Dear Travel Partners

This is an incredible time for us all, daily moments of disbelief, sadness, helplessness and deep concern pepper the industry across the board. From the largest companies and tourism groups to the smallest guest house or lodge the refrain “we are in this together” can be heard. Many are trying their utmost to ensure the correct messages are being delivered to the decision makers and we are grateful for their unwavering tenacity. Our beloved tourism industry is threatened and never before have we recognised the hospitality community’s vulnerability like this. So how can we move forward and remain positive – dreaming of a future, taking the time to explore and learn about new experiences or technologies, finding a new meaningful connection to the environment or community – it’s all possible. Who will we be when we return to a post COVID tourism world? It’s up to us I say – destiny often lies in the individual’s hands.

“It is not in the stars to hold our destiny but in ourselves.” - William Shakespeare

Yours in travel,
Cindy
THE EXCITING REINVENTION OF MABULA GAME LODGE IS ANNOUNCED

The eagerly awaited refashioning of Mabula Game Lodge is now complete. Whilst the lodge has been closed due to the lockdown during the COVID 19 pandemic, our team have been very busy finalising the large-scale project. The objective of the redesign was to create a contemporary haven whilst maintaining an African lodge feel throughout the bedrooms and completing the circle of the lodges’ restyling that commenced about twelve months ago. Authenticity is important to the traveller and the brief included a clear directive to ensure great comfort and practicality throughout whilst enabling our guests to be able to indulge in the little luxuries of a safari destination.

A change begins at the foundation and the newly refreshed rooms boast a gorgeous laminate vinyl floor which extends throughout the bedroom and living space into the breezy new bathroom areas. Characteristic French doors have replaced the heavy wooden sliders to allow the light to flow in, with the added wooden element to create an earthy sense of arrival. Window dressing is always important, so the designer has selected a gorgeous full block out high-quality cotton sateen curtain with leaf motif. A sheer organza curtain backs this to allow light yet maintain privacy.

Capturing the essence of light these new rooms boast a plethora of new lights throughout. From the stylish outdoor chrome wall mounted square light fittings, through to the African themed wall mounted lights and rich chandeliers the entire room shouts luxury and style. Down lights have been used throughout where ceilings permit, and a brass table lamp sets the safari theme beautifully.

“The highlight of this stylish experience is the complete merging of the light colours and contemporary African styles to create a luxury ambiance in the African bush setting that is Mabula” says Esley Giorgiou the well-known lodge interior designer and owner of Effective Finishes.

“Mabula Game Lodge is ready to welcome back it’s loyal customers and look forward to showing off the complete new look that has evolved with the completely re-designed rooms” mentions Cindy Sheedy Walker CEO of Extraordinary Sales and Marketing, “and of course all the other recently upgraded areas such as the world class new restaurant, a fabulous outdoor Wild Playzone complete with active arena, and many other additions which has completed the transformation of the old Mabula to an exciting up and coming Safari Resort.”
A collective yearning for an escape to the bush is almost palpable as South Africa passes its centennial day of lockdown. Often times, in the concrete and blaring cities of the world, one will hear phrases like immerse yourself in nature, escape the city, and losing yourself in nature. On a superficial level, being deep inside the Kruger National Park devoid of any concrete, city noises, and artificial lights is idyllic in and of itself. Yet, the reality is that it can often seem as though escaping the urban structures to find true wilderness areas is an extravagance that cannot be regularly enjoyed. The topic of this week’s blog is to consider the irreplaceable value of immersing oneself in the bush and how such value cannot be found elsewhere.

Certainly, as free time itself becomes an increasing rarity as our daily responsibilities continue to grow, one may reason that—instead of spending time travelling to find nature—one would rather spend that time with friends, do household chores, or just relax indoors. Others may believe, on the other hand, that strolling through a park or visiting a zoo is indeed being in nature. Nonetheless, a significant and compelling amount of research has shown that these forms of nature are inadequate in allowing people to experience the cognitive benefits of immersing oneself in the bush. Notably, psychological research makes a gripping argument that there is a necessity to immerse oneself in the wild in order to increase one’s overall wellbeing and happiness. Most compellingly, the psychological theories on Biophilia and Attention Restoration Theory (ART) fundamentally affect other areas of our wellbeing such as our mental willpower and overall happiness.

Mardie Townsend, a professor of Qualitative Social Research, Social Policy, and Public Health at Deakin University, explains that there is “mounting evidence that contact with nature has significant positive impacts on mental health”. A study that compared the effects of walking through a forest versus walking in a city found that walking through a forest—in addition to decreasing stress and anxiety—increased levels of lymphocytes (cells in the body that fight against viruses and various diseases) and increased the expression of anti-cancer proteins.

On a broader level, there is a body of psychological theory that explores the biological benefits of immersing oneself in the bush, particularly the theories of biophilia hypothesis and Attention Restoration Theory (ART). Biophilia hypothesis is described by psychologists as having an “an innate love for the natural world, universally felt by all, and resulting at least in part from our genetic make-up and evolutionary history”. Fundamentally, this hypothesis is based on the fact that our separation from nature (by the development of mass urban spaces) is relatively recent in the last 250 years, and that we have not yet adapted to this separation. As a result, we tend to experience increased levels of stress, anxiety, and impaired attention levels when not surrounded by nature.
Marc Berman, a psychologist at the University of Michigan, relates these mental health issues to ART in a study that compares the restorative effects on the cognitive functioning of interactions with nature versus urban environments. The study found that urban environments are filled with stimulations that capture attention dramatically and additionally require constantly directed-attention (such as when driving or when working on a computer). Such activities use what is known as top-down directed-attention, which heavily depletes our limited levels of attention. Berman’s study found that nature, on the other hand, ‘modestly’ grabs our attention through intriguing, yet passively-stimulating stimuli. This form of attention-use is known as bottom-up directed-attention and allows for “top-down directed-attention abilities a chance to replenish”.

A prolonged exposure to nature, as a result, improves our direct-attention abilities in the same way as how improving our nutrition and reducing the amount of choices increase our levels of mental willpower to problem-solve. The additional benefits of immersing oneself in nature include reduced levels of depression and anxiety, increased resilience, increased engagement in learning, improved self-esteem, increased physical health, and increased capacity to engage socially. Fundamentally, there is an overwhelming scientific notion that nature is a vital actor in positive psychology—specifically in terms of our subjective levels of wellbeing, contentment and satisfaction, hope and optimism, as well as in our overall flow and happiness.

The reality is, just as with all other aspects of our wellbeing, that our relationship with nature is cyclical: the more we immerse ourselves in nature, the greater levels of stress relief and willpower recovery we experience, which can then allow us to be more productive and to ultimately thrive!

There will be a time when travel will return to our lives, and as we tentatively begin to plan our future adventures, consider the demonstrable scientific benefits in returning to the wild. Our proudly South African bush, with its natural distancing, endless horizons, and limitless skies, has always been ready to welcome you once again.

**CLIFFTOP ATTENDS WELGEVONDEN WORKSHOP**

During the month of July Clifftop Exclusive Safari Hideaway took part in a training webinar hosted by Exclusive Getaways. The theme of the webinar was ‘A collaboration of Welgevonden Game Reserve Lodges – Big 5 Malaria-free Safaris of Distinction’. It was a truly fantastic experience to be a part of and a wonderful collaboration of Welgevonden’s lodges.
VICTORIA FALLS SAFARI LODGE TRAVEL AND LEISURE AWARDS

Victoria Falls Safari Lodge has been named one of the top five Resort Hotels in Africa by Travel and Leisure readers. The awards for Travel and Leisure’s ‘World’s Best Awards survey’ takes place every year where they ask their readers to weigh in on their top travel experiences around the world. This year Victoria Falls Safari Lodge was voted fifth in the best Resort Hotels in Africa category.

SAFARI PLAINS WELCOME COCKTAIL RECIPE – “SAFARI MINT PINA”

While we wait in anticipation to be able to reopen our doors and welcome our guests back, we thought to bring a little bit of Safari Plains to you with our delicious welcome cocktail offered to guests on arrival.

METHOD:
• 1 cup Crushed Ice
• 50ml Coconut Milk
• 1 cup Fresh Pineapple Chunks
• Blend all three ingredients together.
• Pour 50ml Blue Pina Syrup into a chilled Martini glass and top with the crushed mixture. Garnish with fresh mint leaves and sliced strawberries.

*For a delicious adult version add 25ml Bacardi White Rum with the crushed mixture before blending together.

MANDELA DAY INTERVIEW WITH ISAIAH BANDA

July 18, 2020 marks the 11th Anniversary of Mandela Day, an annual celebration of the legacy of Nelson Rolihlahla Mandela on his day of birth. One of Madiba’s guiding quotes for this year’s celebration is “Let’s recommit to work towards our common goal: a Nation Where All of Us are Winners, All of Us Have Shelter, Food and Education”. We ask Isaiah Banda, our Reserve Manager for Lake Kyle, about the legacy of Madiba in the Safari Industry.
Isaiah, thanks so much for joining us on this special day. Tell us what drove your passion for wildlife and this field of work?

“My passion started back when I was still attending primary school because I grew up in a farm where my parents were working. At first, I thought well it’s not something that I will pursue but instead my interest grew more and more until I became in love with it. After I finished high school I went straight for my guiding course, which then took me to Mabula. Since then I’ve loved what I have been doing and Mabula has been my home ever since then.”

So when did you join Mabula?

“Hmmm I started at Mabula all the way back in 2006. I started as what used to be known as a “trainee guide”, which is basically where you start at the bottom once you complete your guiding course. After the in-house training, once you work hard enough, you get promoted to an “intermediate guide”. Based on your guest comments and your passion for what you do, you can get promoted to a senior guide. After I became senior guide, I later became the head guide. I became the Wildlife Safari Manager. Now, I’ve moved to the Reserve management side of the business where I am currently the Reserve Manger of the Lake Kyle side of the Reserve. At this stage I feel like I’m part and parcel—almost like the furniture of—Mabula!” [Laughs]

How do you think the Safari Industry has been impacted by COVID-19 and the lockdown?

“Very badly. The whole tourism industry has been very badly affected. The Safari industry in particular is what brings people out to the bush. The main thing that people want when they come to Mabula is to be out in the field and to enjoy the animals and the game viewing. That has also affected a lot of us. Luckily, while I’m still on duty because I’m on the Reserve management side of the things, the fellow guides that work for Mabula have been affected a lot. You can see when you talk to them—you can hear—that they miss the bush and they miss what they used to do. If it carries on like this with no openings [of the lockdown], I’m afraid that a lot people are going to lose their jobs—and they’re already losing them.”

What is the Community’s Role in Protecting Wildlife?

“I think the most important thing is to teach the community, because if the community doesn’t have the knowledge, they won’t protect the wildlife. I remember that, especially in the local communities, most people grow up seeing wildlife as another meat for them. It is our duty to make sure that we teach them about the value of wildlife and make sure that they learn about it. In fact, before Covid-19, we started a project where during special days—like Mandela day—we would invite the local schools to Mabula to give them educational tours so that they can learn about wildlife conservation. Then, when they go back to their parents and their communities, they could open their eyes to show how important wildlife is— more than just being meat— but its value in bringing tourists and growing our economy.”
The Theme for this year’s Mandela Day is #actionagainstpoverty. What do you think our industry is doing to tackle this challenge?

“I think that the industry is doing a lot because most of the people who are employed in the industry come from the local communities. These are people who really need those jobs, and they tremendously benefit from the industry as well. If you look at Mabula itself, the majority of the people who work here come from the local communities of the area. Few of them are those who come from far away because there haven’t been the skills for those jobs, but we have also started a project where we get people from the local community to train them as qualified guides who then become part of the Mabula family. We have started with four trainees at the moment. In that way, the community can see that the company is doing something for them. Tour groups who visit Mabula also visit the local communities and donate as well as also help build/renovate schools. That is also very important for the community because they can see that the industry as a whole is also doing good for the community. The more we do this, the more support we get from the community to protect our wildlife areas.”

Lastly, how do you think young people can honour the legacy of Madiba in our industry?

“I think that the most important thing is to teach them about nature. Teaching goes beyond books and education, but actually bringing them to nature so that they learn by being in the fields themselves. When you are physically involved, it’s a different learning experience and you can see the importance of that work better by actually being a part of it. Currently, from the way I see it, there is not much awareness within the youth of our local communities. It is very important to create long-term awareness. The more we get involved with the youth, the more awareness we can create by ensuring that it lasts. Unfortunately, we can’t bring any schools this year because of COVID-19, but it’s something that we do every year—to bring the youth to the fields to get them actively and physically involved with our work. The end result is that the people who live here in the local communities are very happy, and they have learnt a lot from the Reserve. In that way you can contribute a lot.”