

LOWVELD

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LIVING

the lockdown edition

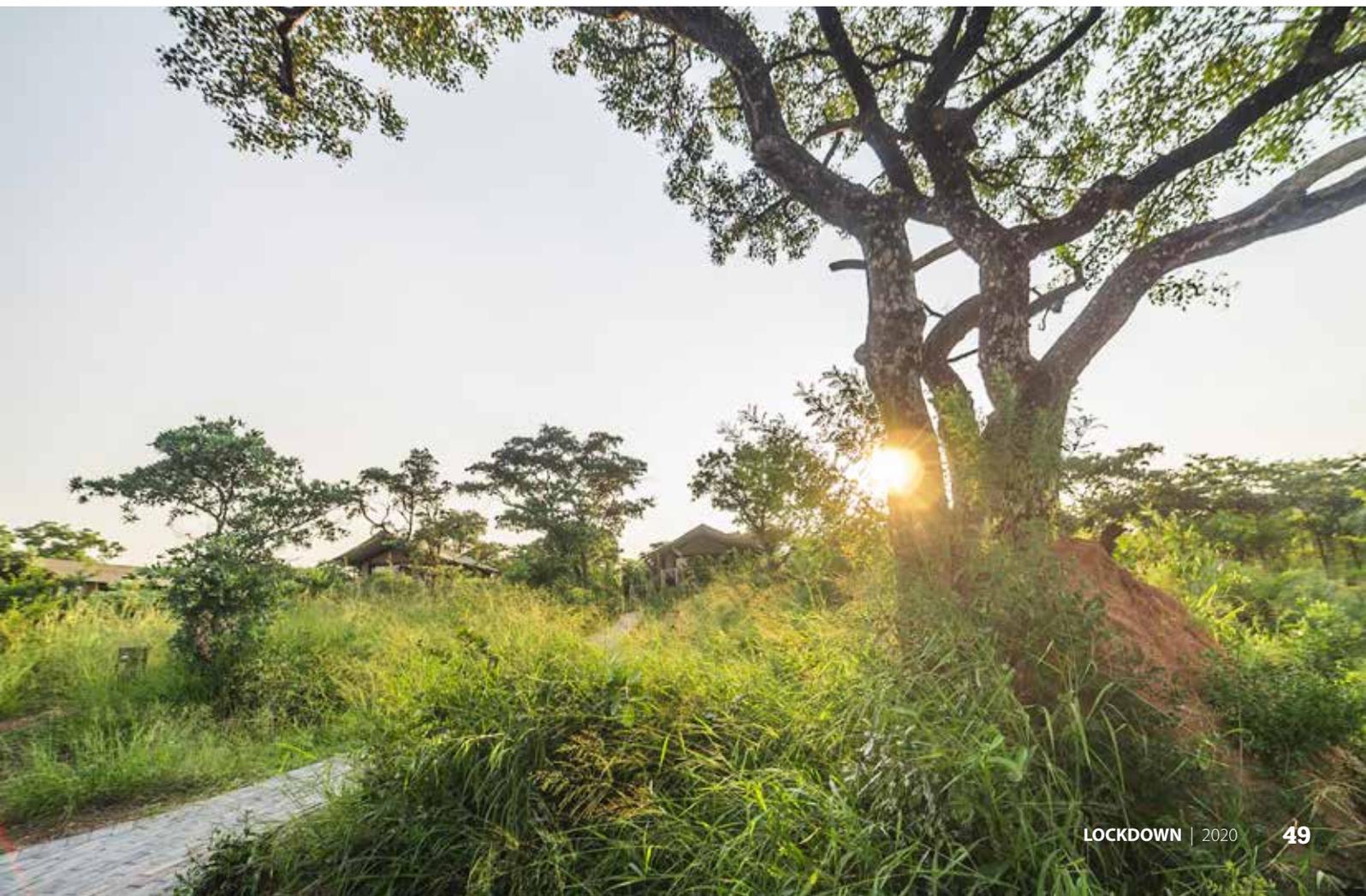
LOWVELD CRAFT FESTIVAL GOES ONLINE | NEW KRUGER TRAVEL SPOT
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mdluli magic

This spanking new, affordable-luxury lodge inside the Kruger Park is so much more than just another building in the bush. *Lowveld Living* was invited to hear Mdluli's story and experience its special setting

Words Bev Tucker





immediately on arrival I notice the large Marula tree at reception, dappling light and shade over a smiling statue of the late Chief Inkhosi MZ Mdluli of the Mdluli community, which owns 850ha of the southern Marula region around Kruger's Numbi Gate. The story of Mdluli Safari Lodge really began over two decades ago when the Chief dedicated himself to getting the tribal land returned after it was fenced into the park in the late 60s.

"He wanted to win it back for his people, and had a dream of building a lodge as a source of upliftment for the community," says Executive Manager Chris Schalkwyk as he walks me through the spacious airy lounge and bar area with its vantage over the bush. It took years of patient determination, the help of like-minded visionaries, and financial investment by companies and individuals, and the Chief lived to see the land returned in 1998 before he died. The lodge officially opened in January this year.

Designed and constructed by Luxury Frontiers, the lodge ticks all the boxes for an upscale escape, satisfying eco-consciousness and social-good factors. What really sets it apart in its category though, is affordability. It's the bush with style at prices within reach of the domestic market. It stands lightly on the earth, on raised composite decking made from recycled material; the rooms are huge, permanent safari-style tents on solid platforms.

My tent is one of 50 – a further 50 are in the pipeline

for Phase 2 along with a spa – set at discreet distances from each other among trees and shrubs, and all facing into the surrounding park. Paved paths, solar-lit at night, weave through indigenous foliage to the main building with its expansive decks and chill spaces. My favourite is the massive rim flow pool area, which beckons me when I arrive on a hot, late summer afternoon.

I'm struck by my lodging's generous proportions. There's room galore to spread out and settle in for a few days of absolute serenity in one of the most privileged wildlife sanctuaries on earth. I do a quick recce of the facilities and find that the sophisticated African-chic style I've admired dotted through the lodge is echoed in the sleeping quarters.

Top marks for the bathroom's double vanity, each with its own huge mirror and sleek black satin basin fittings. There's even a full-length mirror – applause to whoever put that on the room list. I locate the indoor shower showcasing attractive up-market Matsimela hair and body products, chunky bath sheets, smart white bathrobes and – bliss! – an open air shower behind a stone feature wall. I can't wait to unleash my karaoke alter ego in there, but the game drive party is about to set off so I have to dash. Later, lovely tent house.

The game drives at Mdluli are outsourced to Echo Africa, which operates from a nearby base. The most popular times for good sightings are early morning and



evening. Our green viewing vehicle chugs off at 4.30pm sharp but the big animals are shy today. Still, we have amazing sightings of the less glam inhabitants and get to see sunset and moonrise over this special part of the planet. When we disembark for sundowners it's a chance to get to know my fellow guests. Nothing quite like a slug of Amarula to get people chatting like old friends, right? The stars are out by the time we return to camp, and I'm happy to head straight to dinner.

Being a community project, most of the 80+ staff are from the local environs so most are new to luxury hospitality and the demands of a fine dining restaurant. Knowing this, I've prepared myself for whatever may arrive at the table. By dessert I'm won over. The menu is a three-course indulgence with vegetarian options – perfect for me as I haven't provided advance notice of my preference – and is backed up by a decent wine list. I'm impressed and, honestly, a bit surprised. Training in that department is a priority, explains GM Gary Foster. "We had a temporary consultant chef to assist us in setting up systems and do training, and our staff has really blossomed."

When bedtime rolls round I find my room has been turned down, the window panels zipped up and the mozzie net in place. I head for the outdoor shower and with the Southern Cross watching over me, I'm in heaven. I fall asleep in classic bed linen that virtually crackles with high thread count crispness, to the call of a nightjar (the Fiery-

necked, I think). If moonlight had a sound, this would be it.

I confess to missing the early morning game drive. Instead, I sway gently in the hanging chair on my deck, lolling on down-filled cushions, relishing coffee and rusks supplied in my room, and watching soft dawn mist give way to blue sky. Later I waft down to breakfast and fall into step with two of the housekeeping staff. They seem to have a real sense of ownership in the lodge. Some people in their community haven't had jobs for years, and now there's Mdluli, where hope and pride has taken root. "We look after nature and it looks after us," says one. Exactly right.

Early mist gives way to a scorcher; the kind of day when humidity peaks and the ice in your glass melts faster than you can say "gin." In the open-plan lounge area all is serenely cool under the whirr of ceiling fans. When the strident insects and birds fall silent around midday it's time for a traditional post-lunch zizz in the aircon comfort of one's room, a practice also known as "going to read my book."

As the evening star appears I take a dip in the ink blue pool. Metres away there's a mud bath where ellies do their own splashing. Such magic, this. Floating quietly in the still dusk, acutely conscious that a few thin wires protect my pale limbs from a whole universe of amazing animal life. And in that moment all is well with the world.

INFO www.mdlulisafarilodge.co.za,
www.luxury-frontiers.com, www.eva-last.co.za