

CREATURE COMFORTS

NOOR-JEHAN YORO BADAT visits Thula Thula Private Game Reserve in the heart of Zululand.



Ranger Olivier de Reze and tracker Simba Biyela stop on a hilltop to allow visitors to Thula Thula to enjoy a sundowner while watching the sun set.

PICTURES: KAREN SANDISON

T IRED from the long drive, we groaned with relief when we reached the entrance to Thula Thula in KwaZulu Natal. So did our souls at the thought of fresh air, open spaces, good food, wildlife and quiet company.

We were to find all that except quiet company. Owner Lawrence Anthony and his French-born wife, Francoise, as well as their staff, had so many interesting tales to tell that they were fascinating company.

Lawrence is the conservationist and author of *Babylon's Ark* (2008), an account of his wartime rescue of Baghdad Zoo animals, and *The Elephant Whisperer* (2009), in which he describes the resettlement of a herd of elephants at Thula Thula.

The oldest private game reserve in the province, Thula Thula has a colourful history, having been the private hunting grounds of King Shaka Zulu. More recently, it was the hunting reserve of the "gin and tonic set", but hunting stopped when Lawrence bought the place.

We parked near the main house, which serves as the admin office, and were collected by ranger David Tait and tracker Victor "Crocodile" Ngwenya. Tait drove us to Elephant Safari Lodge, the more upmarket side of the reserve. (Thula Thula also has a tented camp, furnished in a cosy colonial style, which caters for couples and families.)

Dotted around the lodge, on an expansive mowed lawn, were eight chalets which looked unassuming from the outside but, we were to discover later, are luxurious inside.

Grazing and playing on the lawn was a lumbering baby white rhino. He slowly approached us. I was about to run for the nearest tree when a warm, French-accented voice said: "Don't worry, he won't

hurt you. He likes you."

The attractive and tall Francoise had come out to welcome us.

We learnt that the Frank The Tank, as the five-month-old rhino was called, was a day old when he was found alone and dehydrated in a Free State game reserve. He was taken to the Moholoholo Rehab Centre in Limpopo and relocated to Thula Thula in October.

His handler, Philani Biyela, who was keeping a watch, warned us not to touch Frank. The rhino is to be released into the wild as soon as he's old enough and the less human interaction he has, the better.

Frank soon lost interest in us and trundled towards the trees, his handler in tow.

Francoise ushered us inside the lodge stylishly decorated in an ethnic-colonial style. The spacious dining room and lounge open up to a wide verandah and a pool.

It offers a serene view of clipped lawns and acacia trees, which meld into the thornveld. During our stay, nyalas, wildebeest, zebras and elephants would intermittently break through the bush, serving up a visual feast for guests.

Late in the afternoon, we headed out on our first game drive with a couple from Belgium, Marleen van de Velde and Justus le Ro.

We'd hardly ventured out of the lodge grounds when we came across Mabula, a young bull elephant, who seemed testy and did a "mock charge" when he saw us. Ranger Olivier De Reze slowly backed up the vehicle to give the pachyderm a wide berth.

Eventually Mabula slowly moved off the road and headed towards a grove of trees, where he proceeded to urinate and defecate.

"I guess I would be grumpy too if



Lawrence Anthony, author of *The Elephant Whisperer*, with his wife Francoise Malby-Anthony, who is behind the lodge's gourmet cuisine. Shown here is Seafood Creole in a Pancake.



someone had disturbed me going to the toilet," said Le Ro.

After spotting more animals and birdlife, we stopped for a brief sun-

downer on a ridge overlooking the reserve.

While we munched on roasted peanuts, tracker Simba Biyela regaled us with an anecdote about the time a visitor panicked at the sight of an approaching elephant and clutched him so hard he almost choked to death.

Darkness had set in as we headed back to the lodge for dinner which was served in the boma. Logs were thrown into the fire and gas heaters were turned up to keep the cold at bay. Then a delicious four-course meal with a subtle French influence was served.

The next day Lawrence told us proudly that his wife had trained the chefs, who came from nearby villages. "Every year, Francoise goes to France and studies with the French chefs. When she returns, she trains our chefs."

"In France you get great ingredients," said Francoise, "but out here in the bush we have to use our imagination."

Giggling and glancing at Lawrence, she whispered conspiratorially: "All our experimental meals have been tested on the rangers. No cruelty was involved".

"We should put that in the menu, that no rangers have been killed in the process," Lawrence quipped.

Then, more seriously, he added: "You know, Francoise is from Paris, but the way she just slotted in here and her relationship with the Zulu

people has just been astounding."

The couple have been together for 22 years, and Francoise said that adjusting to the African bush was easy. "I discovered a new world. I love South Africa, the people, the way of life, history, culture and wildlife."

"She just fell in love with me and didn't care where I went. If I'd gone to the moon she would have followed me," said Lawrence.

Francoise smiled and caressed his hand. "My darling, what can I say? You're right."

"Now you're just being polite in front of the media," replied Lawrence cheekily.

The banter between the couple was heart-warming, and their warmth extended to their staff. The rapport there was tangible.

Mabona Mthimkhulu, who started out as a cleaner in the lodge nine years ago and is now the manageress, said the couple didn't behave as "bosses" but more like family.

"We do tease Francoise about her accent though," she said. "And Lawrence, he's naughty. He keeps asking us to serve him a plate of chips. We keep reminding him that we serve only four course-meals here and that if he wants chips, he must go over to the tented camp."

Throughout our stay Lawrence, Francoise and their staff from both the lodge and the tented camp kept us enthralled and laughing with conversation and interesting conversations.

Peace and quiet was found only out in the bush.

For information on Thula Thula rates and special packages, call 035 792 8322, e-mail thula@netactive.co.za or visit the website, www.thulathula.com



The best room at Thula Thula's Elephant Safari Lodge is the spacious and luxurious Suite Imperiale, with two double four-posted beds.

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Thula Thula and Verve Magazine are offering readers a chance to win a two-night stay for two people, one night at the lodge and one night at the tented camp. Meals and game activities are included but not beverages or transport to Thula Thula

Just answer this question:

Which Zulu king used the land on which Thula Thula sits as his private hunting ground?

SMS the answer to 32546 by midnight on Friday, December 18.

The stay must occur within six months and is subject to availability.

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