

Is that Mabula?

 By Brian Berkman: contributing editor, travel

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"Where's Nana?" a Somerset West woman sitting behind us, in our game drive vehicle, at Thula Thula shouts, to our ranger over our shoulders. "Baby Mandla" her daughter chimes in, "is so big now." "Oh my God", the mother, close to tears, shrieks "is that Mabula over there, coming towards us now?"



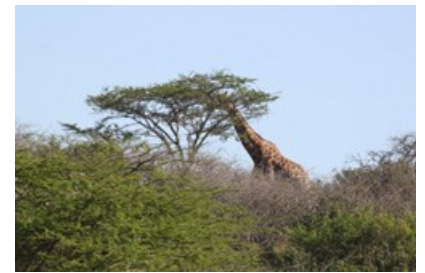
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We realise that the people behind us are obviously part of the Thula Thula inner circle and intimately involved with the management of the lodge, and its animal husbandry. Back at the camp, just like a girl meeting Justin Bieber, their excitement crescendos at meeting lodge owner Lawrence Anthony, obviously for the first time.

An extraordinary story

Turns out they are not part of the lodge team but instead fans after reading Lawrence's book *The Elephant Whisperer*. We are not yet part of *The Elephant Whisperer* cult but we buy the book right away and begin reading that night, amid crimson cushions, lavish, net-festooned four-poster bed in our vast Imperiale Suite.

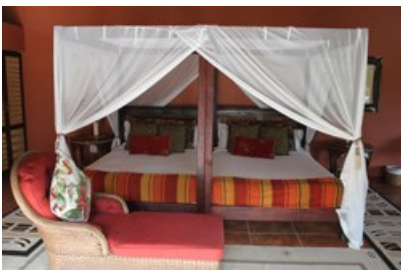
It is an extraordinary, story and an international best seller) about Lawrence's choice to take in a rogue herd of elephants that would, if he didn't step in, be euthanised. He is considered the "MacGyver" of conservationists after his rescue of the animals from Baghdad Zoo, in the middle of the Iraq war. Managing rogue elephants shouldn't be too difficult for the first civilian who entered Iraq in April 2003, while mortars crashed down around him. Read *Babylon's Ark*, published by Thomas Dune Books, about his experiences in Baghdad. It is a jaw-dropping, edge-of-your-seat kind of book that left me an even bigger groupie than I was after reading *The Elephant Whisperer*.



Enjoy the wildlife.

Conservation comes first at Thula Thula

When considering a stay at the four-star graded Thula Thula it is important to know that a portion of your rates continue to fund Lawrence's conservation efforts here and at The Earth Organisation which he founded. All top lodges have excellent community and conservation programmes but, from my point of view, these form an adjunct to the luxury safari experience. At Thula Thula the conservation work comes first. Not that there was anything to complain about: our suite was superb, co-owner Francois Anthony's Franco-African cuisine is elegant, delicious and plentiful and we loved our guides and felt welcome by all the staff.



The writer's suite was superb.

Located just two hours from Durban or 45 minutes from Richard's Bay airport, the Nseleni River runs through Thula Thula which is where Shaka and his father Senzangakhona met which ultimately lead to the formation of the Zulu Nation.

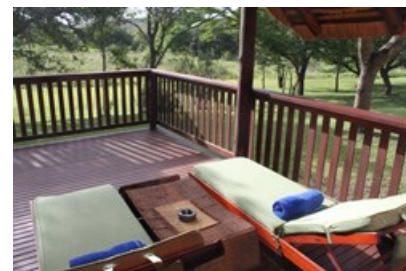
Lawrence is in advanced negotiations with the Zulu chiefs on surrounding farms to drop their fences so that the public will have access to The Umfolozi National Park from nearer to Durban.

Perfect for the company getaway

There are eight four-star graded tents separated from the main lodge area. These are perfect for a company getaway or

upscale bachelor's party where privacy is valued. There are two family tents with two additional single beds. If you're looking for that "Out of Africa" experience, staying in these tents is a step towards that. The free standing Victorian baths are especially romantic. The tents are on cement platforms, have electricity, flushing toilets etc but you are much closer to the environment than in the eight thatched-roofed safari lodge suites with their ochre-coloured walls which are individually decorated in an Afro-Colonial style.

The Earth Organisation has 15 000 members in 17 countries and has projects that include using bacteria to clean up oil spills rather than solvents which also destroy the environment; applying pressure to a Zambian mine that is leaking into rivers; running a Reduce, Reuse & Recycle programme at schools and assisting CROW (Centre for the Rehabilitation of Wildlife) that deals with the rehabilitation of wild animals injured as urban areas expand into their natural environments with new facilities at Thula Thula and Mayibuye Game Reserve.



View the wildlife in comfort.

Look out for *The Last Rhinos*



And at the end of the day, enjoy a dip.

The Earth Organisation has chapters in France busy with an amphibian rescue project which has already saved 8000 frogs and toads from being killed whilst crossing roads while, in Hyderabad, India A.S.A.P (Animal Salvation and Awareness Programme) is a project that incorporates both education and policing. Every Sunday, volunteers conduct Eco-patrols of the zoo, educating visitors about how zoo animals behave and what their natural habitat consists of and why throwing food or teasing animals is wrong.

Another programme aims to reconnect all of us to our environment and to the many cultures that exist in South Africa through a focus on southern African star lore. Many of the stories and beliefs help us relate to the natural world around us through connections between the spiritual, the natural, and remarkably, the scientific.

Lawrence is a busy guy but usually lodge guests get to chat to him in the evenings at Thula Thula at the bar. He launches his newest book, *The Last Rhinos*, on 29 March.

For more information see www.ThulaThula.com or call +27 (0) 35 792 8322.

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