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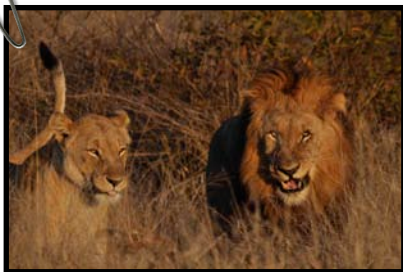


Madikwe: Everybody Wins?



The further west, the better the sunset.

*"Madikwe's narrative is a rich one,
a tale that could only have
happened in South Africa."*



Lion-mating is a fairly aggressive affair.



*"Ben Ndoni seems to have a gift
with babies" (Our Fynn wrapped
up on the left)*



Of stout build and authentic smile, Ben Ndoni seems to have a gift with babies. You could say it's lucky for the guests with babies at Thakadu River Lodge, because Ben is the GM, and infants and wildlife experiences don't usually sit on the same page at game lodges. Yet there is no luck involved, for the further north you drive from Cape Town, the wider the smile...the hospitality...and the literal African welcome.

This is just the way it is in Africa. Much like the fact that for our lifetime there will always be a few conflicts raging at any given time somewhere on the continent, most often over mineral wealth and natural resources. Thankfully though, the natural beauty and sheer experience outweigh the ugliness found in the corrupt governments and despots. One such example of natural beauty, a compelling African story, is Madikwe Game Reserve in South Africa's NorthWest province, where Thakadu is found.

We've got deep knowledge of Madikwe, having first visited when the reserve was proclaimed in the early 90s, and the first wild dogs and cheetah were released. And we've returned a few times since, taking photographs and listening to stories along the way.

Madikwe's narrative is a rich one, a tale that could only have happened in South Africa, a country where discrimination and inequity at the time were written into the laws of the country.

Y'see, Madikwe was a socio-economic initiative; a project that involved buying up struggling cattle-farms and replacing perennially thirsty cows with wildlife - all to achieve the big-picture aim of creating sustainable jobs for the future. Ironically enough, it was the brainchild of the Bophutatswana Parks Board, albeit at a time when apartheid was on its way out.

We arrived at Madikwe in mid-winter. It's the best time to view game, a time of clear blue skies, when the days are temperate, the bush is thin and the nights bloody cold (*Note: no matter the fireplaces, duvets and hot-water bottles promised, you will need your long-johns*). Tuningi Safari Lodge was our first stop, just for a night.

Part of the Madikwe Collection, a group that owns a couple lodges and markets a few more in the reserve, Tuningi is well-positioned. In the west of the reserve, it's behind one hill and surrounded by a few others, the word 'tucked' for once really applying. Tuningi's guides venture into the less-travelled south, where there is meant to be less game. As a result, on our first game-drive we didn't see a single vehicle. But we did see black rhino, buffalo and lion...and for the birders, the yellow form of a crimson-breasted shrike. Add the absence of other game-drive vehicles, and the experience was thoroughly exclusive.

Let's face it, a good sighting of mating lions or a kill can be spoilt by three or four other vehicles maneuvering into position, reversing over saplings, engaging gear and negotiating dongas. It's enough to get you scowling under your beanie and thinking mean thoughts, like 'where did *they* come from?'

A few Madikwe lodges stand out for me, all for very different reasons; Etali, the Bush House and Jaci's among them (the latter was child-friendly before it became an

economic necessity after 9/11). Tuningi is up there with them.

Exhausted by six months of mothering, Alison had slept in for our first drive, staying behind with our then nearly five-month old Fynn. She'd missed the still rare black rhino, but enjoying the room, simply resting in the beautiful environment, is intrinsic to the lodge experience.

Ali didn't miss another drive - the rate of roughly R37 per hour for a babysitter made it worth it. But it was the manner in which the staff took to our young Fynn that blew me away. Whenever we were nearby they *all* just *had* to hold him, with genuine affection, loving his laugh. He too couldn't get enough.

At Thakadu, from where we carried on our exploration of the south of the reserve, it was the same. Fynn was whipped into the kitchen where he was again the centre of attention, sandwiched somewhere between preparation for starters and main course, spit-bubbling and *agoing* his way through the attention.

While I preferred Tuningi's setting, the point of interest at Thakadu is that it is on land owned by the local (Molatedi) village community. An afternoon spent in the village revealed that 42 residents are employed at the lodge - which has in its four years significantly altered life as the community knew it;



The black rhino at full zoom, behind a wildebeest herd.

tourism skills training is offered, an early-learning centre has been created and a clinic has been extended...and the lodge is breaking

even. Villagers are apparently even *returning* from the cities to find business opportunities. Now who says tourism can't make a difference?

Thakadu itself? Positioned above a river, it's freezing in winter, and I won't forget changing young Master Fynn's nappy at 3am. By day though, it's all forgotten. The cuisine is good and the game drives are long - simply because it takes a while to get around a dividing mountain to the areas populated by game.

But the feel of the lodge is different - it's less traditionally formal, and there's a real sense of pride, of 'this is ours'. Which, considering where South Africa came from, says a fair bit about this operation.



The pool at Tuningi lodge - it must be welcome in summer.



Burchell's zebra in Madikwe savannah woodland.