

The Welgevonden region offers over 100 000 hectares of land once again home to lion and elephant which roam the area after almost a century of absence – and it's malaria free. In 2001 the Waterberg Nature Conservancy was awarded International Biosphere status by Unesco.



Picture: Cheryl Hunter

THE WHISTLER

WHO HAS ALL THE BIRDS A-TWITTER

When he's not doing duty as an elephant whisperer, reports Cheryl Hunter

It was a perfectly ordinary game drive until our ranger pulled over on a quiet stretch of road near a copse of small trees, told us all to hush and began imitating the pearl-spotted owl, a voracious hunter of nestlings in the area. Within moments, I was transported into the bizarre world of Alfred Hitchcock as birds descended upon our vehicle. They landed all around us – a woodland kingfisher, barbets, little brown jobs of every description, doves and even the humble mousebird. The sound of avian cussing was loud in our ears as they all whistled and chirped, daring the fake owl to show itself. Birdbrains don't have a long attention span, however, and they soon returned to their daily activities, disappearing back into the bush and leaving us in a sudden loud silence.

Just to prove it wasn't a fluke, our ranger repeated the whole exercise to our utter astonishment. It would have had a birder all a-twitter with the 350 species in the area. And Glenn du Toit, who is billed as one of South Africa's few genuine elephant whisperers, became known – thanks to a wit at the back – as the bird whistler.

Situated in the big-game region of Welgevonden, a dramatic landscape of savannahs, waterfalls and craggy mountains, Makweti Safari Lodge shares a border with the Marakele National Park and the main lodge is built into the natural rock formations of the Waterberg Mountains. It is also home to a small staff of 10 consummate professionals, headed up by game warden Du Toit. The Makweti Lodge staff go to great lengths to ensure that each guest leaves with a burning desire to return as soon as possible.

Welgevonden is only three hours from Joburg by road, or 45 minutes by air (the reserve has two private landing strips) and compares in wilderness size and game viewing with the Kruger National Park.

It offers over 100 000 hectares of land once again home to lion and elephant which roam the area after almost a century of absence – and it's malaria free.

In 2001 the Waterberg Nature Conservancy was awarded International Biosphere status and is the first savannah biosphere reserve to be recognised by Unesco in southern Africa.

In keeping with this ethos, Makweti Safari Lodge is unfenced and deftly built from natural materials, but stocked with all essential modern conveniences and designed to provide each chalet with a sense of seclusion and views of unparalleled beauty.

This catering for the senses is a constant theme at Makweti, which shares the reserve with several other lodges. My fear was that we'd spot a lion; the radio would start squawking as the ranger called in all the other vehicles circling like vultures and there'd be a parking lot to rival Sandton City surrounding the creatures within minutes – as is so common at many reserves. But there's none of that behaviour at Makweti.

All rangers operate with earpieces, so there's no disruptive static from the radio to break the atmosphere of a special sighting.

And there's a three-car maximum at any big sighting, so you always feel a little bit special about the event. In addition, each lodge is allowed only one vehicle and many lodges are privately owned and seldom occupied. The game drives are long – three hours at dawn and another three at dusk each day – but the vehicles are luxurious, comfortable and well-stocked.

Welgevonden runs one of the country's few genuine elephant contraception programmes, making it a choice destination for anyone who opposes the current short-sighted and financially motivated decision to once again begin culling these majestic animals.

The herd is followed at all times by a scientist who is monitoring and researching the effect of contraceptives on the herd's behaviour and this is the first contraceptive that does not halt the normal cycle of oestrus and mating, but does prevent fertilisation.

So males in must have the opportunity to mate with willing matriarchs and babies mature in normal family environments.

These elephants allowed us up close.

They did respond to Glenn and were gentle and calm, browsing alongside the vehicle. Then there's the big Etosha lionesses that were introduced to the park some years ago.

We followed them down a road for ages one morning as they hunted giraffe while Glenn told us the story: The mother lioness was gored during a hunt and her leg was in pretty bad condition.

A flight to the vet was on the cards when the owner of Makweti, a prominent local plastic surgeon, stepped in. He cleaned the wound and stitched her up and she now shows the prettiest inner thigh you've ever seen on a lioness.

I did wonder how these rangers maintained their good humour considering some of the stories they shared about the odd nightmare client.

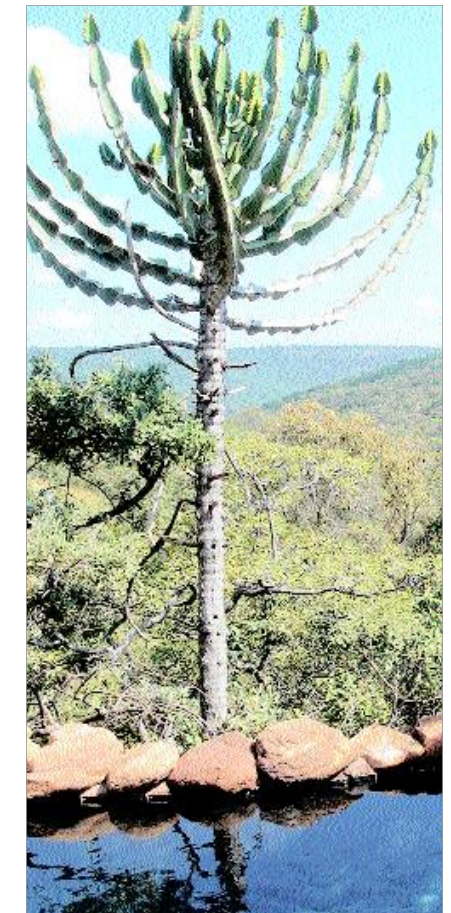
As there are no fences at Makweti, guests are escorted to and from chalets at night and there are intercoms between each room and the main lodge for safety. Lodge manager Karin du Toit took a call one day from an American guest who wanted to know if she could walk up to the main lodge in broad daylight. Karin said yes, of course, and put the phone down. But something niggled and she called the room back.

Why did you ask was the question she put to the tourist who drawled: "Well, there's this big tawny cat on my balcony, so I just wanted to make sure it would be okay to walk past him." Karin's reply is unprintable.

No story of Makweti would be complete without a mention of the food, which is sublime. Elizabeth Monyeki cooks it all up in a little kitchen off the main dining room. She conjures up the most divine carrot cake I have ever tasted.

I mentioned this at lunchtime one day before embarking on a game drive. When I returned, on my pillow was Elizabeth's "secret" recipe. The whole weekend was worth the trip just for that.

To get to Makweti, you drive along the N1 North, past Midrand. Remain on the N1 at the N1/R28 split towards Pietersburg (Polokwane). Pass Pretoria; continue through the Carousel Toll Gate past the Warmbaths (Bela Bela) turnoff. Continue until you approach the Kranskop Toll Gate. Keep in the left lane to take the turnoff to Nylstroom (Modimole) (R33). After the toll turn left at the T-junc-



Glenn du Toit (right) with one of those LBJs, the pool area (below left) and the Makweti tree from which the lodge takes its name (below right).

The picture at the bottom shows the bridge that crosses over to the chalets

tion towards Nylstroom. Travel straight through Nylstroom on the R33 to Vaalwater (±60km). Keep straight on through Vaalwater, pass the Total filling station and Spar just outside Vaalwater. Carry straight on the same road for ±25km from the filling station until you get to the Welgevonden Main Gate on your left. A Makweti representative will meet you at the main gate after you have parked your vehicle in the reserve's secure area. Traveling time from Joburg is about three hours. Makweti is offering a winter special valid until

August 31 for a rate of R2100 per person sharing per night on a full board basis. They also offer a complimentary transfer from Joburg or Pretoria for fournight (or more) bookings.

Bookings must be made within 7 days of travel. The complimentary transfer does not apply for this last minute booking special. All rates include game activities.

Contact details: Tel: 011 837 6776 or email them at makweti@global.co.za or you can visit the website at www.makweti.com.

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