

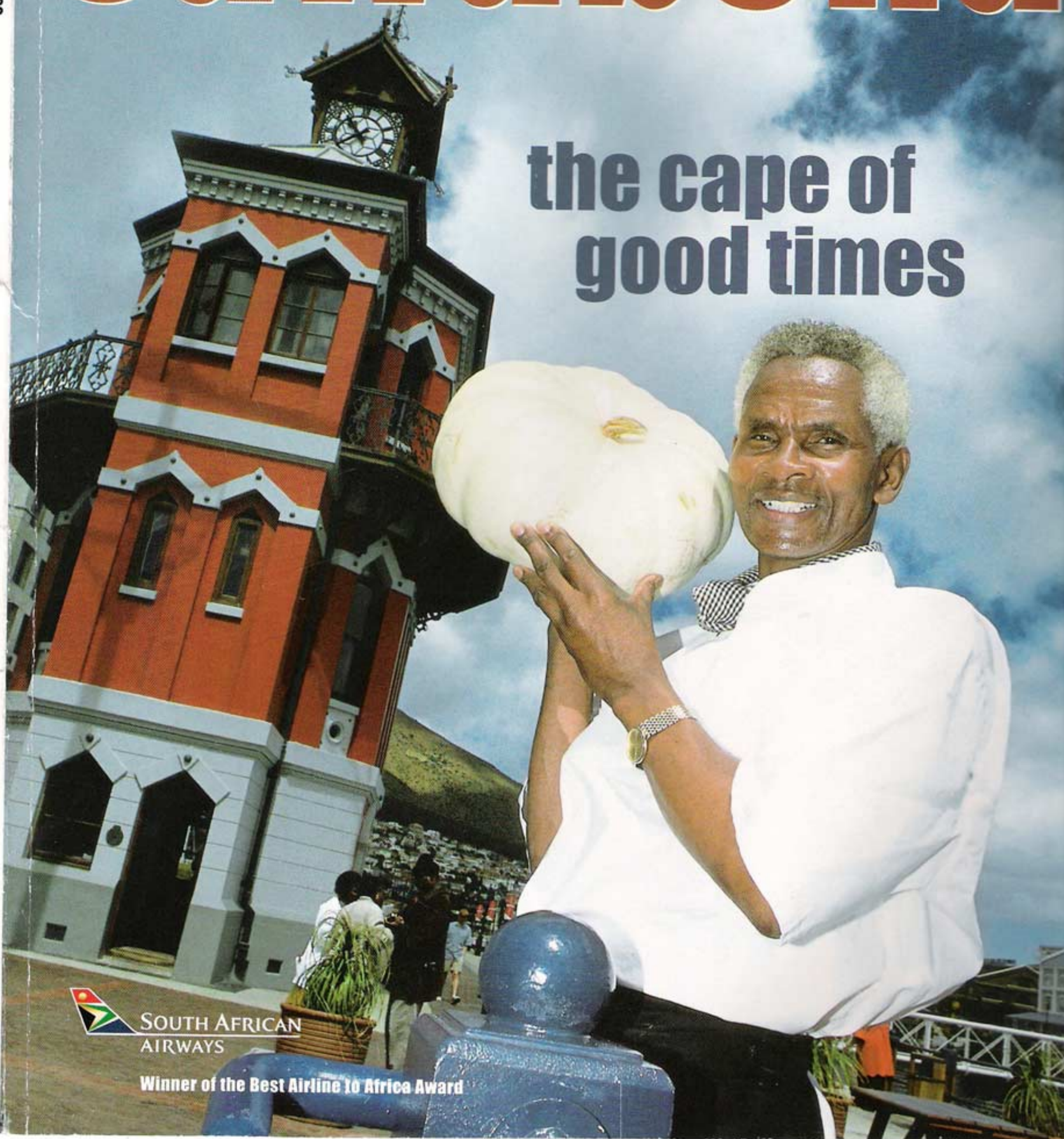
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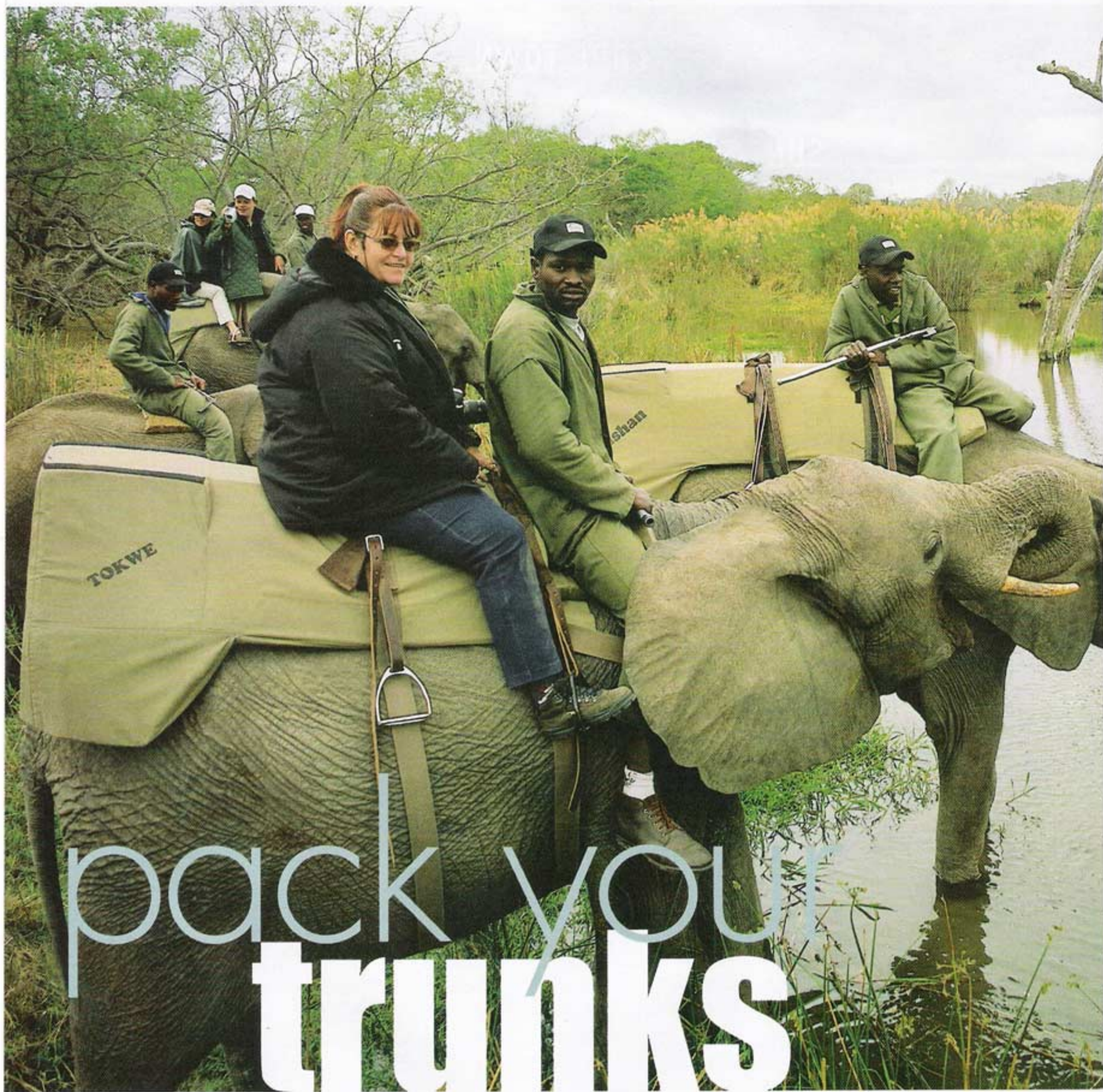
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**the cape of
good times**

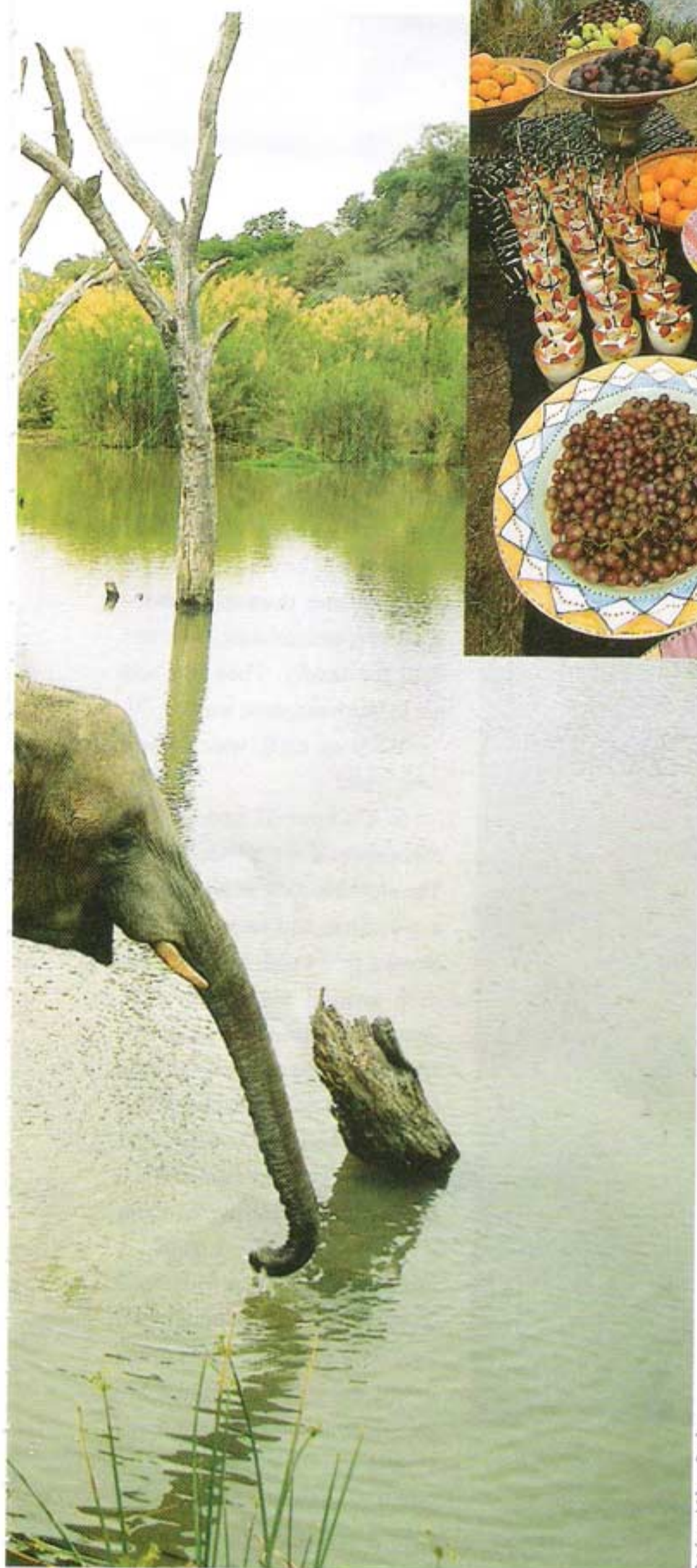


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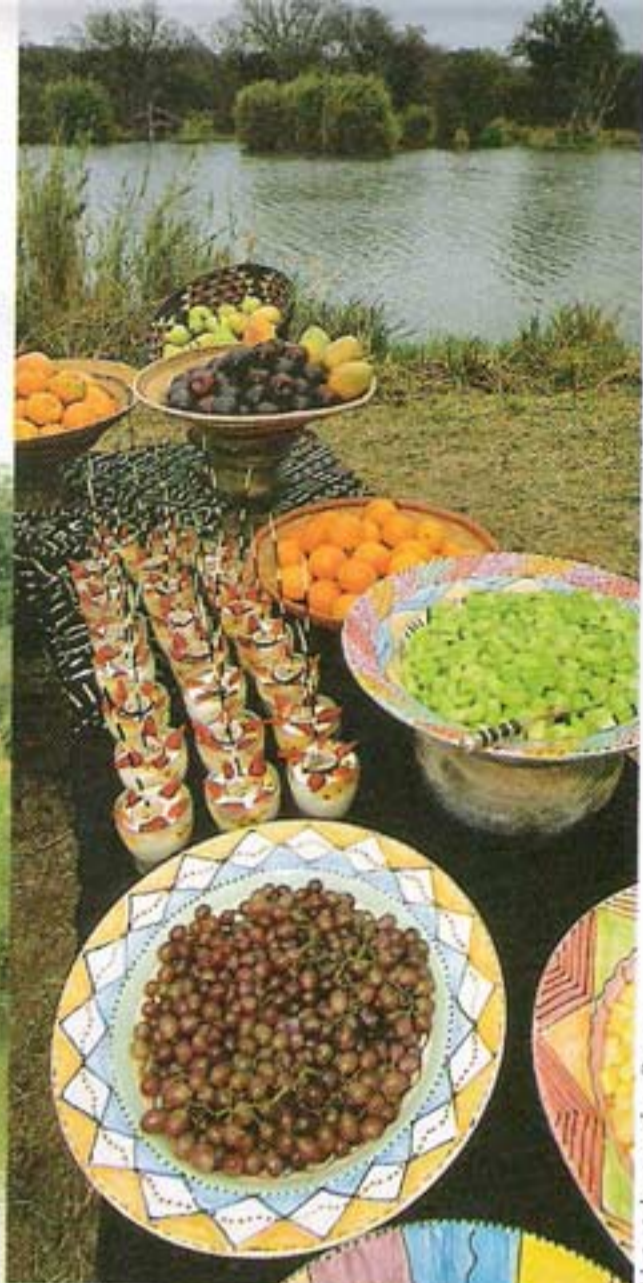


Kapama Game Reserve in Limpopo province has started South Africa's first elephant-back safari. pachyderm called Fishan – and discovered the delights of getting up close and personal



Bridget Hilton Barber

**Bridget Hilton-Barber test-rode a loping
with the largest land mammals on the planet**



Heinrich van den Berg

I'm not convinced that elephants were meant to be ridden by humans. When I climbed onto the broad back of Fishan, I certainly didn't have that playful desire to shout 'giddy-up, baby' and go galloping off across the plains. I was painfully aware that Fishan was almost one storey high and capable of untying my boots with her trunk and flinging them into the nearest dam if she wanted to. Riding elephants is more a matter of respect than domination, and as we set off into the bush I was feeling more like an earnest passenger than an adventurous rider.

Fishan is one of 13 elephants that were moved to Kapama from Zimbabwe earlier this year. We met them at dawn on an uncharacteristically cold morning. They appeared out of the mist like a surreal bushveld circus and slowly moved into formation – a long, straight line, trunks on heads.

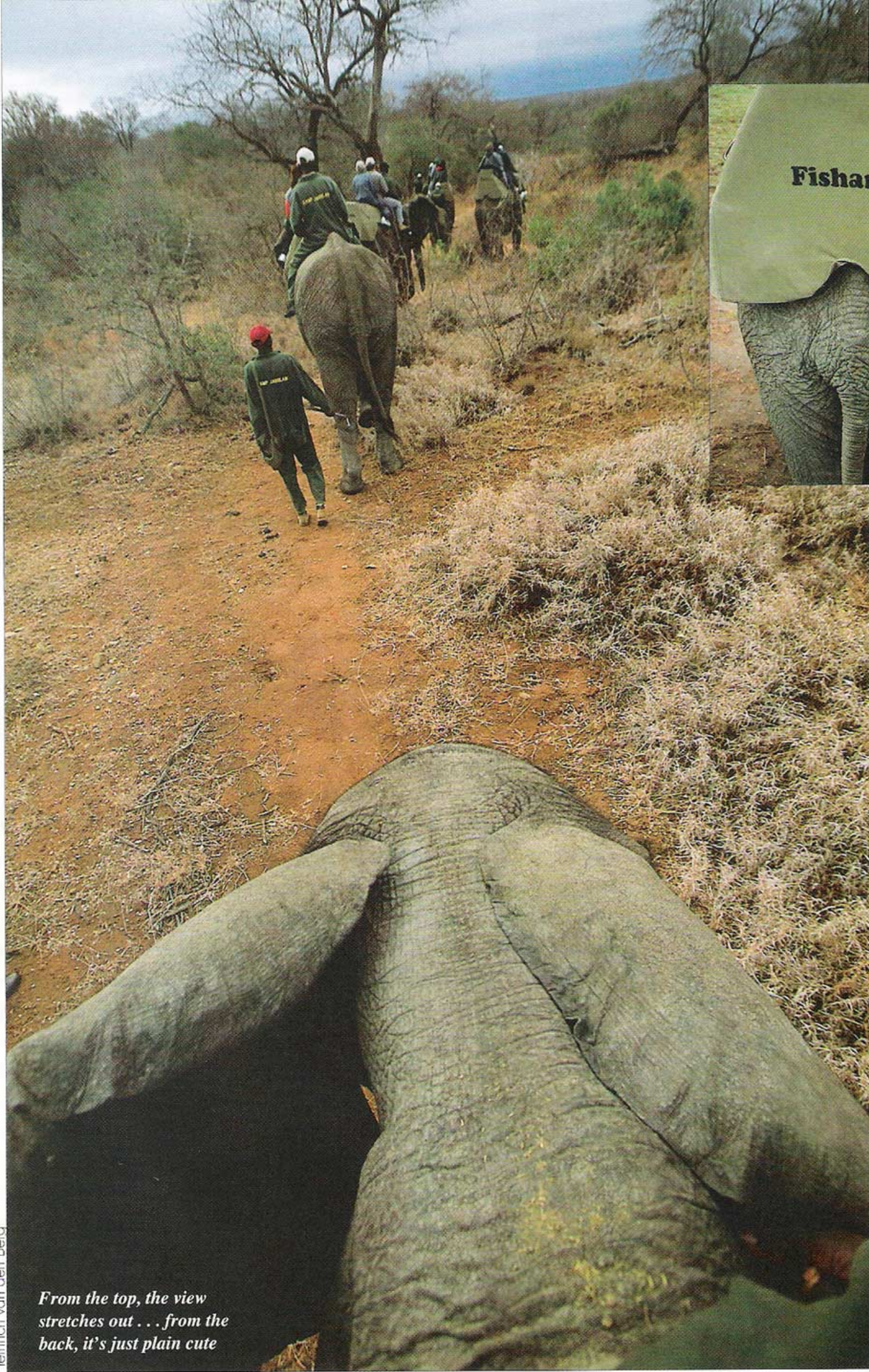
All the elephants were orphaned as a result of poaching and culling, and Rory Hensman, a cheerful and robust guy, explained how he started an elephant rehabilitation centre north of Harare, and decided to train them because he was so impressed by their intelligence and ability to obey commands.

Which they do most of the time. One or two of the young bulls showed a sporting resistance to being saddled up, but their affection for their handlers was obvious, and there was much laughing and cajoling as giant foam saddles (with special holes for their tails) were placed on the elephants, each one proudly bearing a name. The handlers are also Zimbabweans, who moved down here with the elephants when the political situation in Zimbabwe became too volatile. Kapama's vast stretches of scrubby acacia bush have made for a wild and wonderful new home, and they're getting used to the landscape. Jabulani, an orphaned elephant already living at Kapama, has been taken in by the group and is looking decidedly pleased with himself. I asked our handler how he felt about leaving his motherland and family. 'Fishan is my family,' he said.

Each elephant takes two passengers, and the handler sits up front to direct the passage, as it were. It's hard to describe what it feels like to ride an elephant. Their stride tends towards a lope with a bit of a roll, they can break into a trot with ease and they're surprisingly nimble and agile. Fishan foraged on and snatched at passing branches as we walked through the bush and, with him being so tall, the views on board were awesome. We saw zebra and antelope, giraffe and a pod of hippos in a resident dam.

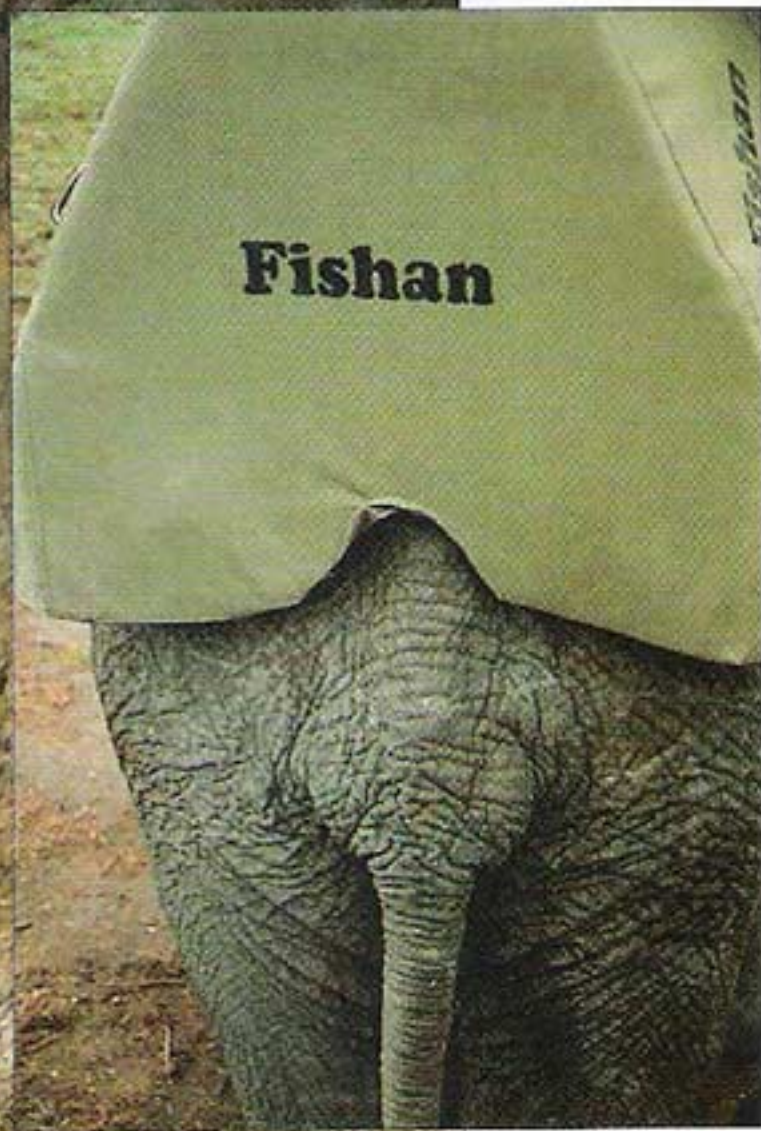
At one point there was great excitement among the elephants when they came across fresh dung left behind by wild elephants. Our ellies talked to each other in low, resonant rumbles, and made concerned squeaking noises. One or two let out a loud trumpet.

The best thing about riding an elephant like this is the privileged insight you get into their minds and behaviour. Relations haven't always been such a pretty picture, but humans have co-existed with the largest land mammal on the planet for millions of years, and we have our similarities. Like us, they have a long childhood, during which time ►



Heinrich van den Berg

From the top, the view stretches out . . . from the back, it's just plain cute



Bridget Hilton Barber

they learn about their society and environment. They

have tantrums when they are weaned, are playful and are disciplined as they test the bounds of society. As rebellious teenagers, they go through puberty, and then gain independence, but maintain close ties with the family. They age and die in much the same way we do.

What on earth was I doing riding one?

It's a special and joyous experience, if not a little surreal. The elephant-back safari lasts for a morning, and as we ambled along a pretty path alongside the dam around noon, we were greeted by a delicious bushveld-style Champagne breakfast laid out and waiting to happen. 'Sit, Fishan!' said our handler, and slowly she got down on all fours so we could disembark. Which is a pretty wobbly affair. A morning's elephant ride sure stretches those inner thighs, and later on, I was very grateful that it was me climbing from a hot bath into a warm bed and not Fishan.

Kapama's special camp to accommodate elephant-safari guests – it will be called Camp Jabulani (after the young Kapama ellie) – opens in April and will offer a five-day elephant safari packages but in the meantime, guests stay at either the luxury tented Buffalo camp or the exclusive Kapama lodge, which is calm, luxurious and beautifully decorated, safari-style. The suites overlook a dam, and wooden decks offer lovely views and spots of quiet repose. There is a large dining room serving hearty fare, a library with a fire for rainy afternoons, and an outdoor boma for night-time fireside chatter. Apart from the chance to climb aboard a different kind of jumbo, Kapama also offers game drives into their Big Five Reserve.

● For more information and prices call Central Reservations on (012) 804-4840; e-mail: gentour@iafrica.com; website: www.kapama.co.za