

BLOW THE BUDGET

Go big, or stay home

Elephant camp makes an impression on **Leizi Eykelhof**

IT IS a long drive from Johannesburg to Camp Jabulani, near Hoedspruit in Limpopo. Fortunately, the Blyde River, its valley, the orchards and the beginnings of the Drakensberg mountain range are welcome distractions from the seemingly never-ending tarmac.

Camp Jabulani is, as the slogan goes, all about its elephants.

It is a six-suite luxury camp in the heart of the Kapama Game Reserve built to support a very special herd of pachyderms.

The story of the camp begins with a tiny elephant who was found stuck in mud. Injured and severely dehydrated, the baby, Jabulani, was taken to the Hoedspruit Endangered Species Centre, run by conservationist Lente Roode.

With the help of a dedicated team — and Jabulani's surrogate mother, a sheep — it took a year to nurse him back to health.

When he was well enough to be moved back into the bush, he put his foot down and refused. His carers were his herd now.

His guardian angel, Roode, stepped in again as news came from Zimbabwe of a 12-member herd whose home was about to be taken by steak-hungry war veterans. Within days a rescue operation was set up and the herd was transported to Hoedspruit. The young elephant was adopted by the others and Camp Jabulani was born.

In the lodge's entrance hall, an antique table groaning under silver-framed family snaps beckoned us into the lodge's stories. We were welcomed as warmly as old friends, with a drink and a chat, after which we were taken across a suspension bridge to our room.

Out of Africa author Karen Blixen's spirit must have had a hand in the decor, which is very much colonial-style "tent", furnished with fine china, silverware and priceless works of art.

The bathroom was the piece de resistance. It took up half the tent and consisted of an enclosed outdoor shower, a separate toilet and a gorgeous, free-standing bath and double basin.



SWAYING SAFARI: The elephants at Camp Jabulani also put on an act straight out of 'The Jungle Book'

FACT FILE

GETTING THERE

From Johannesburg, take the N12 to Middelburg, turn left on to the R540 towards Belfast. In the centre of Belfast, turn right to Dullstroom and Lydenburg. Take the R36 to Ohrigstad and through the Strijdom Tunnel to Hoedspruit. Turn right at the R40 to Klaserie/Bushbuck Ridge. Continue to the Kapama Game

Reserve entrance where you will be directed to Camp Jabulani.

For more information visit www.campjabulani.com

BEING THERE

Rates are from R8 000 pppn.

While there, visit the Hoedspruit Endangered Species Centre where you can interact with cheetah and other endangered species. Call 015-793-1633 or visit www.hesc.co.za for more information.

A wooden room divider subtly decorated with carved elephants, the leaves left on our beds with elephant silhouettes punched out of them, and the walls made to look as if they are covered in elephant dung are reminders that your extravagance is for a good cause — a relief because the experience comes with a hefty price tag.

Each suite has a deck and a splash pool, although it was too chilly when we were there for that splash. In fact, on returning to our room after dinner we were greeted by a crackling fireplace. We fell asleep to that distinctive bushveld flicker.

Every day, visitors are treated to an elephant-back ride through the

bush. We hopped onto Sebakwe, who plays a leading role in the Amarula advertisements on TV.

It was a strange, slightly uncomfortable, but wonderful experience.

I was much too focused on staying on the elephant to spot other animals that may have been lurking in the bush. But I enjoyed witnessing how the herd interacted with trainers and with one another.

I enjoyed, too, the swish and swash that accompanied our swaying safari.

We climbed off the elephants at a watering hole where a live show by the elephant herd and their keepers preceded sundowners and snacks. The talent show reminded me of the jungle patrol in *The Jungle Book*. I could almost hear *Colonel Hathi's March* as the camp's cousins trumpeted and flicked batons about.

Afterwards, on a game drive, we

saw a number of animals and watched an unsuccessful lion hunt.

Then, at last, it was time to hunt down our own dinner.

Gourmet meals are served in the dining room, which overlooks a deck and dam inhabited by a variety of birds. We were lucky to see a giant kingfisher at breakfast.

My favourite dish was a deconstructed bobotie, with the mince spread between poppadom-type layers. The fresh seed bread was truly heavenly (the recipe is on Camp Jabulani's website).

Head chef Andre Gerber believes that food has the power to change an ordinary moment into a treasured memory. I'd have to say, and excuse the cliché, the proof is in his pudding. After this remarkable experience, I get to have the memory of an elephant, too.

● Eykelhof was a guest of Camp Jabulani