



# GAME FOR YOUNG AND OLD

Thula Thula wildlife reserve casts a special spell on children, writes Cheryl Hunter

Game viewing with young children is often just not any fun at all. The animals are too far away and don't do much; sharing binoculars leads to sibling rivalry and bodily harm; the game vehicle is uncomfortable and air-conditioning absent; whispering to avoid scaring the rhino swiftly loses its appeal; and the trip back to camp is interminable.

So it was with more than a little trepidation that I endured the drive to Thula Thula, the oldest private wildlife reserve in KwaZulu Natal, with two small boys. The journey, two hours north from Durban, did nothing to allay my fears and it was with huge relief that we spotted the entrance gate and answered that infernal, repetitive question with NOW, we are here NOW.

We were greeted by owner Lawrence Anthony, ranger Bongani Tembe and tracker Promise Dlamini. My boys fell under their spell immediately and happily clambered into the vehicle for transfer to the main camp.

Dlamini was my saviour. He seemed to know instinctively where to find the small creatures that fascinate children - things they can touch and examine - like a glowing chameleon in a dark bush and a stick insect on a termite hill; once even relinquishing the prized seat on the front of the vehicle to let my 6-year-old have the adventure of his

short lifetime riding above the dusty road. One night drive had been long and cold. We faced into the wind, hoping our dinner was waiting back at camp, when suddenly we spotted a large silvery circle reflecting the moonlight about 10m off into the long grass.

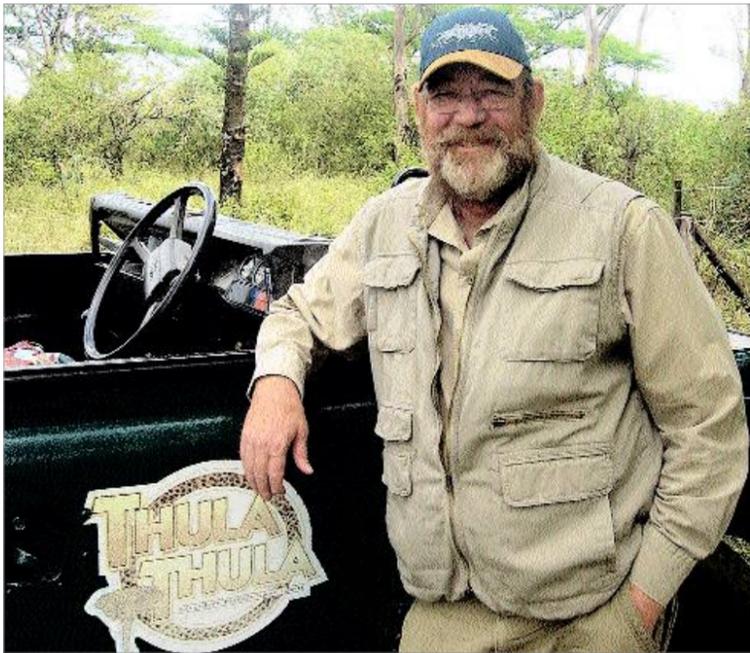
The boys scrambled out of the vehicle on Dlamini's promise of something really exciting, but I dawdled: after watching a small puffadder slither into that same grass about 100m up the road, I wasn't as enthusiastic as my family. We were just in time to watch a bark spider setting out her trap for the night. An enormous female, her body double the size of a R5 coin, spun around and around, building a web more than a metre across, oblivious to her audience. Whatever happened that night, before morning she would consume the entire web - it's high in protein and not to be wasted - and hide in a nearby tree for the daylight hours.

And there was adventure aplenty for the adults, too. Roaming around the hills and valleys of this pristine wilderness are impala, kudu, nyala, zebra, giraffe, rhino, warthog, hyenas and - the main attraction for most visitors - several elephant delinquents. A 10-year-old bull elephant mock-charged us, then dragged his heel across the road in a "cross this line and die" gesture.

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Mock-charged by an elephant bull (clockwise); owner Lawrence Anthony; a 6-year-old in a prized seat; small creatures fascinate kids.



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