

Nana and her baby Lolo, named after
Lawrence Anthony

IN SEARCH OF *Nana*

ROBBIE STAMMERS, EDITOR OF *THE INTREPID EXPLORER*, FOLLOWS IN THE FOOTPRINTS OF THE ELEPHANT WHISPERER, LAWRENCE ANTHONY, AND VISITS THULA THULA

“Total immersion in the wilderness is the purest and most natural of all therapies. Best of all, you don’t have to do anything except be there. The sights and sounds are remedies for the soul, while the scents of the African bush are nature’s original aromatherapy.”



These are the penetrating words of Lawrence Anthony, the larger-than-life conservationist, best-selling author,

environmentalist, explorer and animal saviour – written in his third and, sadly, final book, *The Last Rhinos: My Battle to Save One of the World's Greatest Creatures*.

At age 61, he died of a heart attack before his planned March 2012 conservation gala dinner in Durban to raise international awareness of the rhino-poaching crisis and launch his new book, but he will live on through his immense contributions in a way that will never die.

Known as the 'Indiana Jones of Conservation', Anthony was born in what used to be Northern Rhodesia (Zambia today) and spent time in Malawi as a child. "The bush was right outside the back door," he has said about that time.

Educated first at King Edward VII School and then in Empangeni, he was a successful businessman and estate agent, but it was only after he made Thula Thula – the oldest proclaimed game reserve in the country – his home, that his true calling took flight.

Anthony's tales of taming rogue elephants, rescuing zoo animals in war-torn Iraq and meeting with the world's most wanted terrorists (the Lord's Resistance Army) in the depths of the Democratic Republic of Congo to try and save the last Northern rhino, bear testament to the fire that burnt in his belly. He would have done anything and everything to save the world's animals.

His books tell one about much more than the adventures on which his quests took him; they tell the story of a deep and resounding love for Mother Nature and her creatures, as well as his desperate urge to save many from extinction.

Anthony had two loves in his life. One was his wife and Thula Thula partner, Françoise Malby; the other was his 'mistress', the matriarch elephant called Nana.

One cannot truly describe the incredible relationship he and Nana had, but he firmly believed that elephants had a psychic ability, and this seems to have



ABOVE: Lawrence had such an incredibly trusting relationship with his elephants that Coronation Fund Managers recently built their entire advertising campaign around his relationship with the majestic creatures

RIGHT: Francoise and Lawrence with Thula Thula staff

been confirmed after his untimely passing. Anthony had made a decision a few years ago to distance himself from the once rogue herd, as they were becoming bigger – as was the number of tourists coming to Thula Thula; he did not want to endanger either party.

He still met with Nana in the bush, where she would separate herself from the herd to be with him. Besides those special encounters, the herd had not been near the main lodge for more than 15 months. But within a few days of Anthony's passing, the entire herd arrived at his house and came back every night for an entire week before parting again into the bush.

Anthony was convinced that he could communicate with them on another level; their miraculous salutation only proves this was so.

I was deeply touched by the great man's words in his books and felt as if I had come to know him like an old friend. It saddened me that I would never have the opportunity to meet him in person, but I decided I simply had to go to Thula Thula myself and walk in the footprints of *The Elephant Whisperer*.

So it was bittersweet to head off finally to the green valleys and troughs of the Elephant coast in KwaZulu-Natal to see where Lawrence Anthony once walked;

to meet his wonderful wife, Francoise; to breathe in the serenity of the surroundings he had so treasured and, hopefully, witness first-hand the supernatural herd of elephants that had made such an impact on Anthony, his kin, the Thula Thula family and, frankly, anyone who had visited the lodge or even just read his books.

The matriarch, Nana, was calling me – I could feel it. Or at least I had convinced myself so.

I was waiting in anticipation as we arrived; waiting for the herd to come bounding out to meet me. That intimate encounter I had imagined happening to Anthony but, alas, it was not meant to be for myself. Not yet, at least.

I put aside the imminent arrival of the herd to take in the view. And what a view it was! I recalled reading in *The Elephant Whisperer* that a previous drought had lasted so long that all sorts of animals from zebra to wildebeest had come right up to the doors of the main lodge, dying from dehydration.

The view in front of me was the complete opposite. After a long-awaited and prosperous period of rainfall, the lush green valleys surrounding Thula Thula brought back memories of the *Shaka Zulu* television series; with Henry Cele playing the role of the great Zulu king, gazing



across the beautiful valleys of his kingdom. Thula Thula takes pride in tracing its origin to the private hunting grounds of King Shaka. In fact, the first historic meeting between Shaka and his father (Senzangakhona), which set the stage for the creation of the Zulu nation, took place at the Nseleni River at Thula Thula.

The Zulu name 'Thula Thula' literally means peace and tranquility, and the name certainly fits the setting. The private game reserve is a mere two-hour drive from Durban and a five-hour drive from Johannesburg.

We were met by Francoise, Anthony's vivacious wife, whom I had come to know quite well telephonically and electronically over the weeks before our arrival, as I was writing a tribute to her husband for *Leadership* magazine. She was exactly as I had expected her to be – full of life, with French enthusiasm and a sense of humour that was tangible.

The main lodge is beautifully laid out and the walls are adorned with Francoise's

Within a few days of Anthony's passing, the entire herd arrived at his house and came back every night for an entire week before parting again into the bush

impressive artwork. The Elephant Safari Lodge offers eight luxurious air-conditioned chalets elegantly decorated in ethnic and colonial style, each with a private verandah. Thula Thula also offers the discerning traveller the option of eight luxury tents, all with private viewing decks, mosquito nets, fans and opulent en-suite bathroom with Victorian bath and an outside shower in the double tents. There are also two family tents that provide space, luxury and comfort for parents with children.

No sooner had we settled into our magical rooms, than we were whisked off to the verandah to experience Francoise's culinary skills. She has become renowned for her own brand of cuisine that she calls Franco-Zulu. Combining her French flair with African ingredients and influence makes for a unique gastronomical experience at Thula Thula that will have you resetting that belt buckle to another notch by the time you leave.

While there is certainly a French influence, the meals are not petite in the portion department – they are huge! In our short time there, we feasted on venison terrine with marula jelly, seafood

bouillabaisse Creole and Francoise's famous oxtail bourguignon with garlic crushed potato, her three-cheese and pesto feuilleté on tomato compote and her fillet of impala served on a sweet potato cake with a red wine and bacon sauce. Each dining experience at Thula Thula is a moment to remember.

On our first afternoon, we set out determined to find Anthony's herd of elephants and the orphaned rhinos that Thula Thula had adopted from a young age (see sidebar).

Thula Thula is home to a diverse African wildlife population, including elephant, buffalo, rhinoceros, leopard, giraffe, zebra, nyala, hyena, crocodile, kudu, wildebeest and a spectacular variety of other indigenous species, great and small. The birdlife is also prolific, with over 350 identified species, including raptors. Our rangers were extremely knowledgeable about the game and we soon saw loads of different animal species but, sadly, the elephants were eluding us. Did Nana not instinctively know I was here to see her and her herd?

We did manage to find the rhinos – which was amazing, as they have two

ladies who act as their 'mothers' as well as their own guards who change shifts every 12 hours so that the animals are never alone. A sad reflective reality of the tragedy of rhino poaching. We returned to the main lodge in good spirits that we would find the elephant herd the following morning.

That night we spent our time being entertained by Francoise in the Marula Bar, sipping many cocktails and whiskeys while she regaled us with stories about how she

Thula Thula Rhino Fund

The Thula Thula rhinos, Thabo and Ntombi, are orphans who were relocated at the game reserve from Moholoholo Wildlife Rehabilitation Centre when they were four and eight months old, respectively. They have now been released into the game reserve under high surveillance.

Armed guards accompany Thabo and Ntombi 24/7 to protect them against poachers. With a gunfight having taken place a few months ago – Thabo was shot in the front leg – as well as the loss of Heidi, a female white rhino who was killed by poachers in 2009, the need for increased protective measures is a harsh reality.

In memory of Lawrence Anthony, and to assist with the protection and preservation of Thula Thula's two special rhinos, Francoise established the Thula Thula Rhino Fund (as a chapter of The Earth Organization) in order to raise funds for the guards' anti-poaching training and much-needed specialised equipment, to ensure the ongoing survival of the rhinos, as well as to acquire more orphans in the future.



Thabo and Ntombi are inseparable companions

and Anthony first met in London, when he wanted to share a taxi with her. She refused, only to have a change of heart – leaving the taxi and going after him. The rest, as they say, is history.

Francoise also told us how, together with Lawrence's mother, she planned their wedding before Anthony's return from one of his trips abroad. When he arrived, he was told to dress for a wedding, which he did not consider strange as the lodge hosted many bush weddings. This time, however, the wedding was his own!

One could clearly see that Francoise loved Anthony immensely, and while she spoke with her hands and hypnotised you with her French accent, there was a sadness behind her eyes at the obvious loss of her husband. Her passion for Thula Thula, though, has remained firm and one could tell she would carry on the legacy and that the lodge was in great hands.

The next morning we set off on an early game drive to search once again for Nana and the herd of 22 elephants but, although we had loads of intrepid sightings – including a crocodile charging us while we were out the vehicle, inspecting an elephant bone – Nana was nowhere to be found.

That night it seemed our disappointment would be repeated, until we suddenly heard a large crack and right in front of us stood Mabula, the biggest male elephant I had ever laid my eyes on. The crack had come from a huge tree that he had taken a mere few seconds to snap in half like it was a toothpick. This certainly made our evening, but the light had failed us and it was time to call it a day. I was concerned, as we had to leave the next morning and the thought of not seeing Nana and her calf, Lolo (affectionately named after Lawrence, and who was born in the same week he passed away) was too much to contemplate.

On our way to breakfast in the morning, we decided we had to come to terms with the fact we would not see the rest of the herd and that the experience of Thula Thula had been wonderful enough – when right in front of the lodge, as if on cue, came Nana leading her entire herd behind her. It was the most incredible sight to witness. They had come to find us as I had hoped,

and not a moment too soon.

We jumped into the game vehicle and followed the herd, which now did us an even bigger favour and headed to the airstrip, the only place not covered in dense foliage. That gave us a spectacular sighting of each elephant, many of whom I knew by name from Anthony's books. There was Nana and little Lolo, running in

little steps behind her mother.

I could have sworn I saw Nana look up as if to say, "I was always going to come, you silly human, but just in my own time!" ©

For more information go to www.thulathula.com or to donate to their Rhino Fund, contact Francoise via francoise@thula-thula.co.za



The winning couple will stay in this Suite Impériale

Win A TRIP TO THULA THULA WORTH R10 000 WITH THE INTREPID EXPLORER MAGAZINE

Thula Thula, in conjunction with *The Intrepid Explorer*, invites you to take part in a special competition. One lucky couple can win a two-night stay at the game reserve: one night in the Elephant Safari Lodge in the Suite Impériale, and one night in the Luxury Tented Camp in a luxury double tent.

The prize includes the following:

ELEPHANT SAFARI LODGE – luxury accommodation, all meals (Franco-Zulu cuisine), daily morning bush walk, morning & afternoon game drive.

LUXURY TENTED CAMP – luxury accommodation, all meals (traditional South African home cooking), daily morning bush walk, afternoon game drive.

Package excludes: curio purchases, bar expenses, 1% tourism levy, and gratuities. Please note that transport or airfares to the lodge are not included.

Competition question: What are the names of Thula Thula's two rhinos?

Please send your answer, with your name and contact details, to *The Intrepid Explorer* editor via robbie@intrepidexplorer.co.za by 31 January 2013. The winner will be notified by the editor.



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