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# WILD AT HEART

At Buffalo Ridge Safari Lodge you'll not only find a soulful story and abundant game, harmonious architecture and beautiful views, but laid-back ambience and the best lamb shanks south of the Botswana border

By Leigh Rowand

**W**e had stopped in an open clearing, thirsty for that first sundowner after an incredible afternoon's game viewing in the Madikwe game reserve, just south of the Botswana border. Toasting a dappled pink sky and chatting about the 160-plus herd of buffalo we had come across earlier, we heard him.

He was about 50m away, inquisitive but not aggressive. We kept a careful watch but our ranger Moremi Keabetswe thought it best to get us out of our uninvited guest's way before we had a chance to pack away the drinks. We watched in amazement as the elephant chewed

on some ice, smashed a few beer bottles and crushed a full soda can. Minutes later the novelty seemed to have worn off and as quickly as he had interrupted our party, he disappeared into the thicket, leaving us in awe. And thirsty.

It was an eventful evening to say the least for on our way back to the lodge, we came across an African wild cat, a spotted hyaena and hunting lions. "Another day in Africa," someone chirped from the back of the vehicle. Maybe, but these were perfect finales to a staggering day in the bush.

Buffalo Ridge Safari Lodge, one of

the newest additions to Madikwe, is situated high on the Tweedepoort Ridge with a magnificent vista overlooking the reserve.

Accessed by a wooden bridge that crosses a ravine engulfed by giant rock fig trees, the main section of the lodge blends effortlessly into the surroundings with its lofty, open-aired structure and earthy interiors, and you get a true sense of being in a massive treehouse. The views from all angles of the lodge are also spectacular, whether you're catching some sun on the chaiseslongues by the rim-flow swimming pool or chilling out in one



throughout Madikwe. Chatting to game ranger Moremi who is also Buffalo Ridge's assistant manager, his deep passion for his community exudes. On a previous trip to Madikwe in 2003, I was fortunate to meet Moremi when he was working as a ranger at Etali Safari Lodge. As a Balete community member and now the chairperson, he was quick to become involved in the dream to establish a community-owned lodge. It took seven long years to sign the agreement leases, get financial backing and construct Buffalo Ridge, which opened in December and is named in honour of the Balete totem, the buffalo. The lodge only employs members of the community, while the eco-partnership with The Nature Workshop allows for vigorous skills development and staff training in all areas of hospitality management. In addition, the Balete community will also receive a percentage of the profit turnover.

"Because the Lekgophung community is essentially a farming one, the decor also needed to be simple and quite rural in style, which is why we used so many raw

materials," explains Lucy Corder, a Johannesburg-based interior decorator who was responsible for the interiors at Buffalo Ridge.

"For example, we halved wine barrels and used them as the bottoms of coffee tables, turned old milk cans into vases and smoothed out tree stumps for bedside tables." To enhance this rustic look, which was also expertly created by well-known architect Nick Plewman, Lucy used vibrant colours, shweshwe patterns and a wild mix of textures, from cotton and leather to hessian, wood and the odd bit of velvet. It's a fun, cleverly constructed look with great attention to detail.

In addition, each of the eight thatched chalets is private and stylish with big comfortable beds and a shower that opens up on to glorious views of the savannah. I also loved the black-and-white photographs of Balete community life, which have been masterfully used in the chalets as effective "art pieces".

With hospitable managers Louis and Penny Korb at the helm, the staff at Buffalo Ridge is friendly and

of the comfy living areas. Spacious and seriously laid-back, this really is the kind of place you can kick back with a beer and your binoculars.

But perhaps what really makes Buffalo Ridge get under your skin is that it's the first game lodge in South Africa to be wholly owned by a rural community, a trend that seems to be picking up around the country. In partnership with operating company, The Nature Workshop, which has the expertise to develop the skills to run a world-class lodge, the Balete Ba Lekgophung community has a 45-year lease to operate a commercial lodge with traversing rights



attentive, and nothing is too much trouble. They'll gladly dish out their recipes, and since the cuisine is a definite highlight here, these are often requested.

Judy Dyason, a consulting chef and one of the founding members of the Prue Leith College of Food and Wine in Pretoria, works her magic in the kitchen with a team she is training to eventually run the kitchen on their own. Breakfast (have the homemade muesli) is a hodge-podge of delights and you can

basically order whatever you like from a healthy "grill-up" as I like to call it, to a huge selection of breads, cheese, cold meats and fruit. Lunch is an optional light snack where simple daily specials such as salad wraps, baked potatoes, a quiche or soup and just-out-of-the-oven breads are served.

In a candlelit atmosphere that certainly lends itself to a few good wines, dinner is also casual with wholesome, earthy dishes that have been given a gourmet twist. We

enjoyed Judy's filet rösti served with fresh seasonal vegetables and a red wine jus, as well as the delicious, fall-off-the-bone lamb shanks, possibly the best I have ever tasted.

I have since returned to Buffalo Ridge, not only for the recipe for Judy's to-die-for shanks, or the chance of meeting up again with our sunset elephant, but because I believe there are few places in South Africa that offer laid-back luxury and big-five game viewing at such good value.



Buffalo Ridge Safari Lodge is about a four-hour drive from Johannesburg and 50 minutes by air. Rates until September 30, 2005 are R1 650 pp sharing and R1 950 pp sharing from October. This includes all meals, safari activities and return transfers to the Madikwe airstrip. For reservations, call (011) 537-4620, e-mail [reservations@buffaloridgesafari.com](mailto:reservations@buffaloridgesafari.com) or visit [www.buffaloridgesafari.com](http://www.buffaloridgesafari.com)