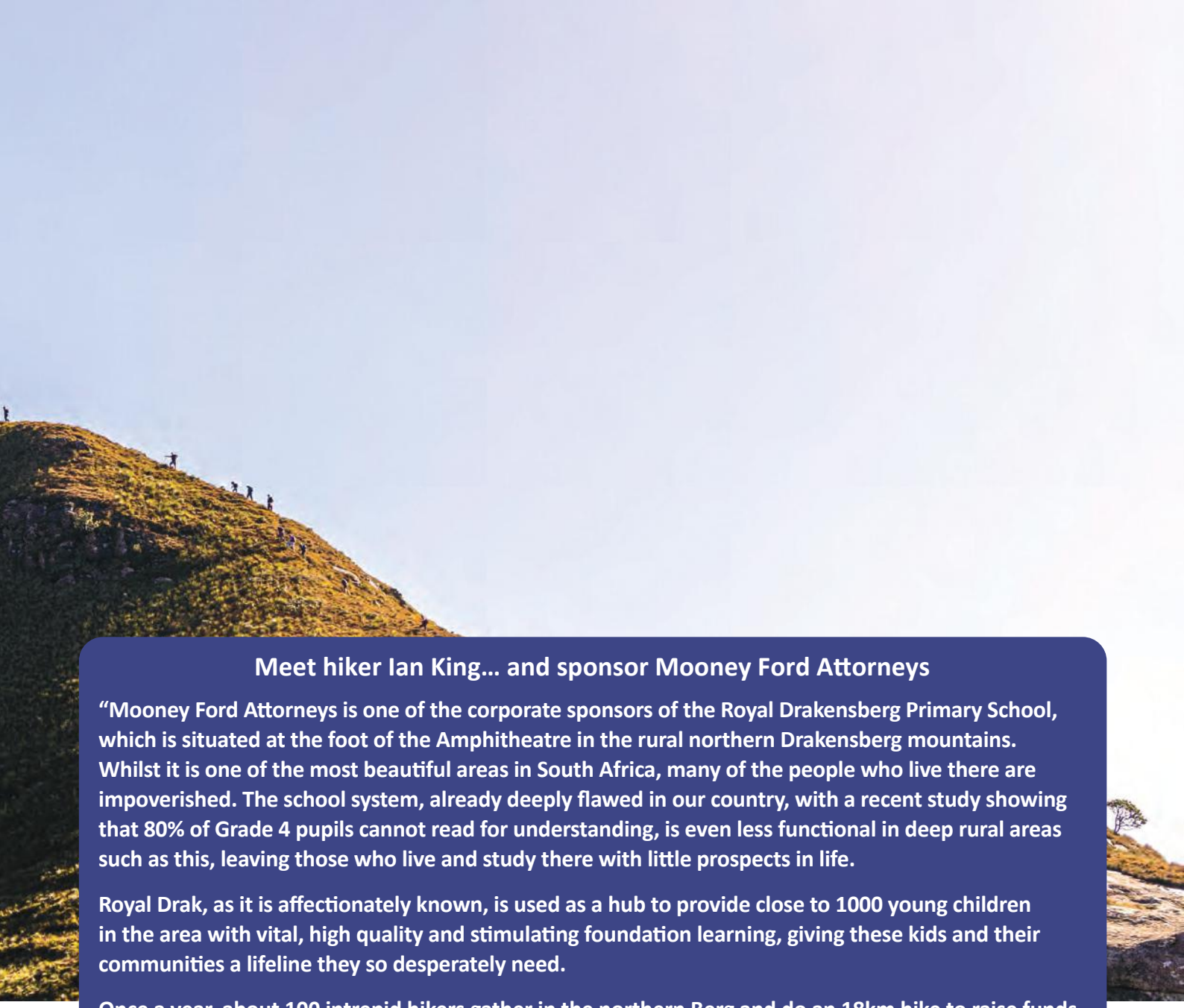
"My husband Nic and I run an NPO called Umzila that has a mandate to support education, and specifically education of previously disadvantaged girls. We chose to support the Royal Drakensberg school a few years ago after staying at the Cavern and learning about the incredible work the Royal Drak team does in the rural areas surrounding the Cavern.

We specifically loved the high standards of education at the school, the wonderful ethos and values taught to the children, as well as how it has used its resources to support other ECD centres in the area.

We were also inspired by how the community respects and supports the school. We had previously supported school infrastructure projects where no maintenance was done, or even where the community had vandalised and destroyed the infrastructure we had built. With the Royal Drak and the amaZizi community, there is only positive change.

Mike Greef, the previous head of school, invited us to the Big5 hike in 2022 and being avid hikers and needing no excuse to spend more time at the Cavern, we signed up. Last year we only managed the Little5Hike due to inclement weather but had a wonderful time meeting new people and the incredible staff from the Royal Drak, who volunteered to support the hike.

This year we managed the Big5, and while it was tough (the ladders!), we enjoyed the camaraderie of the hikers and relished the physical challenge. And of course, the views from the five peaks are unparalleled! Next year is the last Big5 hike and one not to be missed".



Meet hiker Ian King… and sponsor Mooney Ford Attorneys

"Mooney Ford Attorneys is one of the corporate sponsors of the Royal Drakensberg Primary School, which is situated at the foot of the Amphitheatre in the rural northern Drakensberg mountains. Whilst it is one of the most beautiful areas in South Africa, many of the people who live there are impoverished. The school system, already deeply flawed in our country, with a recent study showing that 80% of Grade 4 pupils cannot read for understanding, is even less functional in deep rural areas such as this, leaving those who live and study there with little prospects in life.

Royal Drak, as it is affectionately known, is used as a hub to provide close to 1000 young children in the area with vital, high quality and stimulating foundation learning, giving these kids and their communities a lifeline they so desperately need.

Once a year, about 100 intrepid hikers gather in the northern Berg and do an 18km hike to raise funds for this incredible project. This year we again managed to raise over R1 million.

With our government failing our youth, it is up to us to stand up, take responsibility and make a difference. I am incredibly proud that my law firm is able to do so through Royal Drak.

Sharon and I visited the school unannounced this week. We were both blown away by the confidence, warmth and sheer joy of the youngsters there. 6-year-old Alwondle grabbed my hand and proudly took me of a tour of her school, which included her reading to me. This is what it is all about. Making a difference in someone like Alwondle's life.

We will continue to stay involved; we will continue to make a difference; we will continue in our efforts to provide a brighter future for our youth. Kudos to Megan Carte Bedingham and The Cavern Resort Drakensberg for their generosity in hosting this event, for their initiative in opening Royal Drak, and their continued efforts to build a better future for the youth of their local communities.

We like the Big5Hike because of many reasons, firstly the physical challenge: hiking for charity offers a physical challenge that is rewarding. The hike allows one to push your limits, improve fitness and achieve personal goals while supporting a good cause. The hike brings people together fostering a sense of community and shared purpose. We have made lasting connections, during the years of doing the hike, with like-minded people".

THE PONDO TRAIL RUN...

A Trail Running Adventure with a Purpose

WILD CHILD AFRICA, renowned specialists of fully catered, multi-day adventures, is thrilled to announce the successful completion of The PONDO Trail Run, which took place from May 25th to May 28th. This extraordinary one-day ULTRA and three-day COASTER trail running event unfolded along the awe-inspiring northern section of the Wild Coast, known as Pondoland.

The event showcased not only an unforgettable trail running experience but also a commitment to raising funds for charitable causes.

The brainchild of Matt Botha, owner and founder of Wild Child Africa, The PONDO Trail Run aims to share the natural beauty of Pondoland's coastline with like-minded individuals while actively contributing to its preservation. Botha expressed his deep connection to the area, stating, "Tim, my brother, and I were incredibly fortunate to spend much of our upbringing on Pondoland's coastline, and it's an absolute privilege not only to have the opportunity to share it with others but also to play a part in preserving its future."

The 2022 edition of The PONDO Trail Run marked the launch

Words & pics - supplied

PREVIOUS PAGE: Running on the prostine Eastern Cape beaches

THIS PAGE: A runner talking to ine of the children during the book drop at a local school

FOLLOWING PAGES: Assorted pics from the event

of the "Pondo-People-Planet" initiative. Participants of the race rallied together, raising over R140,000 in support of this project. The funds were donated to The Pondoland Conservation Trust and the Cipla Foundation's "Miles for Smiles" initiative, which provides funds for corrective surgery for children with cleft conditions.

Paul Miller, CEO of Cipla South Africa, emphasized the alignment between the event and their commitment to making a profound difference in people's lives and local communities. Miller stated, "We don't have a strategy, we have a cause. We don't have a vision statement, we have vision. So, we're excited to join forces to help ensure a future that's focused on the well-being of people and our beautiful planet."

Devil's Peak, beloved local brewing company, has been a long-standing supporter of the PONDO trail events. Each day, they owned the finish line, generously providing participants with ice-cold beer to celebrate their remarkable achievements on the trail. Recognizing the untouched pristine coastline of Pondoland, Devil's Peak expressed their love for this unique experience, stating, "This is a truly unique experience to soak in and be immersed in how beautiful our country is. We celebrate the passion and love that Wild Child Africa has for this part of our country through their efforts to conserve its untouched beauty as well as the thrill of allowing people to embark on this life-changing, unforgettable adventure."

Sealand, South Africa's trailblazing lifestyle brand, are the event's newest partners. Sealand is committed to bringing about positive change in the industry by ensuring every decision they make prioritizes the planet and its people. Their handmade products are crafted from waste materials or responsibly and ethically sourced materials.

Sealand's team expressed their excitement about the partnership, stating, "Conservation of our natural playgrounds lies at the heart of our brand's mission, and finding a partner who not only understands but actively supports this vision is truly exhilarating. Together, we can achieve far more than we ever could alone."

THE FUNDS WERE DONATED TO THE PONDOLAND CONSERVATION TRUST AND THE CIPLA FOUNDATION'S "MILES FOR SMILES" INITIATIVE, WHICH PROVIDES FUNDS FOR CORRECTIVE SURGERY FOR CHILDREN WITH CLEFT CONDITIONS

The PONDO Trail Run, in collaboration with Cipla, Devil's Peak, and Sealand, has successfully created an unforgettable experience and look forward to sharing the results of this year's fund raising events.

African penguins - pic DICT

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Lions roam once again at Babanango Game Reserve

Creating a future for conservation at FINFOOT LAKE RESERVE

Where South Africa's wildlife now roam...

SITUATED WITHIN THE Greater Pilanesberg Region, Finfoot Lake Reserve lies just a short drive from Johannesburg and Pretoria. Although known as a haven for local holidays, the 3500-hectare reserve has slowly transformed into a sanctuary for South Africa's wild animals.

At the helm of the rewilding project are Sarel and Melani van der Westhuizen, who have co-managed the Reserve since April 2016 as Estate Custodian and Lodge Manager, respectively.

"When we first arrived in 2016, the lodge had been closed for eight years prior to Dream Hotels & Resorts purchasing it in 2015," Sarel explains. "There was no maintenance, so we had a mammoth task ahead of us, especially since we also had only six months to get it operational."

With 23 years under his belt as a game ranger at various well-known properties in the country with dangerous game, Sarel further admits that his experience in the field has proved integral to their efforts at Finfoot.

"Although we officially opened on the 30th of September 2016, it's been non-stop ever since, and we continue to work from sunrise to sunset, which is common in this industry," he adds. "Our time here has

Words - Chelsey Hale
Pics - supplied

PREVIOUS PAGE:
Zebra at Finfoot Lake Reserve

THIS PAGE:
Sarel and Melani van der Westhuizen

THEY ARE TRANSFORMING FINFOOT INTO A WILDERNESS WONDERLAND THROUGH THEIR ONGOING CONSERVATION EFFORTS

taken a lot of blood, sweat and tears, but our life here is not something we would easily trade."

Due to their passion and dedication to establishing the Finfoot name, their team has enjoyed multiple successes, including an ERO Green Award and a Leadership award in 2022. Of course, their most impressive triumph is transforming Finfoot into a wilderness wonderland through their ongoing conservation efforts.

"As part of our goal to lead with purpose and accountability, we have opened our doors to a wide spectrum of animals in need of rehabilitation and a safe respite to roam freely," Sarel explains. "What we do here ties in heavily with the mission and vision of Dream Hotels & Resorts, which continues to oversee our operations here at Finfoot."

Having recognised that most of its properties are located in eco-sensitive areas, the Group has taken strategic steps to minimise

its environmental impact across its portfolio of mixed-use properties.

"Our collective mission is to co-create memorable travel experiences which connect people for a brighter future," he adds. "In doing so, we have come to understand that ensuring the survival of our most precious resources, such as our wildlife, depends on the actions and choices we make right now. This is why our work at Finfoot is so important."

Having remained hard at work over the last 16 years, Sarel continues to liaise closely with local non-profit initiatives such as the Owl Rescue Centre in Hartbeespoort.

"Last year, we welcomed one serval, three genets, three porcupines, five spotted eagle owls, a mother and baby caracal and a flittering of bird species into our wildlife family. We also now have 15 leopard tortoises, two of whom are incredibly large and friendly and will even follow you into the kitchen!" he adds.

Other safari favourites recorded within Finfoot currently include giraffe, kudu, nyala, blue wildebeest, red hartebeest, waterbuck, zebra, impala, nyala, warthog, civet, aardvark, and more.

Not without its challenges

"Ecosystem protection and wildlife conservation remain a core challenge across the country, particularly in this region where we have a large farming community and human-wildlife conflict is rife," Sarel explains.

The rewilding project of introducing new animals into the reserve is not without its challenges. "It takes a lot of resources to rehabilitate, release and monitor animals on the reserve, but we are fortunate to receive support from Dream Hotels & Resorts and the farmers located around the Finfoot boundary."

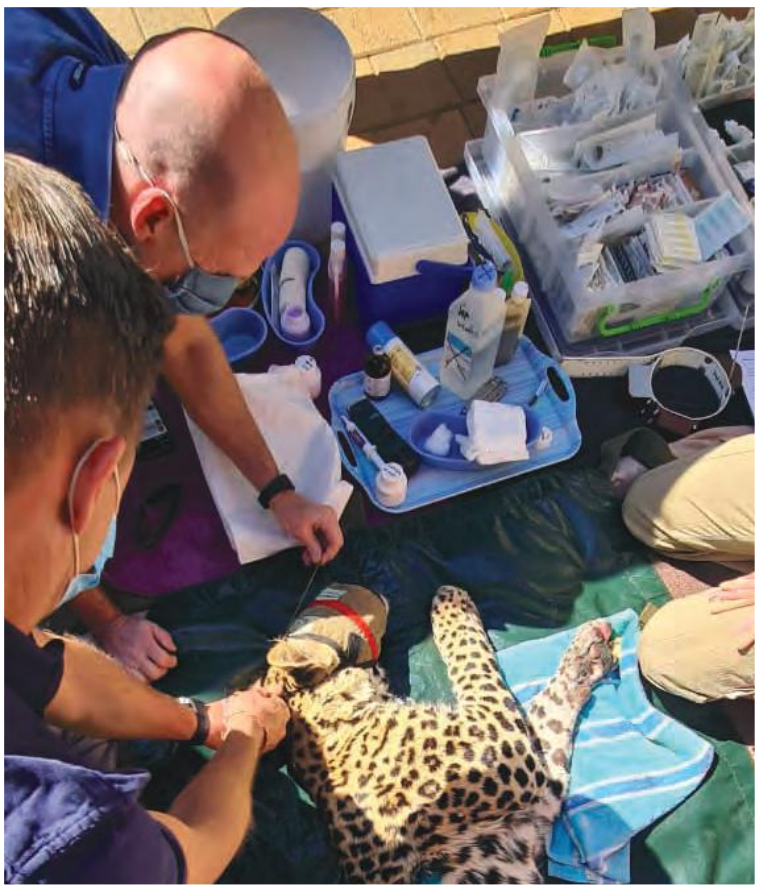
PREVIOUS PAGE: Common genet

THIS PAGE: Rescued leopard being collared and having a veterinary check

As he further highlights: "Farming is all about relationship building and helping each other work towards a common goal. This ethos is very much the same when it comes to wildlife conservation. We are fortunate that over the years, we have nurtured solid relationships with our community whereby they are so willing to work with us and support our ambitions."

In 2022, the Finfoot team welcomed a young male leopard rescued from an illegal gin trap near the Botswanan border. Unfortunately, after roaming too far beyond the property boundary, he succumbed to a snaring fatality.

"This tragic event provides a glimpse at how heartbreaking it can be as a custodian of a reserve and its wild animals," Sarel explains. "Unlike domesticated creatures and livestock, they are so much harder to track and control.



It is a huge responsibility, particularly when it comes to wildlife considered 'problem animals' or DCA (Damage-Causing Animals)."

He further highlights how these terms, which are the result of cases of livestock depredation, can be quite misleading. "Often, the culprit, often misidentified on an individual or even species basis, is just simply a wild animal doing what it is programmed to do – survive."

SAREL, MELANI AND THEIR TEAM ARE FIRMLY COMMITTED TO CONSERVING ENDANGERED SPECIES

Looking ahead

As for the future of Finfoot? Sarel, Melani and their team are firmly committed to conserving endangered species and further transforming Finfoot into a fully-fledged wilderness wonderland.

"The purchase of the neighbouring farm provides enough space to accommodate our long-term plan of introducing other big game whilst still maintaining areas on the reserve for guests to

roam safely without guided supervision," Sarel explains.

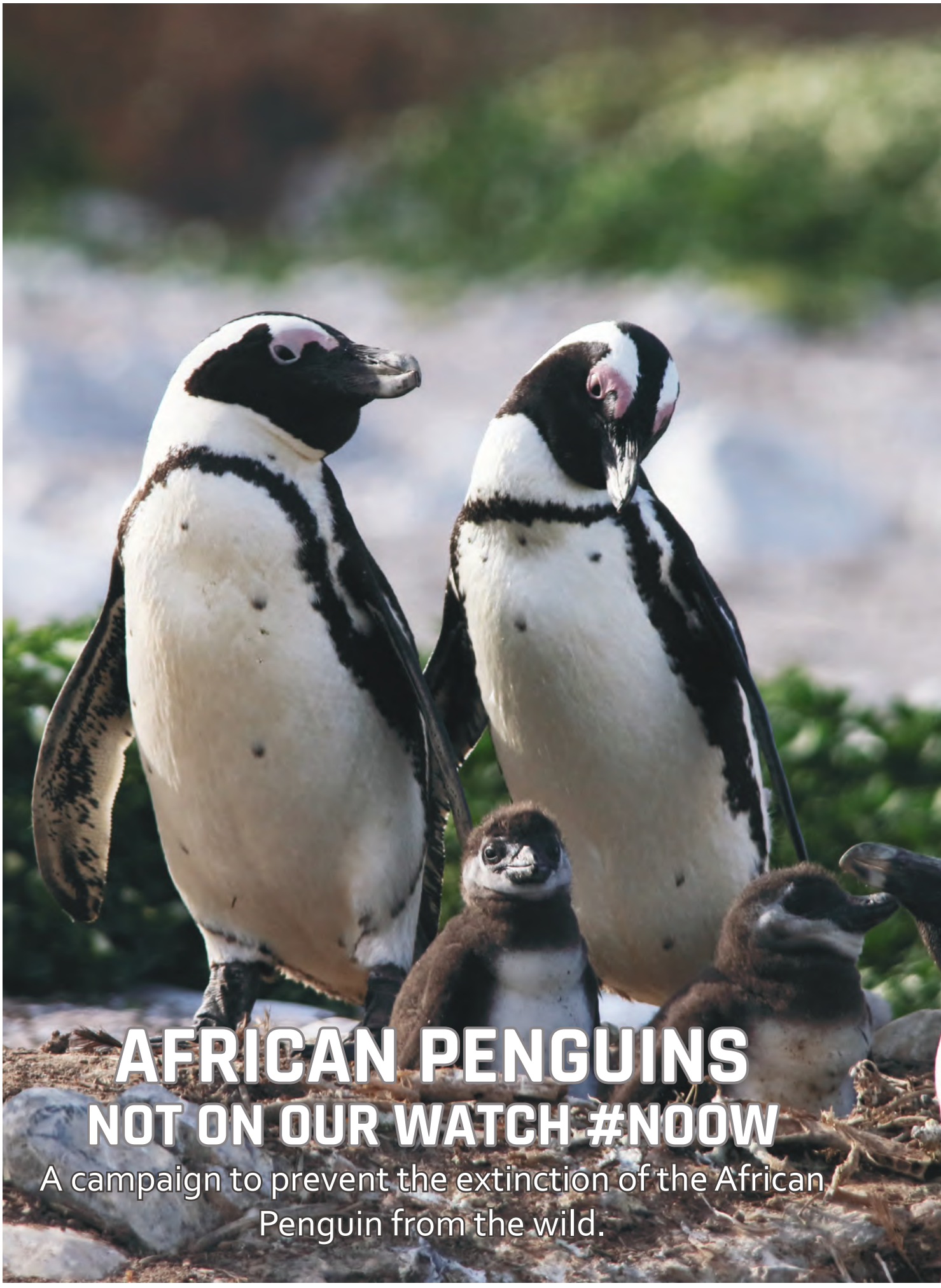
With the North West Province being home to numerous world-renowned game reserves, such as Madikwe Game Reserve, the Pilanesberg National Park, and many other nature conservation areas, their ultimate goal is to ensure Finfoot remains a part of a legacy for future generations to enjoy.

"Finfoot is part and parcel of a greater conservation vision," he adds. "The work we do and want to do is not purely for the delight of guests but for the good of the Greater Pilanesberg community.

"This region is filled with beauty and a strong sense of belonging and togetherness, which makes it an absolute joy to visit. To all those looking to reconnect to nature and feel part of something bigger, there's really no better place to be!" he concludes.

PREVIOUS PAGE:
A pair of caracal ready for release into tjhe reserve

THIS PAGE:
A serval in a cage being prepped for release


AFRICAN PENGUINS
NOT ON OUR WATCH #NOOW
A campaign to prevent the extinction of the African Penguin from the wild.

Words - Marine Dynamics
Pics - Marine Dynamics & Wikimedia

TO DATE THERE have been no public action campaigns for the African penguin, this campaign, however aims to change that. We the people are saying: “Not On Our Watch” #NOOW

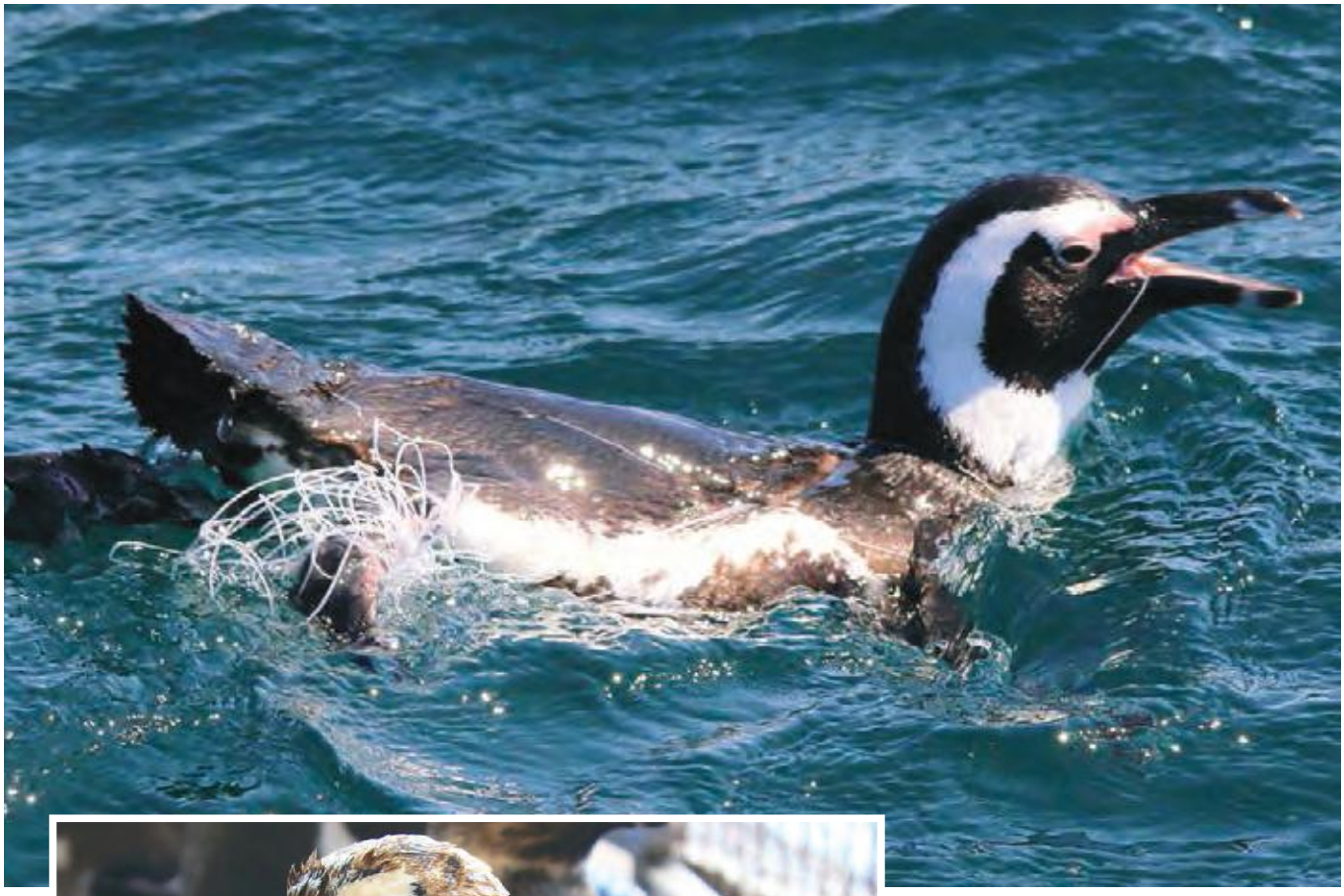
For the African penguin, the writing may be on the wall. With only 10 000 breeding pairs left in South Africa, they are staring down the abyss of extinction. With such a small number of individual birds left in the wild, the population will be functionally extinct by 2035. This means that the population will be so small that it will no longer be able to breed enough to increase numbers again.

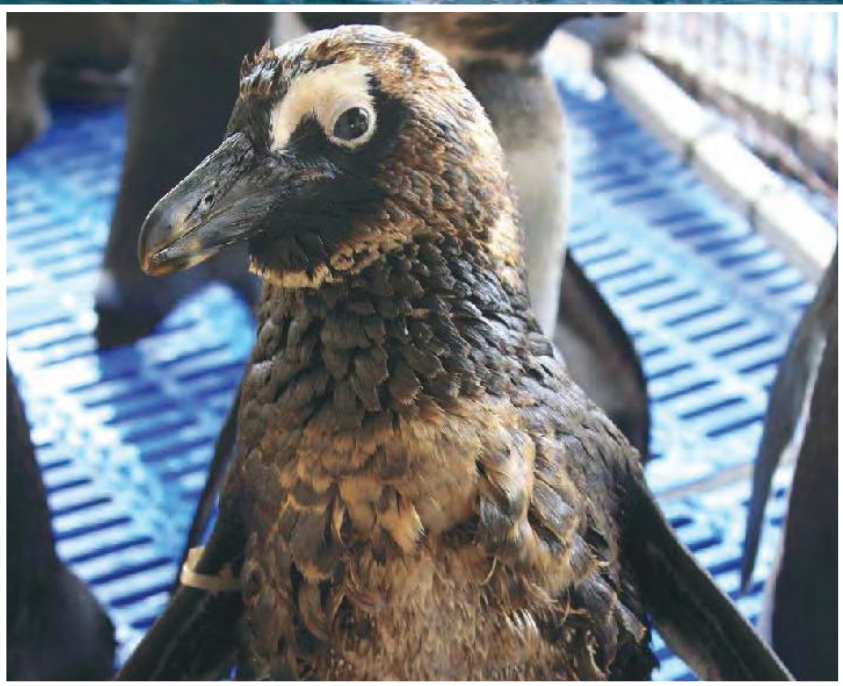
The Dyer Island Conservation Trust (DICT) and the African Penguin & Seabird Centre (APSS) are dedicated to the survival of the African Penguin. Wilfred Chivell, chairman of the DICT says: “The APSS is our biggest project, we have put in a lot of hard work to rescue, rehabilitate and release compromised African penguins. Funding these projects are always a challenge and I am thankful that we can spread the conservation message through my tourism company Marine Dynamics. The thought that my grandchildren would not be able to see the African penguin in the wild, is heart-breaking. Saving any species needs a groundswell of public support. That is why we are part of this campaign. We stand shoulder to shoulder with all the other organisations that are committed to prevent the extinction of the iconic African penguin. We hope that this campaign will get the greater public involved.”

What are the numbers?

A plummeting African Penguin population:

- In the early 1900s, it is estimated there were between 1.5 and 3 million individual African penguins across the species’ range along the Namibian and South African coast.
- It is estimated that there were close to 1 million pairs on the West Coast’s Dassen Island alone. However, by





the mid-1950s, only about 300 000 were left due to egg harvesting and guano removal.

- Since 1979, when the first full count of the major South African colonies was conducted, the breeding population has declined from 55 200 pairs to a mere 10 000 breeding pairs in 2021.
- The current African penguin population is the lowest numbers ever recorded.
- The species has been classified as Endangered on the Red List by the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) since 2013.

We need healthy oceans to support marine life now and into the future, especially if we want our children to see African penguins in the wild.

The goal of the #NOOW campaign is to create a movement and raise awareness about the need for urgent action to reverse the decline of the African penguin population in the wild.

The campaign aims to:

- call for support to ensure that wise decisions concerning the future of the African penguin are made by the relevant authorities,
- create a movement to build pride in African penguins as a part of South Africa's unique biodiversity,
- assist penguin colony managers by ensuring that visitors to the colonies behave in a way that supports penguin wellbeing.

The possible extinction of African penguins will have far-reaching

PREVIOUS PAGE: Penguin caught in fishing line; penguin soiled by oil spill

THIS PAGE: Penguin nesting boxes; young penguin chick

environmental impacts. Penguins are sentinels of ecosystem health and play an important role in the functioning of marine ecosystems. African penguin colonies provide an indication of the status of other marine top predators that target the same prey (sardines and anchovies) and are thus important indicators of the status of pelagic marine ecosystems.

The African penguin is a valuable part of South Africa's natural heritage. They are the only species of penguin found in Africa and are arguably one of the most accessible penguin species in the world. Areas like Boulders Beach in Simon's Town and Stony Point in Betty's Bay on the Cape coast will lose this iconic species that attract many people to visit these areas, and Africa will lose the only endemic penguin species on the continent.

If they disappear from our wild seascape it will lead to economic impacts through job losses for tourism and conservation.

How did we end up at this low point?

African Penguins are faced with multiple pressures that are

Pic - Tami Kaschke

Rehabilitated penguins being released on Dyer Island by the African Penguin and Seabird Sanctuary in Gansbaai

cumulatively contributing to their low population numbers. Historically, egg harvesting, and guano collection led to their decline. In the past, penguins made their nests in the burrows of guano. Harvesting guano removed the penguin nest material. Although guano harvesting is no longer allowed, a lack of nesting habitat is a concern. This is being addressed through revegetation efforts at some colonies and deployment of artificial nests.

The more recent downward trend has been attributed to food shortages caused by shifts in the distributions of their prey species; namely declining small pelagic fish stocks (such as anchovies and sardines) and direct competition with commercial purse-seine fishery for food.

STAND UP FOR THIS SENTINEL OF OUR SEAS, THE AFRICAN PENGUIN, AND SAY "NOT ON OUR WATCH" #NOOW

The 2018/2019 Sardine stock assessment was at the lowest since the 1980s showing an almost complete absence of sardines from the West Coast. This created a perfect storm, a collapsed penguin population because of a range of historic human impacts and near to zero sardine biomass.

WE WOULD LOVE FOR YOU TO JOIN US

Stand up for this sentinel of our seas, the African penguin and to say: **"Not on our watch".**

The **#NOOW** collaborative campaign launched on the 1 March.

- Visit the campaign website www.africanpenguinnotonourwatch.org The website has got great advice on how to be a responsible tourist when you visit a penguin colony.
- Send a letter to the minister: https://**www.africanpenguinnotonourwatch.org/email-the-minister** supporting actions to protect the African penguin.
- Follow the campaign on Facebook and Instagram and share #NOOW campaign posts.
- Share your love for penguins by sharing your photos and videos on social media using the hashtags #AfricanPenguin #NOOW.
- Please contact Dr Judy Mann **judy@aquariumfoundation.org.za** if you would like to be involved in the **#NOOW** campaign.

We are grateful to the funders who made this campaign possible: Georgia Aquarium, Florida Aquarium, Zoos Victoria and the Two Oceans Aquarium Foundation.

Despite many years of negotiation, no long-term decisions have been implemented. Minister Barbara Creecy has recently appointed an international panel to help determine if there is a way that conservation and the fishing industry can work together towards a mutually beneficial strategy. Responsible fisheries should promote protection of living aquatic resources and their environments and coastal areas. An adaptive time (during peak breeding season) and area closure (around breeding islands) management system can help to turn the situation around.

Many African penguin colonies occur in areas that are near existing or planned major shipping routes or ports. A growing threat is the expansion of harbours and an increase in ship traffic. Another threat for the African penguin, is ship-to-ship bunkering, which has started in Algoa Bay and is planned to expand to the West Coast. A large oil spill in the proximity of a breeding colony could destroy much of the remaining population. The maritime industry, including exploration for oil and gas reserves using seismic surveys is a further looming threat.

Other threats include disease outbreaks, extreme weather events, localised predation, and human disturbance at breeding colonies. All these threats require carefully implemented management plans for each penguin colony.

#NOOW

www.africanpenguinnotonourwatch.org
www.dict.org.za

A rhino conservation success story at Tala

EIGHT YEARS AGO, Lawrence Reed was living a regular family life with his wife, Kerry, and two daughters in the quiet suburb of Yellowwood Park in Durban. A former security officer, he'd never really given much thought to the rhino poaching crisis in South Africa.

However, in August 2014, he was bounding across the acacia plains of Tala Collection Game Reserve in KwaZulu Natal hot on the trail of armed rhino poachers.

To date, he and his team have helped local law enforcement deter countless attacks by providing an ongoing strategy to help combat poaching and conduct regular dehorning and microchipping procedures. Their consistent efforts have revived the white rhino population within the Reserve.

"If you had told me that I would be living on a reserve, working to stop the extinction of a species, I'd never have believed you," Lawrence says. Whether doing so fulfils his sense of purpose in the world, provides an opportunity to put his skills to use, or is simply because it's the right thing to do, it's hard to pinpoint one reason why he does it. Perhaps, as I can only imagine, it's a mix of all three.

His connection to Tala first began when he heard of the senseless killing of two female white rhinos and a third, which was being dehorned and needed immediate medical assistance. "That's what prompted me to approach

Pic - Wikimedia

Words - Chelsey Hale
Pics - supplied

management to ask them if they needed assistance with security which soon led to the inception of Rave Rhino," he explains.

Formed with three additional directors – Lee John Versfeld, Wayne Axford, and Warren Julie – who have extensive police and military expertise, Rave Rhino consists of an anti-poaching unit based at Tala that functions 24 hours a day.

"As an NPO, we rely heavily on donations and funds we receive from individuals, who are united to observe the dehorning process," Kerry explains. Aside from being Lawrence's wife, she has continued to play an integral part in the daily operation of Rave Rhino. "It's high risk and not an easy job, but everything we do, we do to the fullest of our capability."

The same can be said for the rest of the team, consisting of three permanent members, Tala rangers, general volunteers, and three free-running Belgian Malinois canines: Connor, Meisiekind and Shadow.

Giving it horns

Following a recent invite to visit Tala in 2022 by the Custodian, Greg Allan, I was fortunate to be given the rare privilege of experiencing a scheduled dehorning first-hand.

After a comfortable night's rest at the exclusive Leadwood Manor House (where I was welcomed by a towering giraffe!), I arrived at the meeting point where I was introduced to several Rave Rhino members and a few South African visitors who, like me, were also there for that 'once-in-a-lifetime experience'.

Following a briefing by Ryan van Deventer, a veterinarian working closely with Rave Rhino, we embarked on our 'mission' to track, dart and dehorn a young male bull. At only two and a half years old, Valentine (born on Valentine's Day 2020) currently weighs a whopping 950 kilograms, roaming the Reserve with his little sister (still to be named) and mother, Madlebe.

"Each rhino must have their horns removed every 19 months to deter poachers," Ryan explained. "The most efficient method to conduct the procedure is darting the rhino with etorphine which is ten times stronger than morphine. It may seem quite rudimentary, but the most efficient method to remove the horn is by way of a chainsaw and grinder. It doesn't hurt them. Think of it like clipping your fingernails."

Following each dehorning at Tala, a DNA sample of the horn is entered into the RhODUS (Rhino DNA Indexing System) system and database before being carefully transported to a secure and undisclosed location.

As we disembarked to locate and dart Valentine – visitors

EACH RHINO MUST HAVE THEIR HORNS REMOVED EVERY 19 MONTHS TO DETER POACHERS, AND THE MOST EFFICIENT METHOD IS BY WAY OF A CHAINSAW AND GRINDER. IT DOESN'T HURT THEM - THINK OF IT AS LIKE CLIPPING YOUR FINGERNAILS

in the main vehicle, Rave Rhino members spread across individual vehicles – the energy was palpable. What was most impressive during this experience was the teamwork. Everyone flows together like an orchestra, with a frequent and succinct chorus of commands back and forth over the radio:

"They're heading towards the runway but moving slowly. Over."
"Affirmative. I see them."
"He's moving in the direction of the tower."
"Keep him moving. Over."

But even with all their meticulous efforts, even the most prepared team can be thwarted by nature. Although the dart was deployed, piercing Valentine's skin, the morphine did not inject. Concerned that they would put the rhinos under stress with a second attempt and the heat of the day settling in, an executive decision was made to postpone operations.

"It's the reality of what we do and a reminder that there are no guarantees when it comes to wildlife," says Kerry. "Sometimes the weather can affect the dehorning procedure, the availability of the vet, or even the unpredictability of the animals. We always put their wellbeing first, regardless if we have a group from the public here to observe."

The dehorning continues

With a message from Kerry informing me that Valentine's rescheduled dehorning was scheduled for the following week, I made my way back to Tala. However, instead of sunshine and blue skies, the weather was grey and rainy, creating the additional challenge of slippery roads and poor visibility.

After hot coffees, scones and cream supplied by the Rave Rhino team, we found ourselves back in the chase, the Rave Rhino team and Ryan working together to track and dart Valentine:

"They're moving towards your unit.
"We have him. Clear sighting"
"Dart's in. Over."

Of course, what struck me most was the efficiency of the dehorning procedure, Ryan working away as if he was carving a work of art with precise and meticulous care. To reduce the stress, Valentine was blindfolded and given earplugs. However, watching him quivering on the ground (a side effect of the etorphine), I experienced many different emotions: First, the anticipation of what's to come, then the adrenaline rush and excitement of being close to a wild animal, followed by appreciation felt for the Rave Rhino team and sadness over the senseless poaching and selling of rhino horns.

As I held the chunk of Valentine's horn in my hand, best described as a gemors (mess) of tangled hair and mud, the question I

PREVIOUS PAGE:
Mom and baby white rhino

THIS PAGE:
The dehorning process

NEXT PAGE:
The process is completed and just before the antodote is administered

found deliberating was, 'How could this be the cause of so much greed?'.

The dehorning process is a strange position to be in – an unnecessary situation that has become necessary. That to give these animals a fighting chance, we must regularly track and dart these creatures to cut off their horns to save them from extinction.

After the procedure was complete, Ryan reminded us that we only had a small window to move in a little closer and take it all in, Valentine was administered with a solution to reverse the effects of the etorphine... and what someone in the group aptly referred to as a regmaker (a pick-me-up). As we watched Valentine rise to his feet, shaking off the pins and needles, we were overcome with a sense of joy and relief, knowing that he had now been given more time as a rhino in the wild rather than another death statistic.

Where to next?

As further context of the rhino poaching crisis, available estimates show that since 2006, 10,000 rhinos have been poached in South Africa. Currently, there are some 20,000 white rhinos and just over 5,000 critically endangered black rhinos in the wild across Africa – a figure that will have decreased by the time this article is published.

Despite convincing arguments around legalising the trade of horns and flooding the market to drive out poachers, no formal studies have been conducted to accurately determine the market's size and demand, what price it should be sold at, and how it would be regulated. Considering South Africa's high levels of criminality at a government level, there's no guarantee that funds raised from legalised trade will be directed back into conservation and that poaching will stop – particularly when all that's needed to take down a rhino is a bullet and a panga. There are still too many unanswered questions.

What we do know, however, is that when the entire world rallied together behind the illegal trade of rhino horns in 1993, and it was officially banned across China and Taiwan, we experienced the golden age of rhinos.

"Unless we all take firm control of the narrative again and focus on the contributing factors around poaching, we will continue to see a rapid decline of the species," Greg Allan, Tala's General Manager, explains.

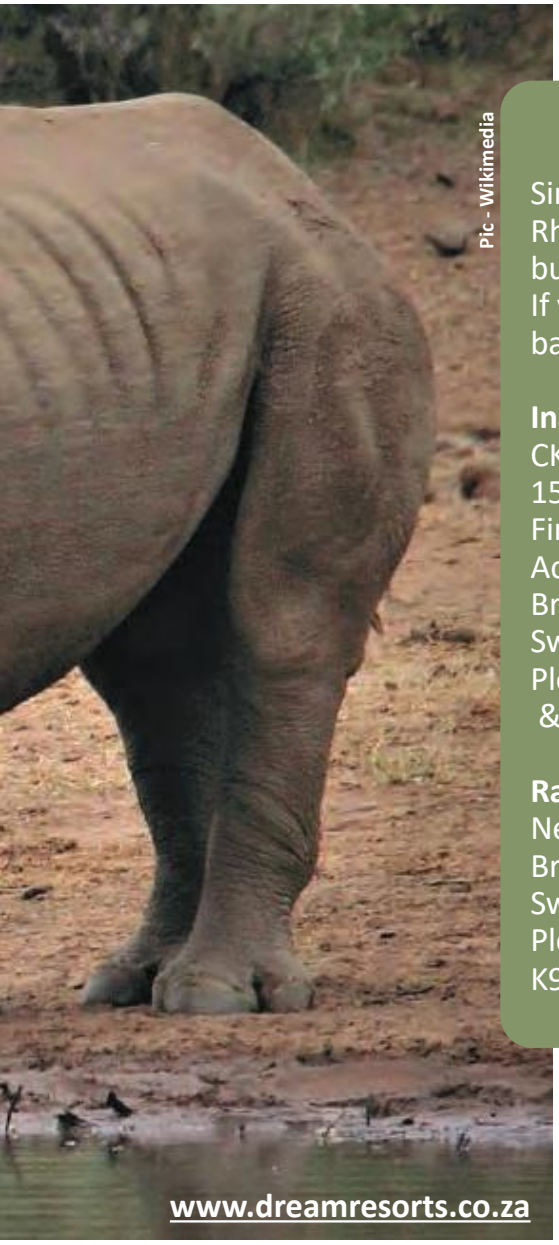
Aside from false claims regarding rhino horn usage and benefits, South Africa's poaching crisis occurs as a greater symptom of ongoing corruption, poor management of resources, poverty and socio-economic challenges around our national parks and reserves.

"Without rhinos, we're also likely to see a drop in African tourism.

WE ARE WORKING HARD TO CREATE A LONG-TERM MANAGEMENT MODEL FOR TALA AND ACTIVELY BRINGING LOCAL COMMUNITIES INTO THE CONVERSATION

And fewer tourists means less money for current conservation efforts. South Africa simply cannot afford to lose one of our wildlife icons and the spaces they call home. This is why we're working hard to create a long-term management model for Tala and actively bringing local communities into the conversation."

The inception of an organisation like Rave Rhino further proves that you don't need a conservation background to do your part in combating rhino poaching. It also appears that the only way to move forward is by working together to remove



PLEASE HELP SUPPORT K9 CONNOR

Since the publishing of this article, Connor, a hard-working and loyal Rave Rhino K9 was diagnosed with splenic histiocytic sarcoma. He is in remission but the team would still appreciate donations for his ongoing medical care. If you'd like to assist in helping them reach their first target of R65 000, bank details are as follows:

Inanda vet hospital and specialist
CK 2010/112150/23
15 Howick drive, Waterfall,3610.
First National Bank
Account number 62910632985
Branch code 250655
Swift code FIRNZAJJ
Please use Reference: 6013 Connor
& email to: info@inandavets.com

Rave Rhino and Wildlife Project NPC
Nedbank account number 1093284048
Branch code 198765
Swift code NEDSZAJJ
Please use Reference:
K9 Connor & your name.

loopholes for further poaching incidents to occur.

"Because there is value on the horn, there's a good chance that, unless things rapidly change, we could find that there will be no more rhinos in the wild. That is the great tragedy we are ultimately trying to prevent in this story," Lawrence explains.

"We hope that by creating awareness and encouraging the public to experience the dehorning process at Tala, people will be less desensitised to the rhino crisis and more inclined to take action."

Through Rave Rhino, you can 'adopt a rhino' by donating a small fee or booking a seat on one of an upcoming dehorning at Tala Collection Game Reserve. A percentage of gate fees also contribute towards their conservation and protection efforts, proving a valuable incentive for day visitors and overnight guests.

"The relationship between Tala and Rave Rhino, along with necessary supplies and financial support they receive, allows us to do everything we can to protect our rhinos and make it difficult for poachers," Greg adds.

"It is a great challenge, but the day we can put an end to the senseless killing of these beautiful creatures will prove a great triumph and perhaps a way for us to make amends for the past and look ahead to a brighter future that we all can have a hand in."

Until that day, Lawrence and his team will continue their 24-hour armed patrols to protect Tyson, Madlebe, Thandeka, Valentine, Ntando, Maximus, Nthokozo, Mpilo, Little B, Muhle, Baby (born 30/06/2022) and the future generations of white rhinos who call Tala Collection Game Reserve home.

This is a testament to Dream Hotels and Resorts bringing to life their mission, vision and values. Please take time to visit **www.dreamresorts.co.za** for more details.

For information on how to experience the dehorning process at Tala Collection Game Reserve, contact Kerry at: info@raverhino.org / 078 147 2989

RHINO CONSERVATION

Words & Pics - supplied

Using cutting-edge AI-enabled technology

THANDA SAFARI, a renowned Big Five game reserve in KwaZulu-Natal is proud to announce its partnership with Rouxcel Technology, a leading conservation company specialising in advanced rhino collar technology.

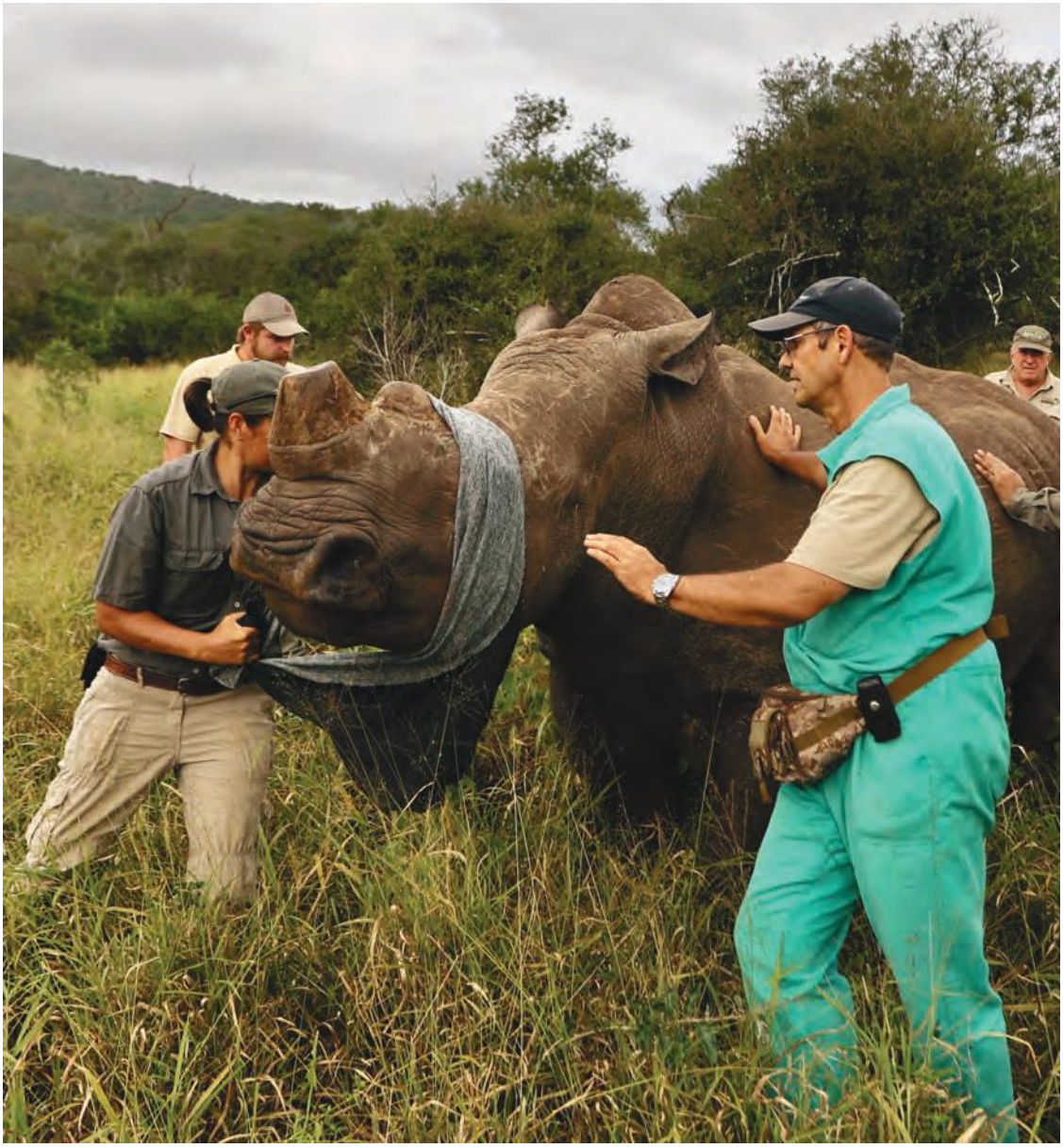
Its revolutionary artificial intelligence (AI) driven technology and real-time tracking and monitoring capabilities empower Thanda Safari to augment the safeguarding and wellbeing of its endangered rhino populations.

Previously, Thanda Safari employed various methods including foot collars and horn pods to monitor their black and white rhino populations. However, limitations with these approaches, such as the use of telemetry units requiring line-of-sight, with no direct data recording capabilities or GPS functionality, necessitated a more sophisticated solution.

The newly developed AI-enabled collars continuously observe, analyse, and learn to identify behaviour patterns specific to each rhino. When registering 'abnormal' activity related to a possible poaching attempt, fighting, mating, giving birth or illness, the collar triggers an instant alert on ranger's phones, pinpointing the incident's precise location via GPS.

This cutting-edge technology facilitates rapid response and investigation, enabling effective safeguarding of these majestic creatures.

Commenting on the technology, Mariana Venter, Wildlife Operations Co-Ordinator at Thanda Safari,



PREVIOUS PAGE: White rhino with AI-driven tracking technology

THIS PAGE: A sedated white rhino ready to be collared

expressed her enthusiasm, stating, “For security reasons, this system is crucial in helping us catch poachers in the act.

“Additionally, it generates valuable data for tracking rhino movements, monitoring their health and all-round wellbeing, thereby enabling us to learn more about their habitats and differing home ranges. This is particularly relevant to the elusive Black Rhinos. Favouring thick bush, they are difficult to monitor, and as a result we can experience long periods with infrequent sightings”.

PREVIOUS PAGE: The ankle bracelet/collar being attached

THIS PAGE: In the process; The sedated rhino with its new collar

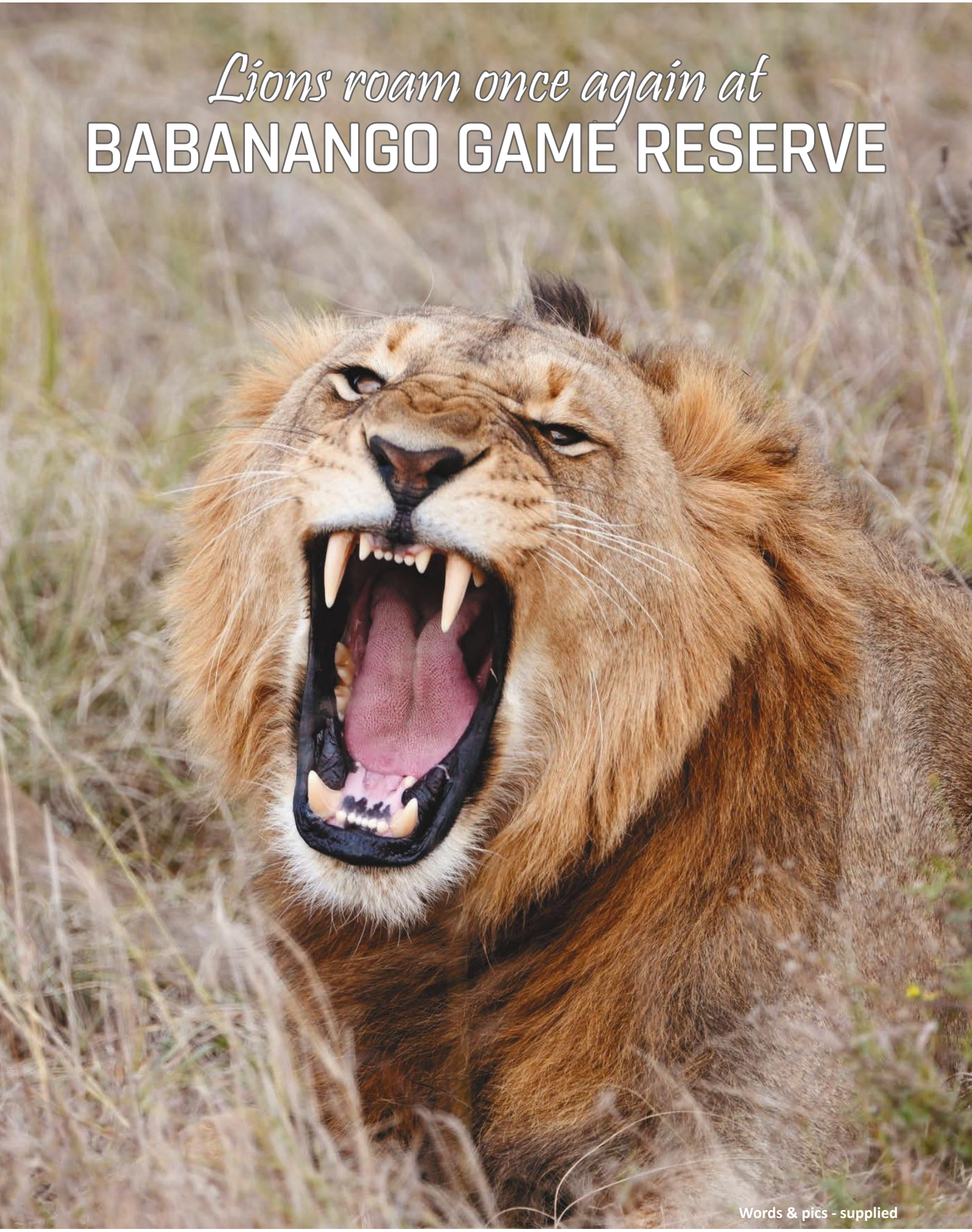
Thanda Safari's commitment to conservation has long extended to sharing knowledge with other reserves and conservation projects as well as fostering collaboration with the local community. Representatives from various reserves witnessed the installation of the AI-enabled rhino collars, highlighting Thanda Safari's role as a leader in innovative conservation initiatives.

South Africa faces a pressing issue with rhino poaching, with statistics highlighting the urgency of conservation efforts. In 2022 alone South Africa lost 448 rhinos to poaching. Thanda Safari's adoption of advanced AI-driven technology represents a significant step forward in combating poaching and preserving these magnificent creatures for future generations.

Read about a previous visit to Thanda Safari HERE

www.thandasafari.co.za

Lions roam once again at BABANANGO GAME RESERVE



Words & pics - supplied

FOR THE FIRST time in approximately 150 years, lions are once again roaming the spectacular rolling valleys and bushveld of Babanango Game Reserve in KwaZulu-Natal. In this historic move, two male lions have been reintroduced into this 20,000 hectare game reserve, as part of the reserve's ambitious and successful rewilding journey.

The lions were translocated from Nambiti Private Game Reserve in April this year under the guidance of veterinarian Dr. Ryan van Deventer and Babanango partner, Chris Galliers of Conservation Outcomes. During the pre-release phase, the two young males were held in the Babanango predator boma for monitoring before being successfully released onto the reserve. Before the release, both lions were fitted with tracking collars to assist in post-release monitoring, with their movements being tracked daily to ensure that they settle well into their new home.

"Our reserve is situated in the heart of Zululand, where seven Zulu Kings are buried not far from here, therefore terming the area 'The Valley of The Kings'. The introduction of 'The King of Beasts' into Babanango Game Reserve was barely imaginable a mere three years ago but now that it has come to fruition, we are ecstatic and one step closer to fulfilling this incredible dream of Big 5 status." said Musa Mbatha, Reserve Manager, Babanango Game Reserve.

Lions play a crucial role in the African ecosystem as apex predators, fulfilling an important ecological role on the reserve. Grazers, such as large herds of ungulates like eland, zebra, wildebeest and buffalo, are growing in abundance in Babanango Game Reserve.

Predation by lions will help manage their populations by removing old, sick, or injured animals, thus promoting healthy populations. The presence of lions will also benefit other scavenging species, such as vultures and brown hyenas, by providing access to more food sources.

PREVIOUS PAGE:
Male lion - pic Mathew Sheath

THIS PAGE:
The Babanango Valley views - pic Chris Galliers

FOR THE FIRST TIME IN APPROXIMATELY 150 YEAR, LIONS ARE ONCE AGAIN ROAMING THESE SPECTACULAR VALLEYS AND BUSHVELD

THIS PAGE: One of the lions being released into Babanango Game Reserve - pic Dr Andrew Baxter

NEXT PAGE: Giraffe (pic - Chris Galliers) and white rhino (pic - Tessa Buhrmann) have been re-introduced to Babanango Game Reserve

'THE RETURN OF THE KING'

The reintroduction of these iconic predators to this region of Zululand is part of a larger vision for the reserve and its contribution to conservation. In partnership with Conservation Outcomes and the Community Trust Landowners, the release of this species is a positive step forward in not only the health of the species' population but for the establishment of the reserve itself.

"The king of the jungle, the fearful but wonderful and loveable creature of God is now back to its place of origin. Above all the source of joy and the creation of job opportunities for all and the attraction of visitors across the globe, for the youth and people of Babanango, this is your gift, receive it, enjoy it, protect it and enjoy the benefits." said Kenneth Buthelezi, Chairman of Emcakwini Community Trust.

This is a significant milestone for conservation in South Africa - lions are listed as "Vulnerable" in their status by the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN) Red List of Threatened Species. Key threats to lion populations in South Africa include habitat loss, human-wildlife conflict, poaching, disease outbreaks, and illegal wildlife trade. These threats contribute to the decline of lion populations and require ongoing conservation efforts to ensure their long-term survival.

The stability of lion populations relies on several key factors, including the growth of their population, maintenance of genetic diversity, and most significantly, the preservation of their natural habitat.

To ensure genetic diversity, the lions in Babanango Game Reserve will be managed as part of a meta-population, and will be joined by another four females that have been sourced from other areas in South Africa.

THE REWILDING OF BABANANGO GAME RESERVE

Over the past five years, the reserve has undertaken an extensive game translocation initiative, sensitively reintroducing close on 2,500 large mammal species back into the area, where once such species roamed freely. This successful endeavor has included the reintroduction of endangered black rhinos and rare antelope like Oribi and klipspringer.

The reserve incorporates a significant portion of land that has been invested by three

community trusts from the region, whose commitment plays a crucial role in long-term conservation success. The income generated through land leases, conservation levies, and other benefits from the reserve is vital for the economic well-being of the surrounding communities.

"Introducing lions as one of the final species in the rewilding process is no small feat. Many important requirements from food sources to infrastructure, need to be adequately in place before any lion is released. Therefore, lions are a symbol of the culmination of years of investments by so many people including the majority landowners, the three Community Trusts. To hear the sound of a lion's roar reverberating through the valleys of Babanango Game Reserve, the heart of Zululand, will be the sound of another conservation success in this incredible project." said Chris Galliers, Conservation Outcomes.

Babanango Game Reserve is committed to its mission of rewilding, and the reintroduction of 'The King of Beasts' is a crucial milestone in the reserve's conservation efforts. In addition, the reserve and its new suite of lodges, is now positioning itself as an impressive tourism product for both local and overseas tourists.

Read about a previous visit to Babanango Game Reserve **HERE**

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