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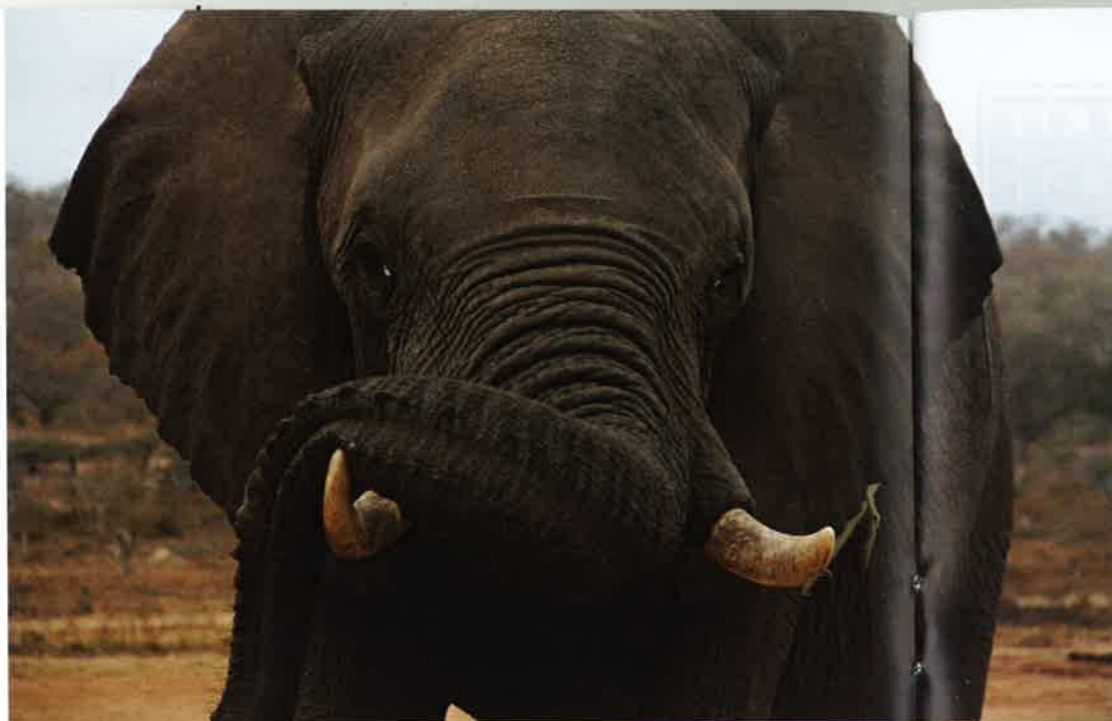
Lente, Jabulani and a cheetah named Sebeka

IT IS 04:30 IN THE MORNING AND WE'RE WIDE AWAKE, FINELY ATTUNED TO EVERY SMELL AND SOUND COMING FROM THE BUSH. WE ARE GOING ON AN ELEPHANT-BACK SAFARI TODAY.

WORDS: HÉLÈNE RAMACKERS

Our ranger arrives early. It's still pitch-dark outside. We get the gas stove fired up to boil water for coffee, with bush sounds playing counterpoint to the burning stove. We are surrounded by nature at Khula's Cottage at the Hoedspruit Endangered Species Centre (HESC), and looking forward to the day's adventure.

After a 45-minute drive through the adjacent Kapama Reserve, we arrive to see all the elephants lined up side by side, with their handlers mounted and ready to go. Jabulani is the main attraction and the biggest one, Sebake, is also the star of the Amartula TV ad. They willingly traverse as a herd in a very specific hierarchy, each elephant knowing its place. Unfortunately there is a mix-up with our booking and we have to return the following day.



KHULA'S COTTAGE

Slap bang in the middle of the bush, Khula's Cottage is quite a unique experience. The three-bedroom cottage comes with lots of creature comforts and an upstairs wooden deck looking out over two watering holes. Isolated from the main centre, it has no mains electricity, just a solar battery bank running 12-volt lights. Even the fridge runs on gas. There are no plug outlets, so if you want to have anything charged, you simply hand it to your ranger. This ensures nothing disturbs the mood created by nature.

This is the only way I ever see myself going camping, where I can get into my white-linen, mosquito-net-enveloped bed for a good night's sleep. Dinners are best enjoyed in the boma adjoining Khula's Cottage. An electrified fence protected us from our neighbours: four curious male cheetahs.

All is not lost. Our trip to the elephants turns out to be an unscheduled game drive and we see some amazing animals. We stop intermittently and manage to spot four of the Big Five along the way. The elusive leopard is playing truant but we do spot several tall animals with long legs and elongated necks.

Back at HESC, I take a stroll around the property. I make eye contact with the cutest meerkat while his sidekick is burrowing in the sand. A little further, there are at least eight cheetah cubs in the "nursery". The cheetah breeding programme is the main focus of HESC, and they work to introduce cheetahs back into the wild to increase their numbers.

An afternoon tour of the facilities takes us to Lover's Lane, where a male and female are joined in the hope of some magic taking place. We see some king cheetahs and lions that were rescued from a circus in Portugal. My favourite sighting, and one of the reasons I was adamant to visit HESC, is two rescued rhinos whose mothers were killed by poachers. Gertjie and Matimba are taking a stroll while their foster mother, Lammie the sheep, is always close by. Human interaction with the rhinos is limited in the hope of one day releasing them back into the wild.

On the second day we get to go on our much-anticipated elephant-back safari. Jabulani is called to say hello; he lets out a loud trumpeting sound while lifting his trunk in greeting. He sashays over and we are given the wonderful opportunity to feed him "boskos" (also known as elephant chocolates). Sitting atop an elephant you have a high vantage point of your surroundings and you literally have to go with the flow. A stop by the watering hole has you hoping that your elephant won't decide to go for a swim! Being in such close proximity to these pachyderms is a deeply spiritual experience.

WHO IS LENTE ROODE?

Lente Roode grew up on a farm in the Hoedspruit area, where her parents farmed with sheep and cattle. The biggest threat to their livestock was predators. Farmers often shot the animals to protect their only source of income. Lente's family was given a cheetah cub whose mother had been shot by a neighbouring farmer. The impressionable six-year-old Lente doted on this animal, naming her Sebeka. The duo was inseparable and this rare friendship paved the way for a calling to protect her favourite big cat.

Lente's life story is a tale of hope, determination and perseverance. Once she had completed her schooling and studies, she married Johann Roode and together they formed a formidable partnership. "My husband met me with a cheetah," she laughs. "Little did he know what he was in for."

Having purchased a farm adjacent to her parents' farm, the couple farmed with a herd of Bonsmara cattle. Predators were still a problem and Lente decided that a clear message was being sent her way – to start a game farm. The Roode couple purchased some more land and the 12 500ha Kapama Game Reserve was born.

Her research into which animals to keep on Kapama led Lente back to her idyllic days with Sebeka and the worrying fact that the cheetah was now listed as an endangered species. How was she to go about acquiring some cheetahs to prolong their lives and save the species?

Enter the hand of fate. A childhood friend and cheetah breeder, Desmond Varaday, received a phone call from Lente to ask how she can start the process of buying some cheetahs for her new venture. His response was surprising: he asked Lente if she would take custody of all of his 35 cheetahs, as he was getting too old to care for them properly.

Johann knew they had to do things by the book. The Hoedspruit Endangered Species Centre was planned and they received input from the University of Pretoria. It took a year to complete the centre and a year for Lente to settle down.

With the cheetah breeding programme in full force, the next goal was rescuing rhinos. "It was a huge challenge," she admits. "We had two survivors and their rehabilitation cost more than just purchasing a new rhino."

One day, Lente received a phone call about an elephant that was stuck in the mud and basically left for dead by its herd. The elephant was only four months old, and it was injured and severely dehydrated. After a full year of nursing him back to health, Jabulani became the inspiration behind the successful Camp Jabulani and the very popular elephant-back safaris. "Jabulani thinks he is a human being," she laughs. "Once he had fully recovered, we tried to put him back into the wild. When he saw other elephants, he chased them. After three months of trying to relocate him, we could see it was not going to work."

In March 2002, Lente and Johann heard that a farm in Zimbabwe would be taken over by war veterans. She feared for the elephants. They moved the elephants and their handlers out of Zimbabwe and they joined Jabulani on Kapama.

When Johann unexpectedly died from pneumonia in 2002, Lente decided to continue with their project. With little financial expertise, she was told to close the place down, sell the animals and let the people go, but she was not deterred. Lente had put her heart and soul into this venture. In 2003, Camp Jabulani opened its doors. The elephants have a wonderful life here. Their circumstances are unlike those of animals in the wild – they are cared for in a humane way and spend the majority of their days free and grazing.

