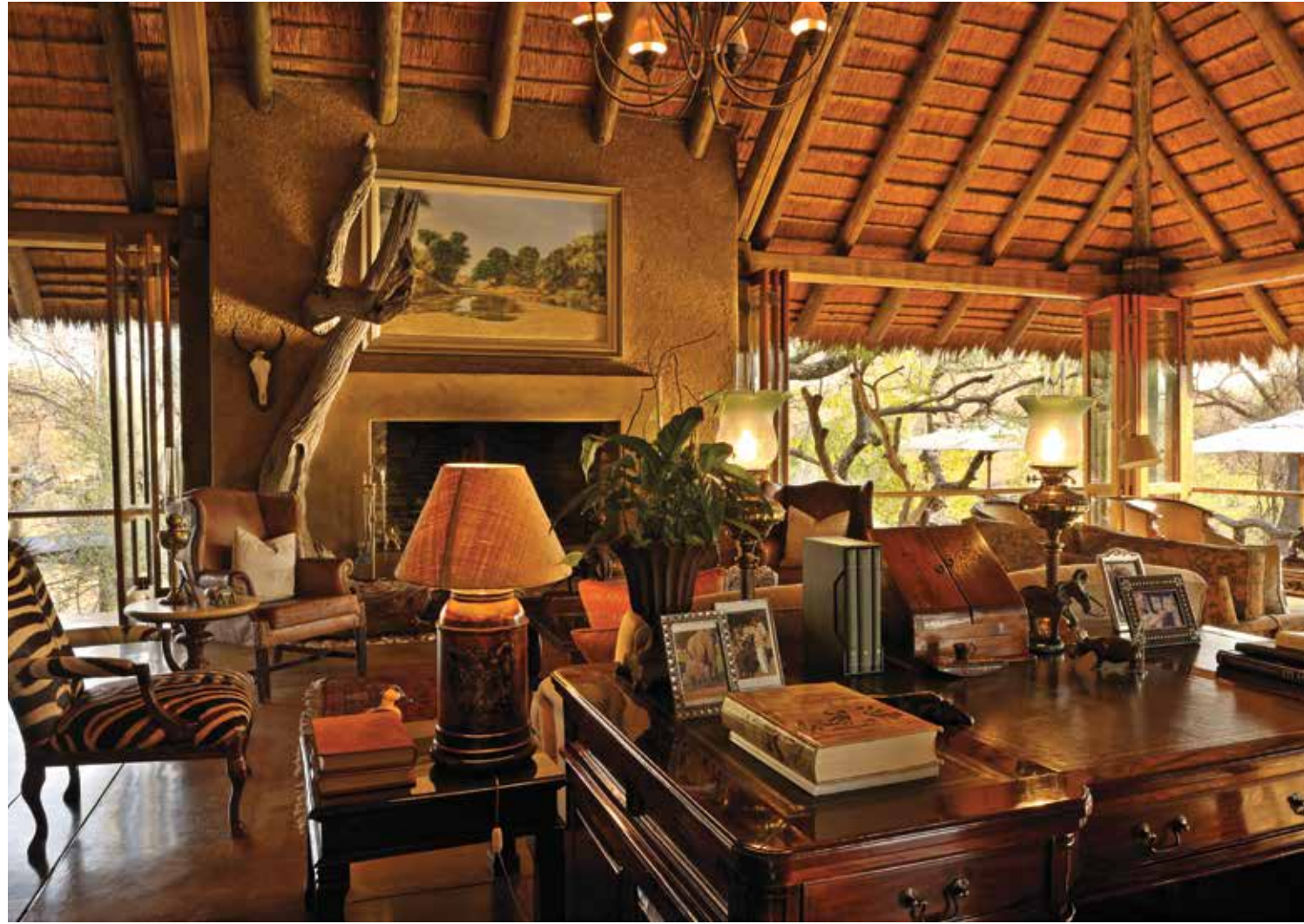


CAMP JABULANI

BY ANDY MARK

I AM PRETTY MUCH THE ENVY OF MANY of our friends and family. Last year we led an expedition from Cape Town to Dar es Salaam with celebrity chef Reuben Riffel, writing and filming content for several of our magazines, so when we broke the news recently that Nicky and I were heading to Limpopo province to check out elephants as well as the last few days of the marula fruit harvest (the marula fruit is the key ingredient in Amarula liqueur) our news was met with much eye-rolling and sarcastic “you poor things...,” comments from our mates.



The problem for us Capetonians is that many of the best and biggest big five wildlife reserves are based far away on the other side of the country, making the trek a serious two or even three day affair if one is to drive by car. Luckily, with some tough negotiations, government relented and allowed the Hoedspruit Air-force Base to be used by civilian aircraft. Security is still tight at the airfield, and no photography is allowed. But it does mean that there are now non-stop SA Airlink flights all the way from Cape Town and Johannesburg to the very heart of this wildlife wonderland. And that's how, on a Friday morning late in February, Nicky and I came to board one of the rather tiny SA Airlink aircraft at Cape Town International. Destination: Limpopo.

After an easy two-hour flight we were met right at the airport by representatives of Camp Jabulani in their shiny new Land Rover Defender game viewing vehicle (one of

the best game-viewing conversions I have ever seen) and the friendly rangers quickly had our bags stowed in the completely sealed, purpose built off-road trailer.

Our camp was named after an elephant called Jabulani (meaning 'to rejoice') who was orphaned at four months old. Jabulani was deserted by his herd after getting stuck in the slurry pit of a disused mine near a broken fence surrounding the Kruger game reserve. A passing mine manager happened upon the nearly-dead Jabulani and, after a herculean struggle, managed to free the baby elephant from the mud. The now-desperate mine manager, with no way of caring for the injured elephant, contacted the owner of the Jabulani Camp Lodge, Lente Roode, in the hope that she would be able to suggest a solution. She immediately took the animal in and nurtured him for a harrowing year until he miraculously regained his full



strength. Attempts were made to reintroduce Jabulani into the wild but it was not meant to be, and he remained with Roode who later went on to rescue an 11-strong, at-risk elephant herd from Zimbabwe. Fortunately the matriarch of this herd immediately took to Jabulani, providing him a family of his own kin in addition to his human relations.

Camp Jabulani is seriously upmarket; a big five lodge founded and built primarily to sustain these elephants. A large chunk of the profits not only go to the upkeep of the elephants but also to a wildlife rehabilitation centre on the same property.

INTO THE WILD

We had no idea how long the drive to the reserve would be and were surprised when the super-comfortable converted Landy Defender turned neither right nor left on

exiting the Hoedspruit main gate. Instead, our ranger drove straight across the tarmac into the entrance of the main Kapama Private Game Reserve, inside which Camp Jabulani is situated.

I was pretty happy that we didn't spend much time on that road, and even if we lived in Johannesburg I think I would still fly to Hoedspruit. The stretch of the N1 between Pretoria and Limpopo, both north- and south-bound are in the top five of the most dangerous roads in South Africa with 47 and 54 average annual fatalities respectively.

And so it was an absolute bonus when our airport transfer turned into a fully fledged game drive, full of sightings of warhogs, springbok and impala, just minutes from the airport. When we arrived at the camp the elephants had just finished cavorting in the large pool close to the boma, and we enjoyed an incredible spread of delectable Amarula inspired

goodies for lunch, the first of several delicious meals that just seemed to get better and better as the weekend wore on. It was at this lunch that we were introduced to Audrey Delsink, head of the Makalali Research Department. Audrey – who is able to identify more than 50 individual elephants by their unique ear pattern and is about to complete her doctorate – spoke to us about her work at the elephant project at Makalali. She also let slip that she suffers terribly from airsickness and admitted to ‘probably having thrown up in every single park’s board helicopter in service’. You see, Audrey’s job is to sedate the elephants with a dart gun so that they can have a satellite collar tracking system fitted and the helicopter flight to find these huge animals is a necessary, if unpleasant, part of the job for her.

I don’t like caged anything when it comes to wild animals. It is for this reason – and with their whole-hearted support – that my children do not go to circuses. So when I learned that we were to actually ride on the elephants I was a little sceptical. We listened to the guides’ preamble about how the animals were never beaten or tied up and how they were only ‘positively reinforced’ during training. The second I got up close and personal to Jabulani, now a strapping big

male elephant, and he made eye contact with me I felt an instant connection. There was such intelligence behind his languid brown eyes and the quizzical look he gave me kind of said, “So what are you doing here buddy?”.

The ease with which the elephants allowed us to climb atop their backs, the way the handlers had to utter no more than a softly spoken word to get the elephants to move into position and the complete lack of any kind of instrument to beat or force the elephants into compliance soon had me convinced that this herd had never been mistreated. We set out into the bush on the backs of these majestic animals, and with the advantage of the elevated view began to enjoy a very different kind of game drive. The elephants in their natural habitat allowed us to enjoy closer encounters with game who were not at all concerned with the close proximity of the elephants. This sunset safari was truly a one-of-a-kind experience as the Jabulani Camp offers the only night safari on elephant back in the world.

A CLOSE ENCOUNTER

The next morning we awoke to the sound of a lion’s roar so close it could have been from inside our lapa. With our hearts still racing we set out in the Land Rover game viewer in search of the predator and not far down the dusty paths we came across three male lions sunning themselves on the already warm sand road. Our guide stopped the Landy a little way up the road, and we watched the trio languidly coming to their feet and start moving past us, close enough to touch. And then suddenly we saw it. A few hundred metres down the road the rump of a waterbuck was sticking out into the track. The lions had seen it too. Well, two of the lions. The third collapsed lazily, very close to our car, as though the walk up the road to the waterbuck was all a bit much for him so early in the morning.

He wasn’t there long, however, when we spotted some movement to our right. An adult warthog emerged from the bush with her baby, clearly under the impression that the coast was clear. The warthog and the lion locked eyes and at that moment the decision was made: she made a run for it – leaving her baby, and a cloud of dust, behind.

But the baby lived to see another day as the lion chose instead to pursue the mother. We all grabbed our cameras and all but fell out of the viewer to follow the action, but the lion’s heart just wasn’t into it. After running a few metres with a loping, lazy stride he gave up the chase.

After all that commotion, we were more than ready for breakfast and were escorted to a dining setup in the middle of the bush, something you don’t get to see every day. A chef standing at a bush kitchen rustled up a hearty breakfast for us, with a rifle strategically placed against his prep table.



Philip Harrison and Kate Nelson



THE LODGE

Camp Jabulani is the perfect place to steep one’s soul in the warmth and elegance of this amazing African property. The villas seamlessly blends into the surrounding bush. The main boma comprises of an open-plan dining room and lounge, which extends onto a wooden deck shaded by enormous leaded trees that have been integrated into the construction of the lodge.

Guests are escorted (this is, afterall, a big five reserve) from the living areas to the secluded suites via a hanging bridge that stretches across the river. The riverbed houses six private and independent luxury suites to accommodate a total of 12 guests.

The rooms are gorgeous, each kitted out with a massive canopy bed, a large stone tub and glass outdoor shower, a private lounge area complete with fireplace, and a completely private plunge pool. All the suites have 24-hour temperature control to ensure the complete comfort of guests.

Guests also have access to the Therapy Lapa where they can relax and rejuvenate after a long day in the African bush.

THE FRUIT OF THE AFRICAN MARULA TREE

You too have seen one of the elephants from Camp Jabulani. Well, you have if you've ever enjoyed an Amarula sundowner. OK, so you might not actually have seen him. But you've definitely seen a picture of him. You see, Sebakwe, bull elephant of the herd, is synonymous with not just the area in South Africa where the Marula fruit originates, but it is actually a picture of him adorning the label of every bottle of Amarula.

On Saturday morning after breakfast, we headed out to Phalaborwa to see the Amarula Lapa where we were able to witness the harvest process of the marula fruit (used to make the Amarula Cream liqueur) and visit a marula fruit collection point. With the season nearly at its end we were lucky to see the last few trucks arrive at the plant and watch the fruit being processed before the long drive to the Cape for fermentation.

The Amarula Trust has been sponsoring the Amarula Elephant Research Programme (AERP) since 2002. Headed by Professor Rob Slotow of UKZN, the project explores elephant behaviour as the basis for conservation and

elephant management strategy development in public and private game parks.

Amarula buys its fruit from villagers who harvest the marulas. They gather the fruit from the ground after it has ripened enough to fall from the marula tree's branches.

The fruit is then crushed and pulped, loaded into tankers and shipped to the Cape, where fermentation yields a marula wine that is double-distilled to make a marula spirit, aged for two years in small French oak barrels. The finishing touch to Amarula Cream is the addition of fresh dairy cream.

Camp Jabulani's delicious menu uses the creamy Amarula drink as inspiration, and the food prepared by head chef, Dylan Frost, ranges from delicately prepared poached pears to beef choux with Amarula Gold, and a smoked cashew Amarula ice-cream dessert.

Camp Jabulani caters for everything from a bush boma (rifle at the ready) to a fine dining experience. We enjoyed the latter on the last of our nights at the lodge that receives 99 per cent international visitors with return guests (not surprisingly) predominantly opting for a longer second visit. Note to self: Return to Camp Jabulani. Pack extra clothes.



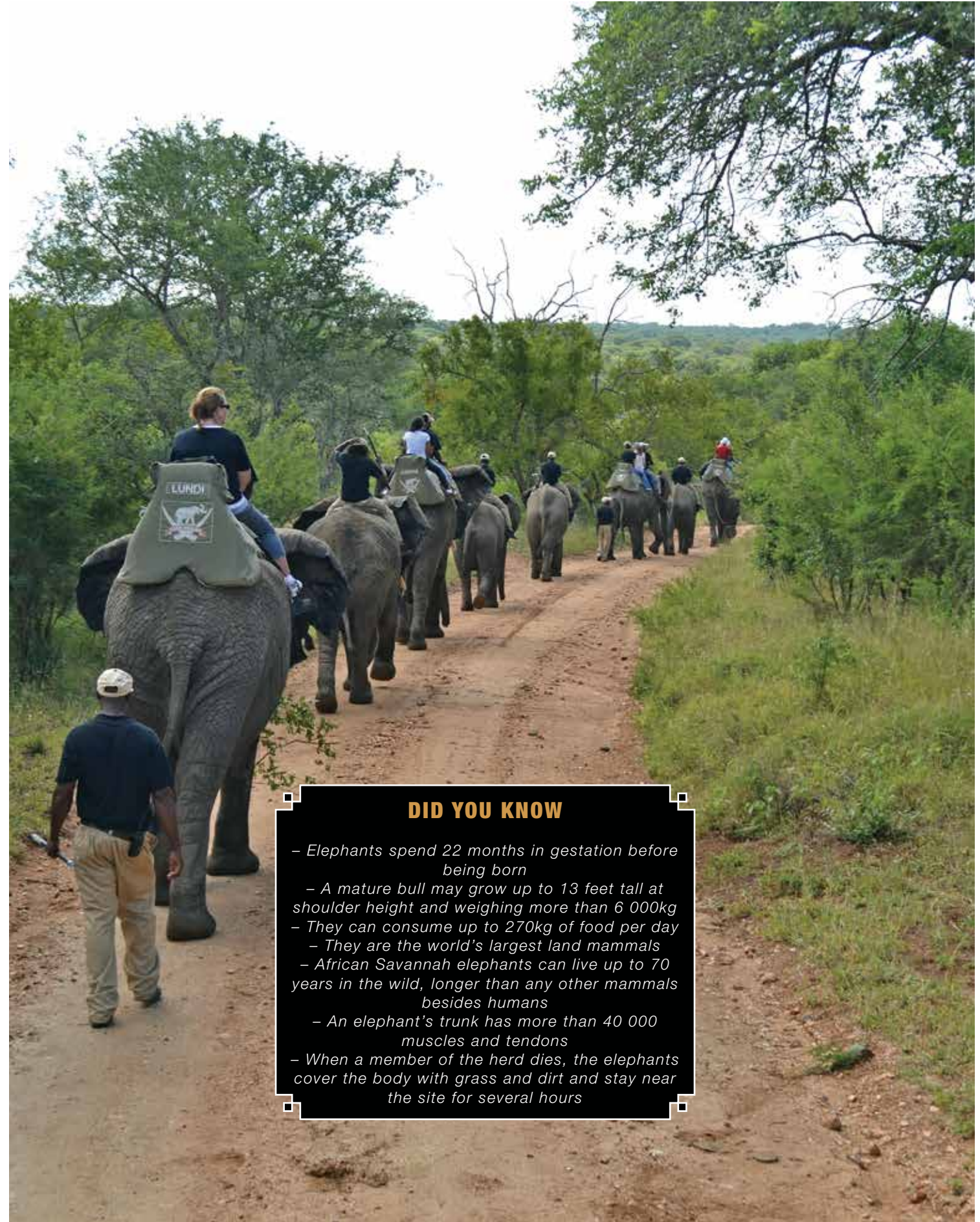
TRAVELLING

Driving: The 1 866km drive from Cape Town to the Kapama Private Game Reserve will take 17 hours and 16 minutes via the N1, provided there's no traffic. This route is tolled.

The 495km journey from Johannesburg to Kapama Private Game Reserve is a duration of five hours and nine minutes via the N12 provided there's no traffic. This route is tolled.

Flying: CPT to HDS weekend round trip for a single adult will cost from R5 500 on SA Airlink.
Non-stop flight duration: 2hr 40min

JHB to HDS weekend round trip for a single adult will cost from R4 380
Non-stop flight duration: 1hr 5min



DID YOU KNOW

- Elephants spend 22 months in gestation before being born
- A mature bull may grow up to 13 feet tall at shoulder height and weighing more than 6 000kg
- They can consume up to 270kg of food per day
- They are the world's largest land mammals
- African Savannah elephants can live up to 70 years in the wild, longer than any other mammals besides humans
- An elephant's trunk has more than 40 000 muscles and tendons
- When a member of the herd dies, the elephants cover the body with grass and dirt and stay near the site for several hours