



Camp Jabulani · South Africa

A close encounter with lowveld giants

Getting up close and personal with an elephant is an emotional, life-changing experience – and it's the unique safari offering that sets Camp Jabulani apart from other South African lodges.



Salvation from the jaws of tragedy. That's the escape story behind Camp Jabulani's elephants, which faced the horror of being shot when war veterans took over the farm in Zimbabwe belonging to their care giver. These elephants were all orphans due to a culling programme in the 1980s and were trained for elephant-back safaris. They now faced a grisly end... But enter Lente Rooode and the Hoedspruit Endangered Species Centre, who undertook a brave and elaborate rescue operation. Lente and her team spirited the animals away to a new home in the lowveld. Faced with the overwhelming responsibility

of caring for these elephants, the next logical step was to create a camp to support them. This would also enable guests to interact with the gentle giants. And so Camp Jabulani was born. The five-star lodge, a member of Relais & Châteaux, sits in the heart of Kapama, a private game reserve in the Limpopo lowveld. With the grey-blue Drakensberg mountains in the west and iconic Kruger National Park to the east, Kapama lies in a stretch of game-rich bushveld frequented by the Big Five. Arriving at Camp Jabulani, guests step out of the everyday bustle of their workaday lives and into a realm



Sundowners next to a waterhole are the perfect way to finish a relaxed elephant-back ride through the lowveld bush. And with five lion prides resident in the reserve, you may find a big cat who wants to join in the fun as well.

seemingly suspended outside time. The beautiful lodge is set along the banks of a (mostly) dry river bed. Its tranquil dining room and lounge merge with a wooden deck in the shade of lofty leadwood trees. A suspension bridge connects the living areas with the suites, which lie scattered beside the river. Open-plan interiors allow for communion with the bushveld, providing a comfortable, homely environment. The rich textures of organic elements strike a balance between designer elegance and lowveld traditional: crystal glasses and silver service juxtaposed with grass-pressed mud walls, stone floors and thatched roofs. Each of the six luxury suites has a large bedroom with bathroom en-suite: think pure cotton sheets, large stone tubs, glass-enclosed showers that appear to be suspended among the trees. There's a separate lounge area with fireplace, a wooden deck and private heated plunge

pool. After a dusty day of game activities, there's soft lighting, a blazing fire and a welcoming bed to draw to a close another idyllic safari. In addition to the suites, there's Zindoga Villa, designed for guests who prefer a more exclusive experience or for small groups, especially families. This 424-square-metre house is entirely self-contained and mirrors the style of Camp Jabulani. The villa is serviced by its own team, including a chef, butler and ranger with a private vehicle. Some guests while away the heat of the day in a hammock, others indulge in retail therapy in The Gallery or visit the Hoedspruit Endangered Species Centre. For the more energetic there's an open-air fitness area to work off those calories. It has a variety of exercise gear, weights, a treadmill, exercise bike and even a sauna. There's also a bush spa for languid pampering. The resident



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therapist offers everything from skincare and body treatments, to natural wraps and foot massages. Each day begins and ends with a game drive in an open safari vehicle. The vegetation is typical of the lowveld: mixed woodland dominated by a variety of acacia and bushwillow species. The varied habitats support high densities of wildlife, offering top-notch game viewing. Apart from elephant, buffalo, rhino and large herds of antelope, giraffe and zebra, Kapama is home to a healthy Big Five population. The reserve has five lion prides and guests also have frequent sightings of leopard, cheetah and spotted hyena. Twitchers won't be disappointed, with more than 350 bird species recorded, including the endangered ground hornbill, lappet-faced vulture, knob-billed duck and African finfoot. But it is the elephant encounters that set this lodge apart from all others. There's

nothing quite like sailing through the bushveld on the back of a muscular grey cloud. The elephant grooms are dedicated to their charges, which is clearly evident in their caring, yet firm, approach. The elephants are trained by a reward system rather than forcing obedience through physical punishment. Each guest is partnered with an elephant based on temperament. Saddles have been designed with comfort in mind – for both elephant and rider. Perched atop their mighty spines, you soon become lulled by the gentle rocking motion as you move in single file through the bush. Afternoon safaris set off just before sunset. The elephants converge on a romantic clearing lit by lanterns where a white-linen table adorned with drinks, crystal glasses, fresh flowers and delectable canapés awaits. There can hardly be a better way to end a day in the African wilderness. ■ Justin Fox



Lente Roode, who rescued the Camp Jabulani elephants, established the Hoedspruit Cheetah Project, which has since evolved into the Hoedspruit Endangered Species Centre, in 1990 with a view to protecting and breeding these endangered cats.

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