

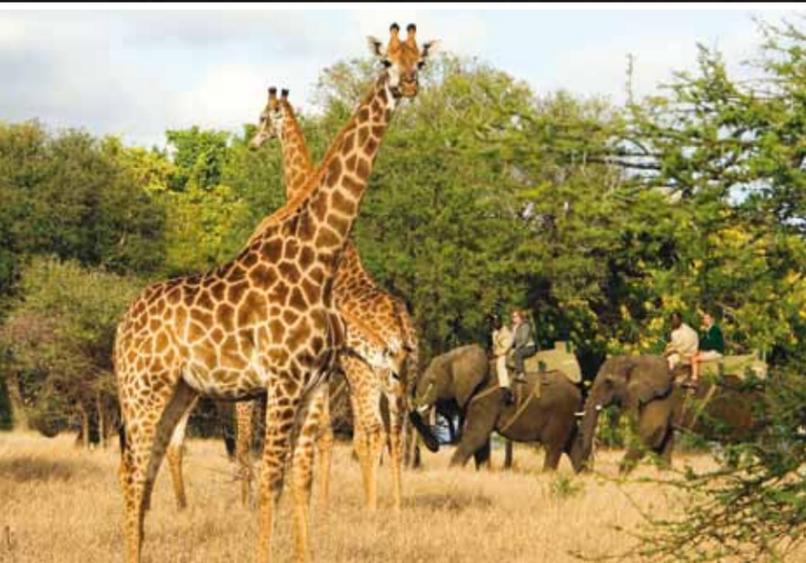


High and Mighty

It's an extraordinary experience riding on elephant back in the bush. The animal tolerates you, but it's best to keep in mind that you're not the master.

Words LES AUPIAIS

The sights, sounds and smells of the bush permeate every aspect of this retreat. Here, your body is pampered into blissful oblivion, rested beyond compare, nourished with excellent fare and enthralled – courtesy of Africa's gentle giants



WAYS AND MEANS

Camp Jabulani is located in a private Big Five game reserve in Hoedspruit, Limpopo Province. Daily one-hour flights are operated by South African Express between Oliver Tambo International Airport and Hoedspruit. Complementary 20-minute road transfers are provided to/from Camp Jabulani from/to Hoedspruit Eastgate Airport. Direct SA Express flights are also available from Cape Town on Tuesdays, Thursdays and Sundays. The camp is a five-hour drive from Johannesburg.

For more, visit www.campjabulani.com, call 012 460 7348 or email reservations@campjabulani.com.



PHOTOGRAPHY: COURTESY OF CAMP JABULANI

WALKING IN THE BUSH, tracker to the front and back rifles at the ready, your body is on high alert. What are you but a soft target for an irritable buffalo or a rhino that gets wind of your threat to its calf? And then there's the slightly faster getaway option; the horseback safari. You're still vulnerable, but close enough to the bush to hear, smell and see it naturally.

On elephant back, you redefine the experience. You are, in essence, an apex predator three metres up on the world's largest land mammal. You look into nests. You're green-shoot height with a giraffe. It's unlikely you'd be prey to anything bar a hunter.

But not here. Here you are with your guide in a protected private reserve as a tolerated rider. 'Tame' isn't a word you should bandy about any wild animal, especially around a species that we're just beginning to understand.

Riding the now famous 16-year-old Jabulani, you recall that elephants live to roughly human age, which makes him the equivalent of a skateboarding, baggie-shorted, iPod-wearing adolescent, but with excellent manners.

Camp Jabulani, named after him, is set in the 13 000 ha Kapama Private Reserve in Hoedspruit, where a small herd of elephants rescued from a Zimbabwean war zone now work a few hours a day for their keep. This is Jabulani's adopted family.

At four months old, he'd been found wedged in the silt of a dam, and in danger of dying from dehydration. Taken in by the Hoedspruit Endangered Species Centre, the idea was to rehabilitate him and return him to the wild. But elephants are social creatures, the complex relationship between matriachs, females in the herd and their calves still a subject of considerable research. What was clear was

that Jabulani – meaning 'to rejoice' – had no intention of abandoning his new 'herd', even if they walked on two legs and looked weird. The fateful rescue of the Zimbabwe dozen meant that the 'mountain' had figuratively come to Mohammed.

What was extraordinary was that the traumatised animals that had been shipped by truck over the border immediately accepted the recalcitrant 3 000kg Jabulani and that matriarch Tokwe had adopted him.

Riding him – or one of the other human-tolerant members of the herd – puts you in a strange space. Camp Jabulani offers the only 'after dark' elephant-back safari and the experience is eerie. An elephant moves uncannily quietly for a creature of its size, the thick pads beneath its feet acting like a dense foam suspension system.

You undulate through the night acutely aware of wind and the deepening shadows. What you hear is their conversation, a sound that travels for kilometres. The low rumble seems to come from beneath you like an amplified growl in an echo chamber and because your legs are spread across its back, the noise seems to pass through your own body. The hair on your arms stands on end. You're nothing but an eavesdropper to a conversation in a language you'll never learn, never understand. It's this experience that you take away with you. That and a growing sense that our often feeble social structures – broken relationships, scattered tribes, war and desire to acquire more than what we'll need in several lifetimes – would seem bizarre to them. It's difficult not feeling 'unevolved'.

The next day, on a game drive, we park and observe the herd wallow in a large waterhole, spraying mud and churned water about. You

watch what seems to be rivalry on the edge of aggression between young bulls, notice that smaller members of the herd are playful and indulged, and that obvious deference is given to the matriarch. And that, strangely, they seem to be... joyful.

That night, we put them to bed. They're stabled in a giant enclosure, given concentrated pellets and water. They've been free all day apart from the early and evening rides; and now they rest. Through the slatted enclosure Jabulani has stopped moving and his eye, fringed with the impossibly long spikes of his lashes, is fixed on us. It's a dark rich brown, and just for a moment, you sense the 16 million years behind his kind.

And so to bed. Apart from the Big Five and the muddy dozen experience, Relais & Châteaux member Camp Jabulani will give you the best R&R you've had in years – from a long wallow in the suite's egg-shaped bath to the first eight-hour sleep in weeks in a mosquito-canopied bed under cool cotton sheets.

Here's what came before: pea soup with crispy pancetta, sour cream and croutons; orange duck *confit* with potato fondant asparagus and a molasses jus; and then there was the pear tarte tatin served with vanilla cream.

If sleep, egg-bath wallow, and the food don't quite unwind you then two hours at the Therapy Lapa will do you in: the outdoor deck opens to the bush and offers a comprehensive spa menu including body wraps, hand and foot treatments and rejuvenating therapies.

In those free blissful hours post early morning ride or drive, stay in your open plan suite with a lounge area, fireplace, and a private plunge pool with wooden deck overlooking a dry riverbed surrounded by the bush. Consider the break an essential survival tactic. □