

Amazing Memories

A FAMILY HOLIDAY IN SOUTH AFRICA



"ELEPHANTS ARE CAPABLE OF PINPOINTING WATER SOURCES UP TO 12 MILES AWAY, AND **WILL BE ABLE TO RECOGNISE ME EVEN IF I COME BACK TWENTY YEARS LATER.**"



Renowned for its elephant riding expeditions, and high level of elephant interaction, it keeps fourteen special elephants: from Pisa, the baby, to Sebokwe, the largest male; from Tokwe, the matriarch, to Mambo, the playful hooligan of the herd - plus, our Jabu, who owes the camp his name.

"Like humans, who are typically right, or left-handed, elephants have a preferred side on which they use their trunk."

To illustrate this our guide, Stanley, shows us the grass stains, and wear and tear, on the left-hand side of Jabulani's trunk.

"The proboscis, or trunk, is a fusion of the nose and upper lip, elongated and specialised to become the elephant's most important, and versatile, appendage. African elephants are equipped with two fingerlike projections at the tip of their trunk, while Asians have only one. The elephant's trunk is sensitive enough to pick up a single blade of grass, yet strong enough to rip the branches off a tree."

As if to demonstrate this, Stanley asks Isabel, my eldest daughter, to drop the ankus (elephant goad) on the ground. Uncertain, she does so only for Jabulani to pick it back with his trunk, and 'hand' it back to her.

The smile of joy on Isabel's face was glorious to behold: pure enraptured delight. So too, Jabulani. He seems to be beaming with pride, and behind

his thick curly eyelashes his eyes are smiling with real pleasure at being so appreciated.

"Jabu, lift," requests Stanley. Jabulani turns the end of his trunk upwards, inviting contributions. With huge smiles on their faces, the children pour pellets into his trunk. I don't know who is happier. Jabu in receiving his treats; the children in giving them; or me in enjoying their delight.

Elephant trunks are capable of expanding, contracting, and moving in a diverse array of directions, while their keen sense of smell is used to survey the environment. The trunk is raised and waived in the air to gather scent particles. These are then carried to a specialized gland called the Jacobson's organ, located in the roof of the mouth. Through this process, elephants are capable of pinpointing water sources up to 12 miles away, and will be able to recognise me even if I come back twenty years later - hence the phrase 'memory like an elephant.'

Jabulani stands scratching the back of one of his back legs with his other back leg. Dangerous to anthromorphise, but he does look surprisingly human. To further this, he scratches the front of his left front leg with his right leg. He then kicks and scuffs the sand, almost in unconscious boredom.

Interaction over, we mount our elephants via a ramp. Legs astride the howdah, I realise that I am not as supple as I once was, and that my

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decision to wear shorts was not the best. My elephant is remarkably hairy! Worse still, his hair is unexpectedly hard and scratchy.

"Here, feel the outside of Jabu's ear. Now, feel the inside. Feel how different it is. Velvety smooth on the inside?"

An elephant's skin is about an inch thick in most body parts, although it is paper-thin in some areas, such as behind the ears. These are made of a very thin layer of skin stretched over cartilage, and a rich network of blood vessels. On hot days, elephants will flap their ears constantly, creating a slight breeze. This breeze cools the surface blood vessels, and then the cooler blood gets circulated to the rest of the animal's body.

Sensitivity to touch does not depend on the thickness of skin, however. In elephants, the numerous nerve endings that sense touch and pain are on the skin's surface. Hence, as my

elephant handler told me, elephants can feel a mosquito landing on them.

Effectively, elephants walk on tiptoes; their foot is like a hand. The gnarly soles of their feet are designed for grip, and to mould themselves over any roughness in the terrain. Consequently, they can walk with near silent steps - although I did detect a steady, scuffing sound.

We are afforded a great view on the back of this beautiful grey animal, who measures four metres at the shoulder. We catch sight of wildebeest, giraffe, and warthog. Our handler tells us that he sees lions, too, when on the elephants' backs, but that the elephants are not phased by them.

As he walks, Jabulani is constantly feeding. His digestive system is poor, only using 40% of what he eats. Whilst this makes for poor nutrient absorption, it creates a dung rich in nutrients that is beneficial to other animals, such as dung beetles.

All the same, we learn that male elephants are won over by food: their stomachs rule. Perhaps they are not so different from us, after all.

WE ARE AT CAMP JABULANI IN KAPAMA PRIVATE GAME RESERVE, ON THE EDGE OF KRUGER NATIONAL PARK, SOUTH AFRICA.



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