

## DESTINATION ♦ SOUTH AFRICA

FOLLOW ME

ELEPHANT  
WALKBe part of the Circle of Life at this  
wilderness camp

SUSAN BUGG

Conservation plays  
an important role at  
Camp Jabulani, Kapama  
Game ReservePICTURES: ALBIE VENTER  
SUPPLIES

**C**rack! "That was a tree," our guide Ruan says unnecessarily from the spotter's seat on the front of our open-top safari truck. We've seen broken branches strewn along the dirt road and vegetation ripped from the ground to expose its tasty roots. And then there's the dung, giant steaming balls dropped in untidy trails. Yes, something large is afoot in Africa's Kapama Game Reserve.

An eager party of amateur animal detectives, we've learnt from Ruan and fellow guide Andre that rhinos stop to poop and leave behind tidy, albeit large, mounds.

Elephants, on the other hand, walk and drop their waste at the same time. Aha! We have our suspects.

But finding them isn't so easy as their wrinkled khaki hides are so well hidden in the thorny acacia bush that we're beside a mother and calf – close enough to see mum's long black eyelashes – almost before we know it.

"Even though they are such massive animals, their camouflage is ridiculous," Ruan says.

"It's hard to believe an animal that size blends in so well."

Engrossed in feeding, the giants pay us no attention, their trunks tugging foliage from the trees and curling it into their mouths in one continuous circle.

Kapama (nearest town Hoedspruit) occupies 13,000 privately-owned hectares on the western edge of South Africa's famous Kruger National Park, an hour's flight northeast of Johannesburg.

The wild elephant herd roams the grassland and bush with other "must-see" animals of the illustrious Big Five – Cape buffalo, lion, the elusive leopard and precious rhinoceros.

But what brings wildlife lovers to Camp Jabulani, the luxury Kapama lodge where we are staying, is a 15-strong herd of "ellies", the core of which was rescued in 2002 from Zimbabwe where they had been

THIS IS A SAFARI  
EXPERIENCE  
AT ITS BEST ...  
WITH SERIOUSLY  
LARGE HOSTS

orphaned by a culling program and trained to carry tourists.

Their owner was losing his farm and the animals faced death.

Lente Roode, who founded the Hoedspruit Endangered Species Centre (HESC), brought them and their keepers to the centre and set up Camp Jabulani on surrounding family land.

Here, travellers can enjoy an African safari experience at its best – a combination of luxury accommodation, wildlife, good food, sunset drinks – to be shared with some seriously large hosts.

ELEPHANTS AND  
OTHER ANIMALS

Up until April this year, elephant-back safaris were part of the Camp Jabulani experience but with global opinion heavily weighted against the practice, last year the Roode family decided to phase out the rides.

Now Camp Jabulani's trained elephants roam Kapama during day, accompanied by grooms to keep them away from the wild herd, before returning to their stables at night.

Guests can still spend time close to the elephants, and hear guides tell stories about the animals.

There is Jabulani, a calf rescued by Mrs Rood in 1997 and hand-reared at HESC before finding a new family when the Zimbabwe herd arrived.

Tokwe is the nurturing matriarch and Sebakwe the dominant male, famous as being on a label of South Africa's national liqueur, Amarula.

The baby Timesa, orphaned by the drought afflicting the country, was welcomed into the herd in November.

"There wasn't a dry eye that day," camp manager Christo says as he leads us on an afternoon walk

through the bush to watch the elephants. Even more magical is sitting by a waterhole at dusk for sundowner drinks, watching silhouettes moving slowly, with a setting sun and the Drakensberg Mountains in the distance.

But it isn't all about the elephants. Kapama is also home to 42 different mammals and 350 species of bird, and safari drives to see them take advantage of the early morning or late afternoon light. We see impalas and warthogs by the dozen; elegant giraffes and roaming Burchell's zebra. In two days, the guides find lions three times, rhinos and a pair of young male hyenas.

Ruan says by focusing on everything – not just the marquee animals – you get a better safari experience.

## THE LODGE

Jabulani means "rejoice" in the Zulu language and who could not be happy to stay at the Relais & Chateaux-accredited lodge.

The main building, set amid trees and overlooking a waterhole, houses a dining area and communal lounge

with couches and inviting open fireplace. A suspension bridge across a seasonal creek bed – its dry surface shows up animal tracks each morning – leads to six individual suites.

Each has a private plunge pool and a freestanding stone bathtub that's good substitute when the weather is too cool for an outdoor dip.

Three-course lunches and dinners are part of the tariff. One night might be a braai (a traditional barbecue) where among the piles of meat and side dishes are South African specialties such as Boerewors sausage, served with pap (polenta-like maize) and chakalaka, a spicy tomato and vegetable stew.

The decor is safari-style: timber, earthy textures and colours, animal print fabrics and artwork reflecting the bushland and its animals.

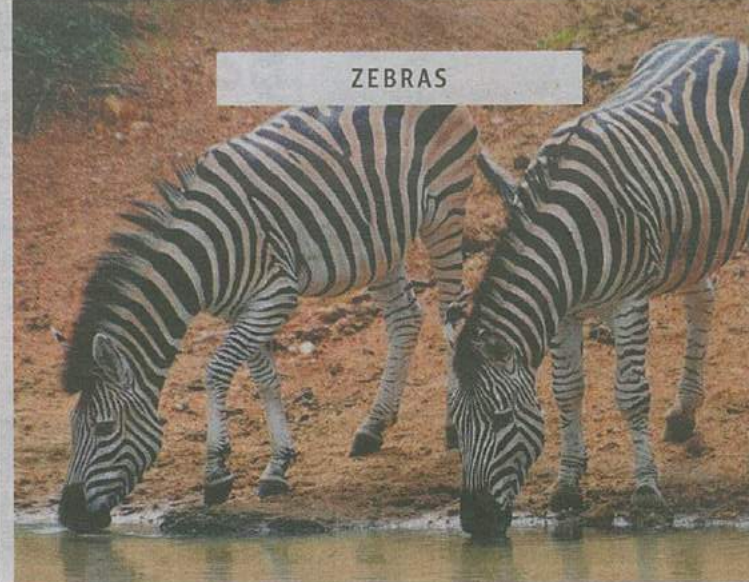
## TO THE RESCUE

The nearby Hoedspruit Endangered Species Centre opened in 1990. Its early focus was on breeding cheetahs but it has expanded into conservation programs for other species and is a rescue centre for orphaned and sick

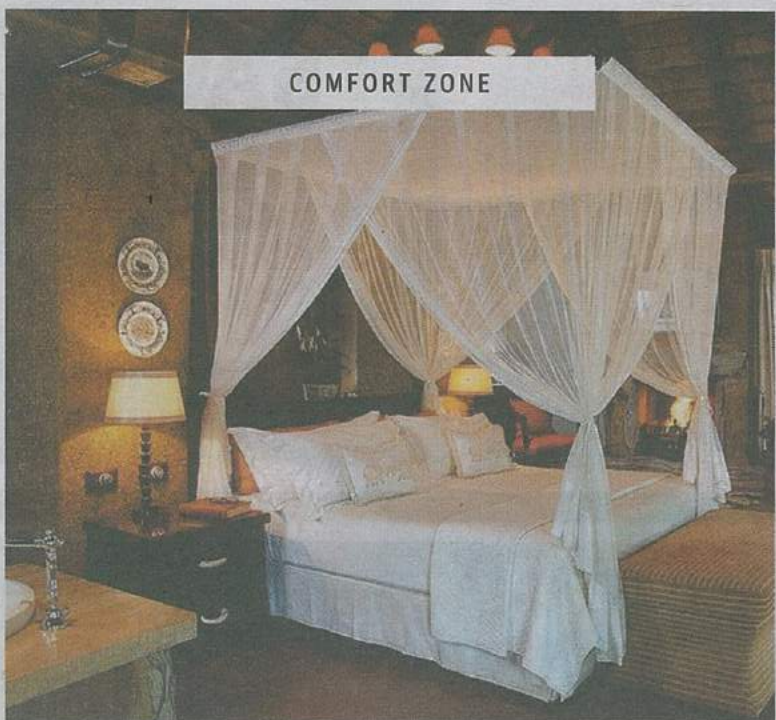
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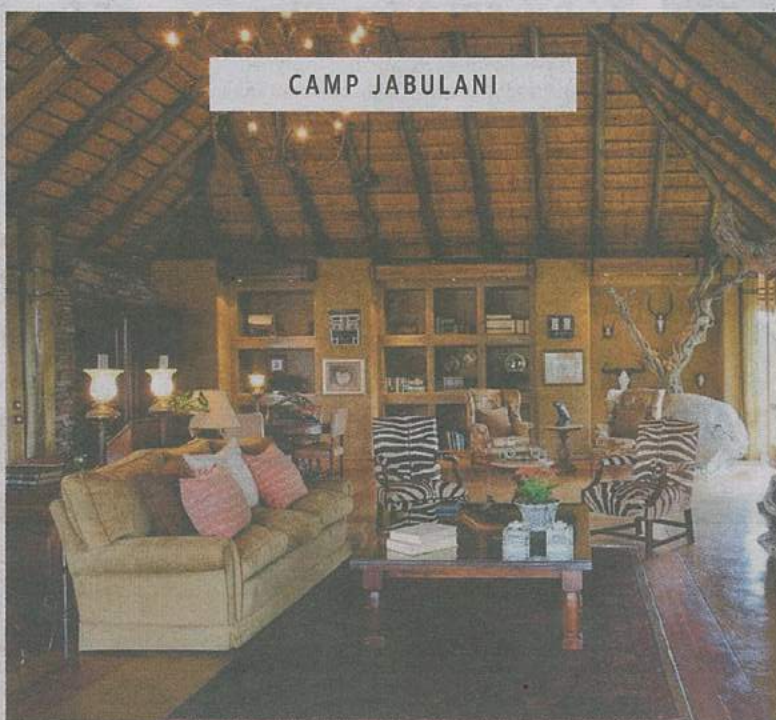
ZEBRAS



DESTINATION ♦ SOUTH AFRICA



COMFORT ZONE



CAMP JABULANI

**ESCAPE ROUTE**

**SOUTH AFRICA**

**GETTING THERE**  
 South Africa Airways has daily flights from Johannesburg to Hoedspruit. The drive from the capital takes almost six hours.

**STAYING THERE**  
 Suites are R14,200 a person, twin share (about \$1400), a night. This includes game drives, bush walks and safari drives; meals and drinks; laundry, Wi-Fi, a tour of HESC and transfers from Hoedspruit Eastgate Airport.

**MORE**  
[campjabulani.com](http://campjabulani.com)  
[country.southafrica.net/country/au/en](http://country.southafrica.net/country/au/en)

animals. But the first one we meet is Belgian shepherd pup Bullet who is being trained to join older dog Zee in keeping HESC and Kapama safe from poachers. Today, Bullet's target is a ball but he will soon be on patrol to protect the region's precious white rhinoceros.

Poaching is a huge problem in the Greater Kruger region. Countrywide in 2016, a thousand rhinos were taken for their horns, which is mistakenly thought in eastern Asia to have magical medicinal powers.

Another rhino orphanage closed

this year after poachers broke in and killed two babies. HESC has its own white rhino nursery where calves are cared for, a sheep as their surrogate mother, until they can be released back into the wild.

As the safari tour drives us around, birds of prey circle above the HESC "projects" – a baby elephant wandering freely with its own human keeper and surrogate sheep mum, two rescue leopards perched in a tree, and enclosures of lazing cheetahs. The birds are waiting for the next delivery to a patch of ground known

as the "Vulture Restaurant". We watch and wrinkle noses as a ute – a bakkie as it's known in South Africa – pulls up and dumps its load of leftover meat from predator feeding. Down come the vacuum cleaners of the bush to pick clean the bones.

Hooded and white-faced vultures jostle with marabou storks, a creature whose thoroughly revolting looks earn it a place among the "Ugly Five", alongside the wildebeest, warthog, spotted hyena and vultures.

THE WRITER WAS A GUEST OF SOUTH AFRICAN TOURISM.

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