



Keeping the . quiet

Richard Holmes finds Tanda Tula the perfect getaway for anyone looking for lived-in elegance, magnificent elephant watching and lots of quiet time

IT'S STRANGE HOW NOISY PEACE AND quiet can be.

For once my laptop is safely packed away, my cellphone is off and there is not a TV in sight. No telephone to yank me from a mid-afternoon snooze ... not even the whirr of a minibar fridge. And yet, still, there is a cacophony of chattering and scratching emanating from the dry undergrowth outside my canvas window.

The folks at Tanda Tula (meaning 'to love the quiet' in Shangaan) do what they can to ensure their elegantly decorated safari tents are as serene as possible, but there's little anyone can do to keep the sounds of the bush at bay.

Situated in the heart of the Timbavati Private Nature Reserve, Tanda Tula's safari tents are a breath of fresh air in a luxury market seemingly dominated by a 'more

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is more' philosophy – more bells, more whistles, more opportunities for distraction. And yet, at so many lodges, they usually add up to *less* opportunity to experience the mesmerising bushveld.

At Tanda Tula you'll find quite the opposite, with the rustic-chic feel of a loved and lived-in getaway. Leadwood trees grow up through the deck of the dining area, the staff greet you by name and your favourite drink is poured before you reach the bar.

'Our rates are all-inclusive, so there's no fussing about with bar tabs or anything like that,' says Nina Scott, who, together with her husband Don, operates and manages the lodge. 'We're quite happy for guests to spend the whole day drinking G&Ts at the pool,' she tells me as we wander past a small herd of sunbathing Europeans.

It's a hospitable, whatever-makes-you-happy attitude that courses through the veins of Tanda Tula. Each of the lodge's 12 tents enjoys its own private nook of riverine bushveld, with a simple wooden deck and comfortable armchairs allowing you to sit back and soak up the scenery.

Tents are elegantly furnished with wrought-iron beds, understated African carvings and an *Out of Africa* bathroom complete with claw-and-ball footed bath and outdoor shower. Rough walls fashioned from mud, elephant dung and grasses complete the rustically luxurious picture, where the delight is in the detail.

A flask of iced water – the lodge avoids eco-unfriendly bottled water – magically refills itself throughout my stay, a field guide lies at the ready on a side table, and a tray of coffee delivered to my deck makes the wake-up call for the early morning game drive bearable.

The sun has already risen as I savour the freshly brewed coffee, scanning the riverbed for early morning visitors. It's the end of a long, dry winter and the Nlharalumi River, which flows only at the height of the summer rains, is dry. Deep holes in the sandy watercourse mark where elephants dig down to the water table, carefully siphoning off the seepage until crystal-clear water flows freely.

The region may be famous for its white lions, but elephants are the reason I have travelled to the Timbavati, a 60 000 hectare wilderness shared by just eight safari lodges. With fences dropped on three sides, the wildlife roams freely between this private reserve and the greater Kruger National Park.

For elephants, of course, the fences are artificial boundaries to be ignored at will, and it's precisely the migration and movement of these ponderous pachyderms that brought Michele and Steve Henley to Tanda Tula five years ago.

Working under the auspices of Save the Elephants, an international body dedicated to conserving the species, the pair's Transboundary Research Programme, based at the lodge, has done pioneering work into how the elephants of Kruger graze and migrate; essential information when planning how to manage the region's growing ellie population.

'We're trying to find out what drives elephant movement from core areas into peripheral conservation areas,' says Steve. 'If we're going to manage elephant populations we need to know what elephants need, and where they go to get it.'

Using GPS technology, the pair has collared 45 elephants in their five years at Tanda Tula, building up an impressive body of knowledge of how elephants use their habitat to full advantage.

'Elephants move over a much larger range than we previously thought,' says Michele. 'Using GPS tracking we are learning how males and females will graze in different areas, and spread their impact on the environment.'

Elephants – and whether there are too many of them – has been a hot topic in recent years. The Henleys are at the forefront of research into how to manage the species within the confines of the Park.


'We help the Kruger National Park management make decisions about managing elephant populations. The goal is to look at controlling impact, not numbers,' remarks Steve. 'It's important to understand that elephants are part of an ecosystem, and we don't promote the survival of elephants over everything else. However, elephants enhance biodiversity and if you protect elephants you create a resource base for a host of other species.'

The Henleys are only too happy to share their groundbreaking work (funded by Tanda Tula) with guests – visits to their on-site research centre can be arranged.

I bump into some of their boisterous subjects on a late-afternoon game drive; a breeding herd silhouetted against the sunset, kicking up plumes of dust.

Gathered around one of the waterholes that are a lifeline before the rains arrive, the herd casually trundles through the veld, pulling over trees and stripping bark as if taking items off a supermarket shelf. Judging by the foliage this small herd is chewing through, Steve and Michele have their work cut out for them in gathering data to manage the region's elephants.

As the sun dips behind the skeleton of a gnarled Marula tree we head back to the lodge for dinner. Fires flicker in the sandy riverbed, where lantern-bedecked tables beckon diners to settle their camp chair into the sand and stare up at the stars.

Now it's the chatter of happy travellers that breaks the silence, but as the wine flows and conversation slows, the bush reclaims its hush. Feet in the sand and head in the stars ... not a bad place to love the quiet. 

Your Diners Club Card is accepted at Tanda Tula.
For more information, visit www.tandatula.co.za.