

A Polish CHRISTMAS

WORDS BY ANGUS BEGG

IT'S CHRISTMAS EVE and in the middle of the sparsely decorated table, in this tiny eastern Polish village, lies a big fish. It's a carp, the traditional festive meal in this part of Poland, and it has until now been lying in the downstairs bath. It's a typical large family occasion. My wife and I are guests of her friend


Lesia, whom she taught to speak English when living here, and this is her family; parents Jan and Zofia, husband Piotr, sister Irena, brother Gzregorz and his wife and child.

Preceding the fish, and prepared by Zofia with love and no little pride, are an exquisite bean soup, beetroot, sauerkraut—one of the very few foods alien to my inquisitive appetite—and mashed potato. After grace is said—this is a staunchly Catholic household—the table erupts in a babble of Polish, a fast Slavic tongue that

allows no quarter. With Gzregorz leading the pack, the diminutive Lesia and her looming 6.8ft husband are the only three at the table who speak English, they switch rapidly between subjects and people. It's an exhausting and happy feast. After presents have been exchanged the family attend midnight mass in the little church across the icy road.

Being a notoriously early riser, the next morning—Christmas—I inch my way down the icy driveway, a mix between snow and

Move over sun, sea and sand, make way for a real Polish Christmas filled with snow, mulled wine and hearty stews, says Angus Begg



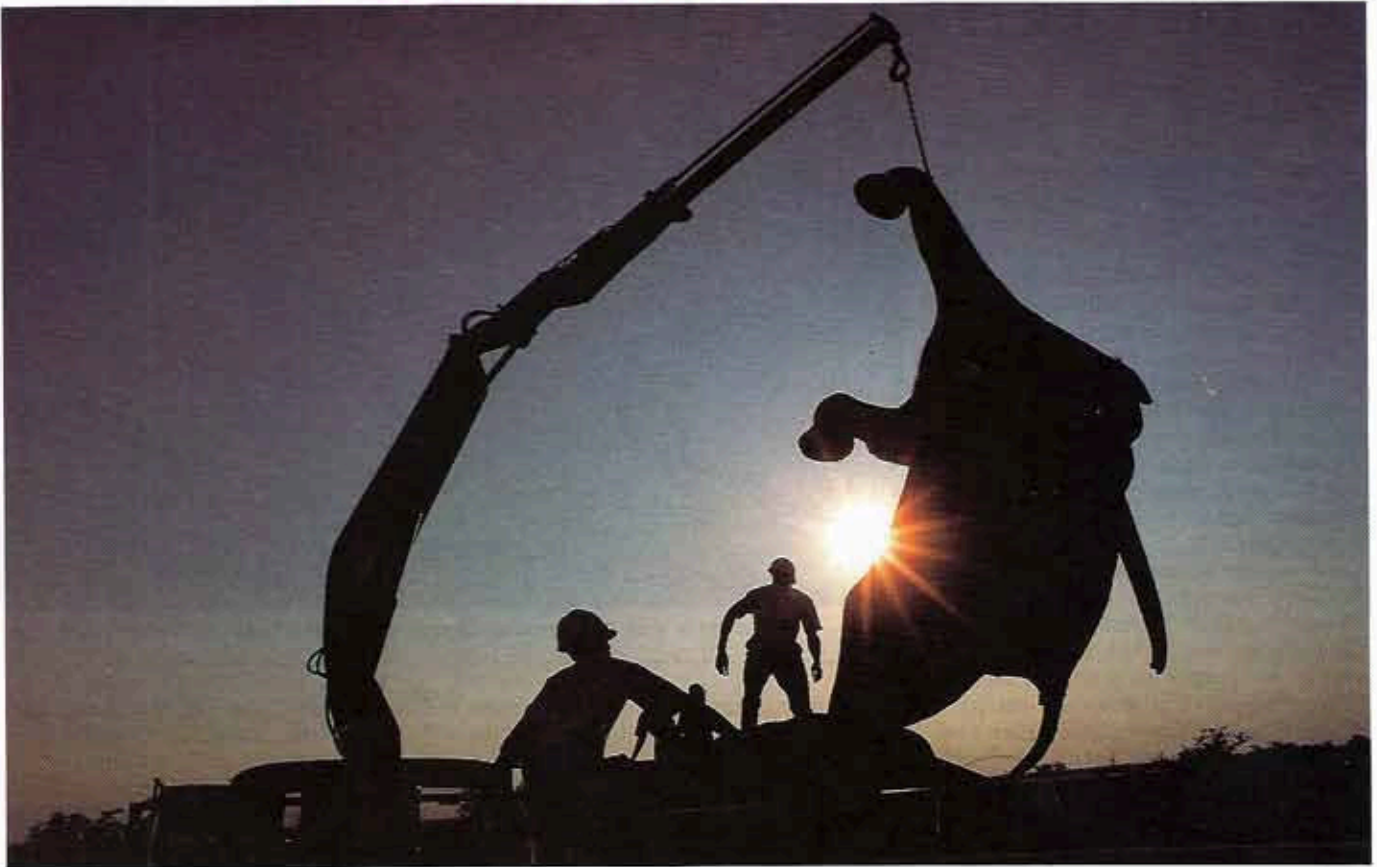
Partnership at MADIKWE

For rural people, the choice between cattle and wildlife is often an agonising one. In the second in our series on wildlife projects set up in partnership with local communities, **Angus Begg** visits Madikwe game reserve in North West province.

Pictures by **Rick Matthews**

THE GREAT ELEPHANT DEBATE

to cull or not to cull ...



An elephant carcass is lifted by crane into a lorry and transported to Skukuza Camp in the Kruger National Park.

That is the question facing wildlife managers in protected areas throughout Africa, but most particularly in the Kruger National Park in the Eastern Transvaal, where a controversial culling programme has been in operation for years. It was reviewed at an inconclusive debate recently.

by Angus Begg

photos by Anthony Bannister/ABPL

The elephant's legs begin to wobble, struggling to support her large body. They buckle, bend and she slips backwards into a sitting position. Comic. Pathetic. She leans forward, her weight taking her on to her knees, but the momentum is too great and she tilts forward, her tusks piercing the ground. Her twisting trunk bends left and right, searching ... perhaps for support ... battling to understand what has happened. Her sister, eyes wild and ears flapping, shields the young one. With a giant will, the wounded pachyderm wobbles to her knees once more, before pitching forward on to her trunk. And there she stays.

Another elephant has been culled. No one pretends it is pleasant; no one enjoys doing it. But there is still strong disagreement about whether it is necessary.

The "elephant debate" held recently at

Kyalami, outside Johannesburg, was heralded as a meeting of minds in conservation that would solve the ongoing, controversial issue of elephant culling and the morality, or lack, thereof. When the debate finally took place – a function that had taken the Rhino and Elephant Foundation and FALCON (Front for Animal Liberation and the Conservation of Nature) the best part of a year to organise – it brought a number of keen environmental heads with vastly differing views together. Among the participants were delegates from the United Kingdom, Canada, the United States and, most importantly, South Africa's neighbours. But perhaps most significant was the National Parks Board's new approach to the issue. Whereas the issue of culling had never before been open to discussion, with the Board making its own decisions, it was now clear that consultation was indeed what it wanted ... a sharing of ideas on what is recognised as a very sensitive subject.

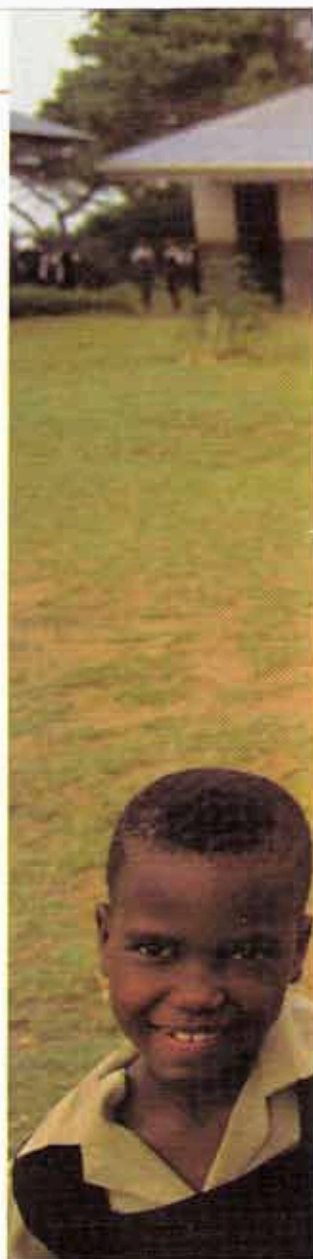
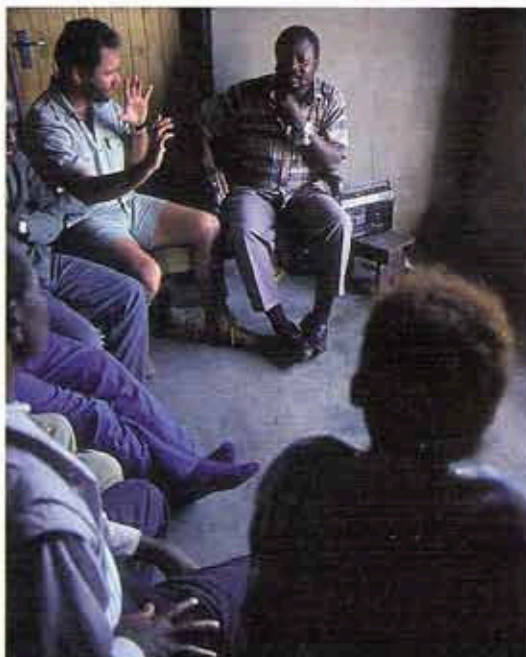
National Parks Board chief executive Dr. Robbie Robinson opened proceedings. "Yes," he said, "the National Parks Board had changed dramatically in recent times and it is eager to open elephant management to public debate." Addressing a fresh, early morning audience as the stragglers tip-toed in, Dr. Robinson set the tone for the day's discussions: "The situation of the elephants in the Kruger National Park is in dire need of review."

Entomologist Chris Styles took the podium and challenged the need for culling. The gist of his argument was that elephants are essential landscape managers that make "immense structural changes to the landscape ... changes that we don't understand", and he linked their seemingly destructive behaviour to the survival of other creatures, from the sucking-bug to the sable and other rare antelope that feed on the mopane tree. "Uncontrolled," he said, "the elephant is free to open up and maintain areas of mopane veld. In short, man can't better



In our next few issues, we will look at whether - and how - community development and ecotourism are working in various parts of the country. Angus Begg starts the ball rolling with a visit to the Phinda/Hluhluwe-Umfolozzi area

Pictures: Paul Weinberg



A FINE BALANCE

KwaZulu Natal was a fairly obvious place to start, as it is home to the Natal Parks Board, probably the first organisation to link conservation and the development of the communities surrounding game reserves.

But there are about 150 NPB projects in this province alone, so I restricted my study to Zululand, looking briefly at those around the Hluhluwe-Umfolozzi Park and the efforts of the Conservation Corporation around the Phinda Resource Reserve in the Mkhuze area. Both have moved far beyond allowing their rural neighbours to sell curios, or perform traditional dances outside the park.

Phinda's rural project manager is Les Carlisle, former general manager of the lodge at the reserve; his shift in occupation is seen as symbolic of the company's new direction.

Supported by Isaac Thembe - a northern Maputaland lad headhunted from a non-governmental organisation a year ago - Carlisle spends his days driving between communities, establishing contacts, maintaining friendships, and learning

about the people's needs. These may be more toilets for the high school at Mngqobokazi, a clinic for the Mduku district, or building materials for a local entrepreneur.

The people of Mduku, Nibela and Mngqobokazi districts welcome the sight of Carlisle's bakkie.

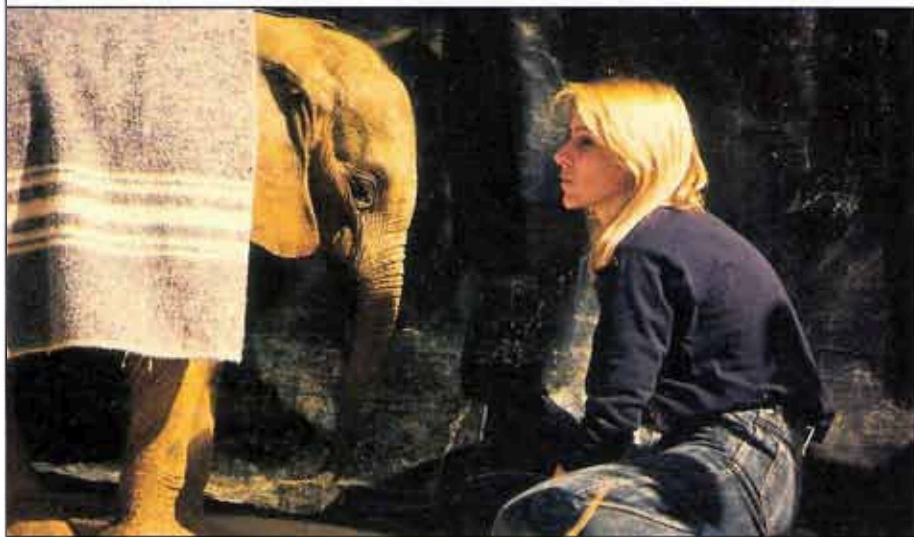
About half an hour down the road from Phinda is Mtubatuba, where Paula Morrison holds court among community development workers. The environmental awareness officer for the Natal Parks Board in Zululand, Morrison has taken the areas of Umfolozzi, Hluhluwe and Mkhuze under her wing.

She too appears to be a messenger of hope for the local people. Like Carlisle, Morrison is associated with good tidings and gifts ... such as news that running water will be installed, or bringing a new pump handle for the tank.

Although the NPB and Conscorp are very different organisations, the former being public service-orientated and the latter profit-driven, they are clearly involved in the same business. They are doing their best to ensure that the people living around their reserves benefit from and contribute

Focus on the National Parks Board

The issue revolves around elephants, but involves culls, big game hunters, animal rights, community rights, and five million American dollars. **Angus Begg** tells the story



In the Kruger National Park, between 500 and 600 elephants used to be culled every year. Last year, after the great Elephant Debate, half the usual quota of elephants was removed, by translocation or shooting.

This year, the cull, which usually takes place in early winter and lasts for several months, has been suspended.

According to the chief warden of Kruger, Harold Braack, scientists are reviewing information – from other parks, from their own, looking at the options offered by expanding the park's western frontier; and hopefully, the northern one, looking at surveys and biodiversity reports. By August, he estimates, they will have come to a decision.

The decision to keep the elephants to a population of 7500 was made in the 1960s. That may change now too.

And, to the joy of overseas conservationists, National Parks Board has made it clear that they think translocation is the route to go. They have hired Rozanne

Above and below: These pictures were taken in 1994, at the last cull where the controversial immobilising drug Scoline was used.

Middle: Karen Trendler of the Animal Rehabilitation Centre near Pretoria hand-raised three very tiny elephants from the cull over two years ago. The small elephants were usually killed because they couldn't survive without their parents. Karen wanted to see if she could raise these ones, but after several very traumatic months, the elephant babies died of Salmonella.

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Well I did anyway, and I took it. Which pretty much explained my backpack and filthy-booted presence before a cathedral in a medieval square in northwest Spain some 10 months ago. Just before the European cold set in.

With hundreds of fellow pilgrims and hikers milling below the quite stupendous cathedral in Santiago, apparently the third most holy site in Christendom after Jerusalem and Rome, I wondered just how long it would take to absorb the last 800km over the 30 days that comprised my experience of *El Camino de*

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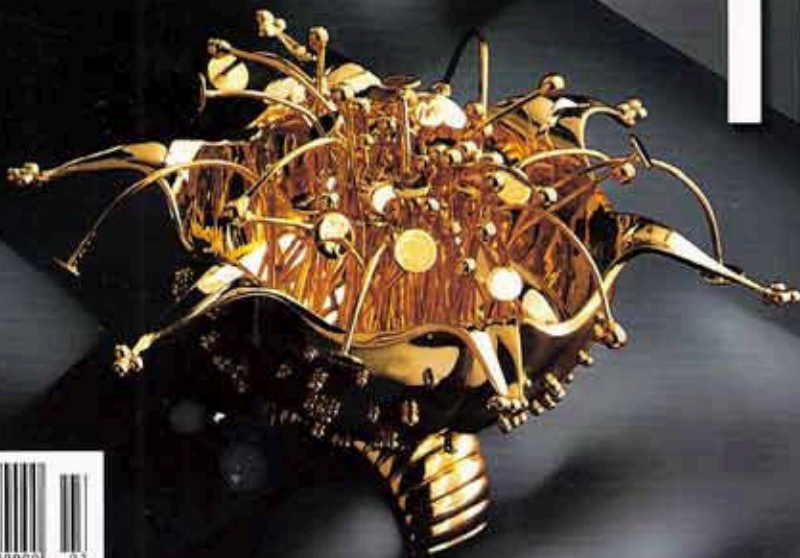
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Walking

the thin green line

Following Hadrian's Wall is a great way of experiencing Britain's beautiful landscape on foot

It's not so much that I had this urge to walk across England as it was the chance to stretch my legs, set the breeze free in my head and indulge in a bit of ancient, moss-covered history. It was also to celebrate the fact that walkers could finally walk the entire length of Hadrian's Wall, some 130 kilometres from coast to coast, across the narrowest stretch of England.

Officially known as the Hadrian's Wall National Path Trail (HWNPT), it stretches from the quiet Solway estuary in the west, breeding ground for so many waterfowl that eventually find their way to Africa, to the funky party capital of Newcastle in the east. It is the latest piece of ancient history to attract walkers to England's shores – 130-odd kilometres of village pubs, green valleys, re-created Roman settlements, cowpats and sheep. Lots of sheep.

In AD 22, northern England was the northernmost frontier of the Roman Empire, the northwest city of Carlisle then already a Roman settlement. A few forts were scattered across the country – observation points for ill-meaning 'barbarians', today known as the Scots – who would lead raiding and pillaging missions from the north. →

Over the centuries stones have been removed from the wall for use in the construction of local houses



These toilets at Housesteads Fort are almost 2 000 years old. They just don't make them like they used to

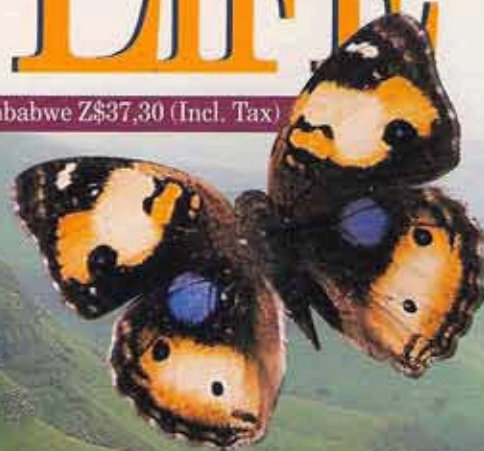


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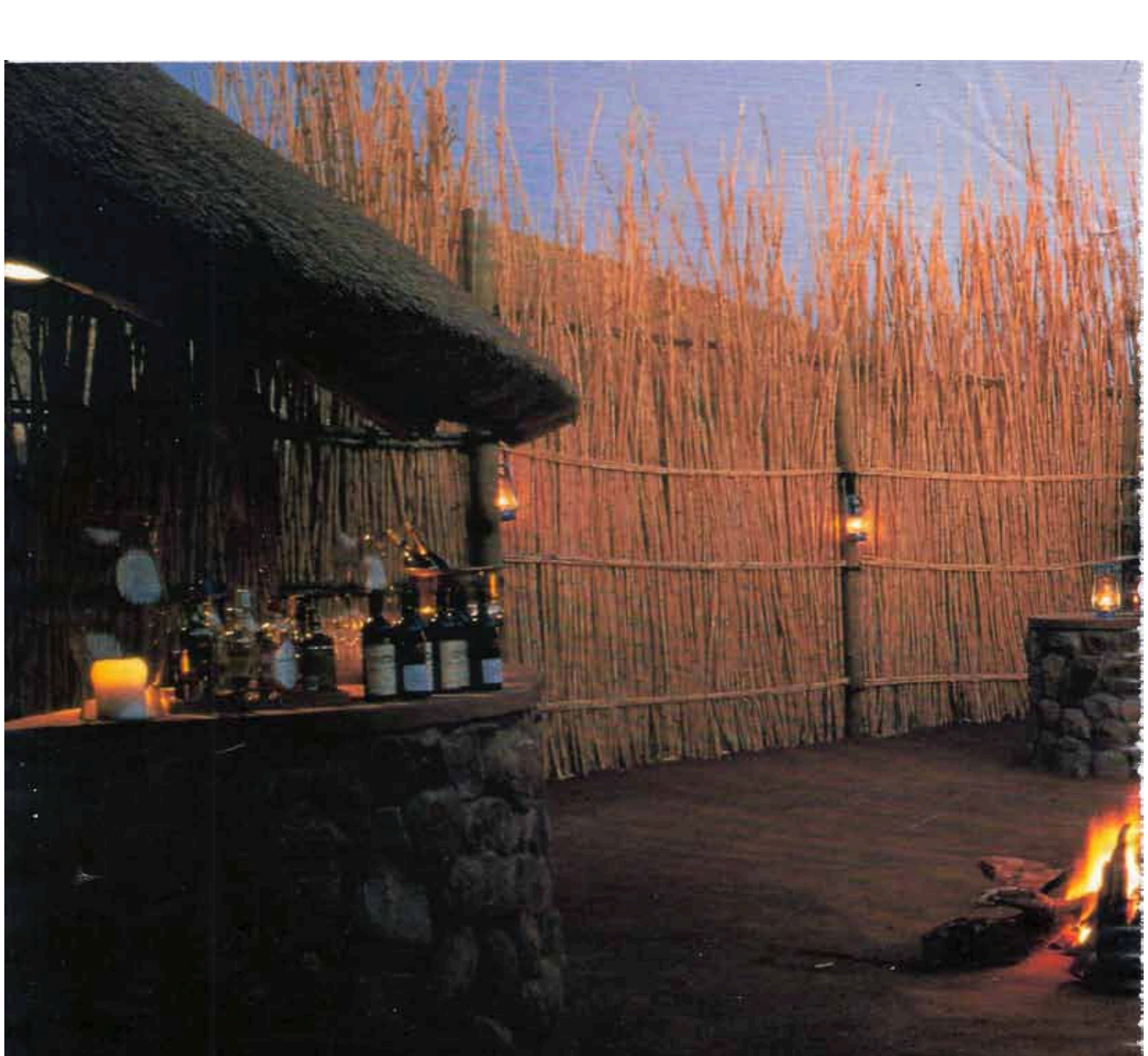


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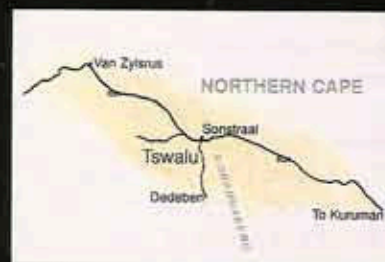
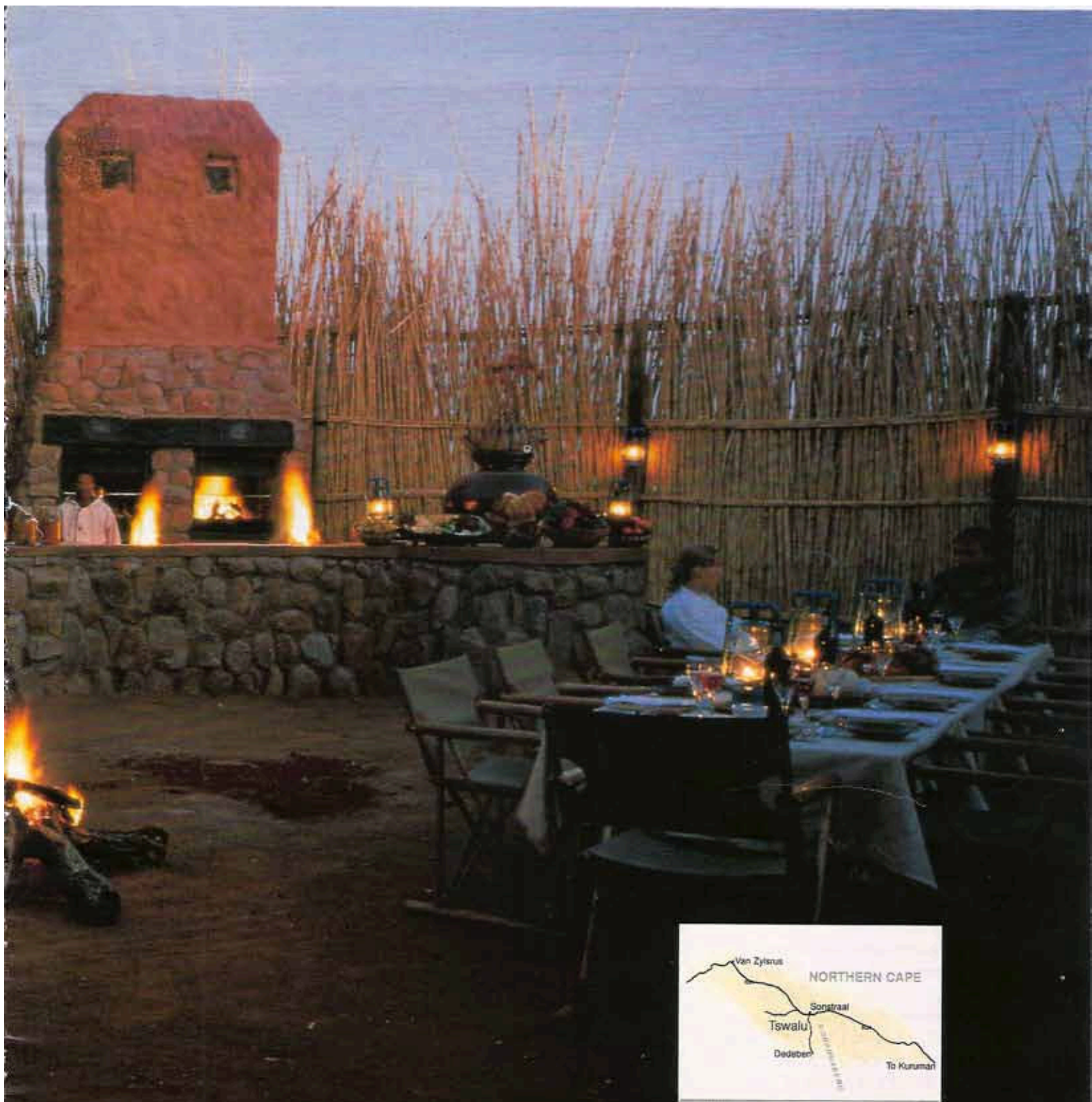




The largest private game reserve in South Africa

Story and pictures by **ANGUS RORY O'CONNELL BEGG**

Tswalu Des



The authentically decorated boma
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