



# DOING THE ELEPHANT WALK



□ After going down on his front knees, Mabula gored the ground with his tusks and then rolled over on his side, legs sticking ignominiously into the air.

Thula Thula, a place where trust and time is restoring relationships between humans and animals, and one man's passion for conservation is making world headlines

THE NOVEMBER RAINS HAD REVIVED a drought-stricken Zululand. A constant low rumble of thunder animated nature with electrifying energy, and as the game-drive vehicle navigated the slippery hill, the rain came down in straight jets. At the pinnacle a lone elephant stood. "It's Mabula," Siya said from the tracker seat. "He's in musth".

Mabula is one of the seven rogue elephants that came to Thula Thula Game Reserve in 1999. Lawrence Anthony, the owner of Thula Thula, has chronicled the incredible story of this herd in *The Elephant Whisperer*, which he co-wrote with his brother-in-law Graham Spence. It is a book that has gripped the imagination of an ever-increasing group of readers, luring many to this place in rural Zululand that was once the hunting grounds of King Shaka.

Siya and Sima, the two game guides, were apprehensive of Mabula's temper and we kept a safe distance. When he picked up our presence Mabula led us into a dance of retreat and approach. Even the most docile of bulls is turned into an aggressive, unpredictable animal when their testosterone levels surge during musth. Eventually Mabula turned sideways to show us his full size and then went down on his front knees, goring the saturated earth with his tusks. It then seemed as if his sense of humour got the better of his hormones as he rolled over on his side, legs sticking ignominiously into the air. Twice this performance was repeated, and Sima decided it was time for us to beat the retreat.

The original herd that Mabula belonged to came from Mpumalanga traumatised, angry and dangerous. Thula Thula was their last hope of finding sanctuary. But, led by the matriarch Nana – named after Lawrence's mother – they continued down a destructive path that led Zululand's conservation fraternity to the conclusion that the adults were beyond rehabilitation and had to be taken out. Lawrence begged for a last reprieve and upon receiving it camped out in his Land Rover just behind the electrified fence of the holding boma. Desperation and intuition must have inspired him as he started talking and singing to the herd. So began the formation of a bond and communication between man and animal that transcends traditional beliefs and general knowledge about the social behaviour of elephants.

In one of the most poignant scenes in *Elephant Whisperer*, Lawrence describes how, after two weeks of constantly talking to the elephants, a palpable change came over the herd. Daring to approach the fence, Lawrence found himself face-to-face >>



□ Lawrence Anthony and his wife Françoise with volunteer Alyson McPhee.



□ Thula Thula Elephant Safari Lodge is situated between tall tamboti and marula trees, and overlooks an active waterhole.



□ Nana, the matriarch of the rogue herd of elephants that came to Thula Thula eleven years ago. The bond between Nana and Anthony is a central theme in his book *The Elephant Whisperer*.



□ Guides Ryan Bowles and Promise Dlamini share some facts about tortoises.

>> with Nana, who then put her trunk through the fence and started to gently touch him. The decision to release the herd into the reserve proved to be well-timed, as they proceeded to settle down in their new environment.

The rain had let up when we came across the breeding herd. The guests, from as far afield as Vancouver, were keen for the guides to point out Nana, Frankie and the other characters of *The Elephant Whisperer*. Nana – now blind in the right eye, her left tusk broken – grazed peacefully with her young calf. It was evident that the emotional scars of 20 years ago had been healed.

Thula Thula's elephants now number 20 in total, including Gobisa, a mature bull that was brought in to be Mabula's patriarch. Not wanting the legend of Nana and her herd to diminish his reputation, Gobisa also broke out of the boma and the reserve soon after his arrival. But, in Lawrence's own words, "He soon picked up on the females and realised there are a lot of pretty girls on the reserve! His attention has now switched from testing the

“There is really no mystique about communicating with elephants - anyone can do it. It is all about reconnecting with nature and your instincts”

□ Game guide Siya braves the rain and Mabula's antics in the tracker seat.



boundaries to following the herd – a very good sign.”

We met Gobisa on the road back to the lodge. Dusk was falling as we watched him squirting mud and sand into the air and over his head. Eventually he raised his trunk high, sensing us, before casually sauntering into the bush. How fortunate we were to have encountered all of Thula Thula's elephants on that rainy afternoon.

Back at the lodge, the aromas from the kitchen promised culinary heaven. Françoise Malby-Anthony has brought all the flair and finesse from her home country to this remote corner of Zululand. She's celebrated for the French-African fusion food that the guests are treated to at the luxury lodge. Once a year she attends classes at the Le Nôtre Culinary Institute in Paris to keep abreast of the latest food trends. "But we have to adapt to the local palate and products," she says in beautifully accented English. To mention but one of the dishes from the four-course dinner menu – pineapple chicken on sweet potato cake with chocolate chilli and red wine sauce. Ooh la la!

After dinner we sat around the bar, joking and listening to the fascinating stories about everyday life

at Thula Thula. The Anthony family has deep roots in Zululand, Lawrence and Françoise's love of the land, its animals and people defines their lives.

With a growing list of awards for his various conservation projects and initiatives, Lawrence is described by the media as an environmentalist, explorer, and best-selling author. Both books from his pen – *The Elephant Whisperer* and *Babylon's Ark* – have been translated into several languages and are under negotiation for international film rights. Lawrence dreams big and he takes bold steps in realising his goals. Steps like entering war-torn Iraq in 2003 to rescue the traumatised animals that had survived the bombing of the Baghdad Zoo – a saga grippingly portrayed in *Babylon's Ark*.

Today the Baghdad Zoo is again the biggest in the Middle East and receives thousands of visitors every year – one up for the conservationists. But, says Lawrence, Uganda's northern white rhino has now been declared extinct – a species lost forever. Two years ago Thula Thula's only white rhino was lost to poachers, but since then two rhino orphans, Thabo and Nthombi, have come to Thula and are being introduced into the bush by volunteer Alyson McPhee. This is the scale of balances in the quest to save nature, and mankind. The trick is to try to tip the balance in nature's favour – not an easy feat. In this, the Anthonys have created a beacon in Thula Thula.

In parting, I wanted to learn the secret to communicating with elephants. "There is really no mystique about it – anyone can do it," Lawrence declared affably. "It is all about reconnecting with nature and your instincts." □

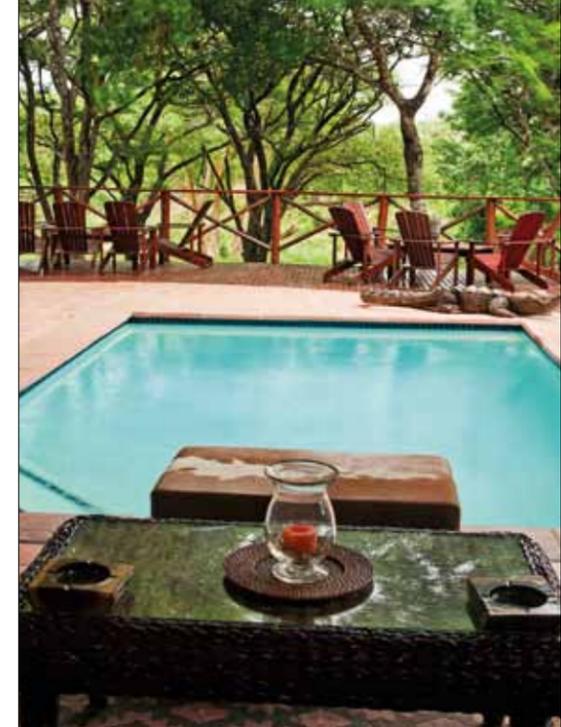
Map reference D8 see inside back cover

## Footnotes

Thula Thula Game Reserve is situated north-west of Empangeni in northern KwaZulu-Natal. The 4 000ha reserve will soon be joined to the 96 000ha Hluhluwe-Imfolozi Game Reserve through a corridor that incorporates community land. After 14 years of education and negotiation with the communities and the five chiefs that rule over this land, two community game reserves have now been declared. Thula Thula and its surrounding communities have joined hands in the quest to preserve the land and animals.



**Thula Thula Private Game Reserve**  
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□ Zululand summers are hot and humid and the pool is the place to be at midday. Before the single electrified wire was put up around the lodge, the elephants regularly visited the pool – one even taking a plunge on occasion.



□ Thula's breeding herd now numbers eighteen females and calves, plus the two bulls, Mabula and Gobisa.

□ Alyson McPhee with her babies – the white rhinos Thabo and Nthombi.