

Extraordinary Elephants

South Africa's Jabulani Safari Lodge offers world-class hospitality that is unusually big-hearted.

by Elizabeth Warkentin



THERE IS A COLLECTIVE

holding of breath as the elephants begin arriving.

Nathan, my personal safari guide from Jabulani Safari, had driven us to a waterhole on Kapama Private Game Reserve, located outside the South African town of Hoedspruit. A long table was laden with appetizers and pretty cakes and a couple of bartenders prepared classic sundowner drinks for the lodge guests. A dozen or so directors' chairs sat in a semicircle facing the waterhole. The excitement in the air was like the buzz on the red carpet on Oscar night as more guests arrived and we waited together for "the big moment." As we chatted, the honey-gold light of early evening faded, the sky turning blood orange before softening to sorbet pink and lavender purple.

Then we see them on the opposite side of the waterhole. The Jabulani herd, currently 15 strong, amble by, single file, each with their carer at their side. The pachyderms are on their way to their stables to tuck in for the night after a day out foraging on the 16,000-hectare (39,536-acre) reserve. Before continuing to their open stalls, several pause to take one last drink, their trunks hoovering up gallons of water and spraying it into their mouths.

Near the end of the queue comes Khanyisa. At 5 years old, this albino elephant is the youngest member of the herd. She suffered traumatic injuries as a baby as a result of losing her mother and getting caught in a snare. But she seems to have recovered well as she pauses for a drink.





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ROOTED IN EARTH

A growing number of African safari lodges are involved in wildlife conservation efforts, but since its beginnings conservation has always been Jabulani's raison d'être. The sophisticated, two-Michelin-key property consists of a classically designed main lodge, dining room, and bar; two villas; six timeless, ultra-private suites; and a spa. Relais & Châteaux opened the lodge in 2005 to help support and protect a refugee elephant herd from Zimbabwe and care for orphaned baby elephants — in addition to contributing more generally to wildlife conservation.

The story began in 1997, when Jabulani Safari owner and managing director Adine Roode, whose family owns Kapama, had taken in and rehabilitated an orphaned baby elephant who was christened Jabulani. Later, in 2002, having agreed to provide a home to the then-homeless Zimbabwe herd, she founded Hoedspruit Elephant Rehabilitation and Development, or HERD, which currently employs a staff of 140. In 2019, HERD built the only elephant orphanage in South Africa.

Roode's is a dedication to the welfare of animals rarely matched. Not only does she oversee operations both at the lodge and at HERD, she has fought in the trenches with injured and traumatized orphaned elephants.

"It was really tough with Kanyisa," Roode says. "When she arrived, she had a snare that went through her mouth. There were two cables that were knotted and went back through again, cutting off part of her ear. I had to clean the wounds daily, but I think she knew it was for her own good."

The heartbreak of losing her mother, together with the pain in her mouth, were so extreme that Kanyisa began to refuse her milk bottle. Luckily, Roode worked out a way to give the orphan her bottle, but Kanyisa's health took a frightening downturn nonetheless. "There were a few nights where I really believed I was losing Kanyisa," says Roode. "One night I could feel death knocking at the door. We were lying together, and I just prayed."

WILD ENCOUNTERS

Guests at Jabulani Safari, where every suite and villa comes with its own butler and safari guide and every guest is treated like both a friend and an A-lister, can observe Kanyisa and the rest of the herd from afar during the sundowner experience.

Another elephant moment on offer to Jabulani guests is the "Elephant Swim," where at midday they can watch the individual personalities of the herd drink, swim, and frolic in the cooling waters.

A third possibility is the "Meet the Bulls" activity. This allows guests to meet and offer elephant treats to only the three most sociable bulls — Jabulani, Sebakwe (the herd's dominant bull), and Somopane — since these three enjoy attention from humans. Sebakwe and Somopane, part of the original Zimbabwe herd, grew up on a farm. Their owner had them regularly interacting with visitors before he was forced to relinquish his animals in 2002 during the country's land reform movement. Unlike the others, Jabulani, HERD's first orphan, was found alone, in a silt dam in 1997 when he was four months old. Roode, a few elephant caregivers, and a companion sheep looked after him before he was eventually adopted by the Zimbabwe herd's matriarch, Tokwe.

In contrast to Jabulani, the younger orphans have had limited contact with humans, with the exception of Roode and a few of the dedicated carers. This was intentional. Roode and her team of experts understand that it's best for the orphans' wellbeing to allow them to live as close as possible to their true, wild natures. In this way, the team hopes the elephants can one day be released into the wild.



Adine Roode

HOPEFUL STARLIGHT

On my last night at Jabulani, after an exciting game drive tracking the movements of a brawny male leopard, I return to my beautifully appointed suite. Out on my private deck, as I search the night sky for the Southern Cross constellation, my thoughts drift back to the soul-stirring elephant sundowner experience.

The herd seemed so calm and content by the waterhole. And Khanyisa appeared happy and well-adjusted among the older elephants. My throat catches when I imagine what could have happened to the Zimbabwe herd and the orphans had Roode not opened her nature reserve and her giant heart to these magnificent animals. I'm grateful to this superwoman for allowing visitors to share in the magic of this special herd and letting them be a part of something meaningful. ●



Villa Sompane

HERD Moving Forward

Both Jabulani and HERD are always evolving. In 2026, HERD is planning to launch the Limpopo Research Centre. The center will be a permanent, purpose-built space for ethical elephant research intended to deepen current understanding of elephant behavior, well-being, and social structures, in addition to contributing to long-term conservation.

LOOKING AHEAD TO 2027, MORE IMPROVEMENTS ARE COMING TO JABULANI SAFARI:

- the spa facilities will be expanded
- three new superior suites will be added
- the lounge in the main lodge will undergo a renovation
- the kitchen and dining spaces will be redesigned enhancing Jabulani's reputation for exquisite, inspired cuisine.



Jabulani Safari (x3), Elizabeth Weir (x2) (2 elephants)