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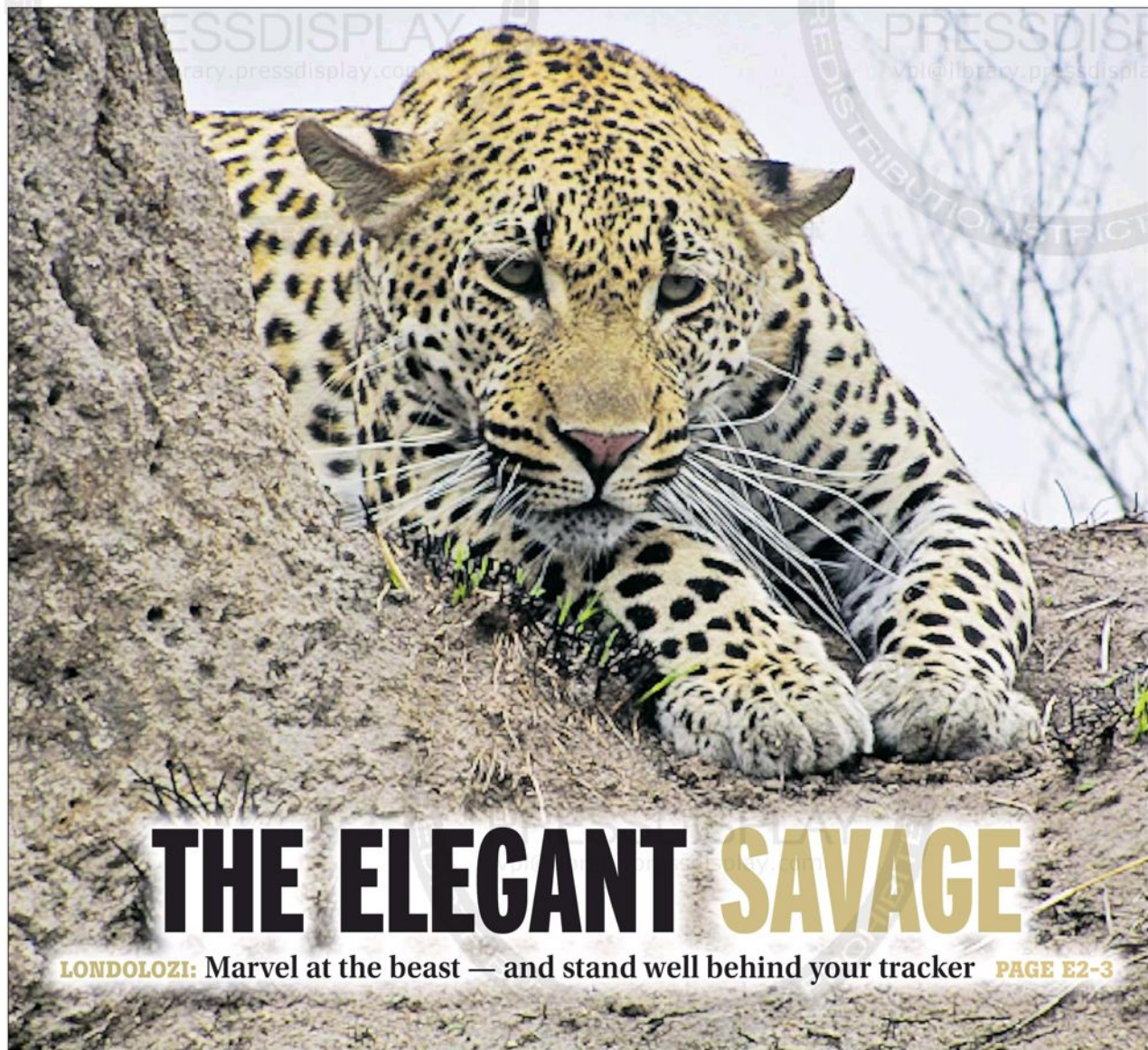
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SECTION E



THE ELEGANT SAVAGE

LONDOLOZI: Marvel at the beast — and stand well behind your tracker **PAGE E2-3**

In South Africa, following your tracker's signals is vital. I took particular note of his fist-in-the-air movement that meant 'freeze.' — SUBMITTED PHOTO



**Rick Cropp and
Barbara Braidwood**

FOR AS LITTLE AS ...

\$36 US

... tour Washington, DC, after dark when it's a different place. No crowds at major landmarks and good lighting hides the pits and zits of the city like good cosmetics. Zohery Tours (www.zohery.com) and Dr. Zohery (25 years experience) gave us a pleasant evening crawl of the city.

£57.50 (\$74)

... paint your own Delft Blue tile during a painting workshop at Royal Delft in Holland (www.royaldelft.com). Guidance from one of the painters plus materials (pencils, Delft Blue paint and the ceramics tile) are included.

\$65

... buy the Montreal Museums Pass (www.museesmontreal.org/site/museumspass.htm) for entry into 34 museums and attractions (such as the Environment Canada's Biosphere, the Château Ramezay and the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts) in the city, plus unlimited bus and metro travel. It is valid for three consecutive days.

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... experience Catalina Island's new two hour, 1.2 kilometre zipline tour (1-800-626-1496, www.visitcatalinaisland.com/avalon/tour-zipline.php) that drops from 152 metres to 18 metres above sea level with one run that is 335 metres long. Zip along five consecutive lines at up to 72 kilometres per hour and hear about Catalina Island, CA its wildlife and history at the stations.

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... fly to Hong Kong with Cathay Pacific Airways (www.cathay-pacific.ca). Other destinations including Manila, Bali, Hanoi, Jakarta, Bangkok, Singapore and more are priced from \$964. Departures are from Feb. 15 to May 24 or Sept. 4 to Nov. 30 but you must purchase tickets by Mar. 31.

Barbara Braidwood and Rick Cropp are Vancouver based writers.

Prices and availability subject to change



Elegance amid savagery the Varty family offers a wildlife experience that can only be described as enchanting — SUBMITTED PHOTO

Rooms with wildlife views

SAFARI: Londolozi game reserve puts its spotlight on nature

BY SHANNON MELNYK
FOR POSTMEDIA NEWS

I am instructed to stay behind the rifle.

The scalding African sun is no match for the heat generated by the sudden realization that there is nothing between me and the Dark Continent's most ruthless predators but a man with a skinny gun. I am walking the South African's Sapi Sands with Jeremiah Hambane, a Shangaan tracker. He exudes a quiet patience; a quality honed to master planet Earth's first science, or more of an inherent trait required of a traditional tribal life that includes juggling his three wives and 11 children.

His hand signals are simple enough to follow; I take particular note of the fist in the air, meaning "freeze". It's not hard to imagine doing so at the sudden sight of a 75

kilogram leopard in search of a mid-afternoon snack. But Hambane is at ease looking at vague wildlife prints and making mental calculations of those who have walked, stalked and prowled before us.

Without the assistance of the ancient knowledge of tracking, one could either wander the bush for an eternity lurking for what they call in safari lingo "the big five" (the lion, African elephant, Cape buffalo, leopard and rhinoceros) or, catch a creature off guard, which is not a great of ideas. It's why trackers are the most valuable assets in the bush, especially at the legendary 15,000 hectares Londolozi, known for its spirited population of the elusive leopard.

Londolozi comes by its name honestly; Zulu meaning "protector of all living things", South Africa's most history-rich game reserve has come full circle with its transforma-

tion from a bushveld hunting camp almost a century ago — to one of the world's most sought after ecotourism destinations today.

The land has been held for generations by the Varty family, whose financial struggle to keep their beloved farm turned them into what should be characters in an epic Hollywood film. The Vartys became hosts to presidents and princesses, sacrificing wild beasts at the mercy of the hunter's gun. Game became gander for gazing and a five-star luxury safari experience for the wild at heart ensued. Thirty-five years later, the Vartys have accomplished their dream of creating a blueprint for modern day conservation and social enterprise in South Africa. Londolozi and its message of partnership between people and wildlife have received high praise for their efforts, the most notable com-

ing from Nelson Mandela who said: "there I saw people of all races living in harmony amid the beauty that Mother Nature offers. Londolozi represents a model of the dream I cherish for the future of nature preservation in our country."

Elegant offerings amid the savagery in this vast wilderness offers an experience that can only be described as enchanting. Five base camps offer meditative luxury: the rustic Ralph Laurenesque feel of the Pioneer Camp or the designer's dream of a Granite Suite. The magic of these comforts is that they'll never keep you from remembering precisely where you are. Your private plunge pool may be accidentally equipped with baboons eyeing your Amarula cocktail, enjoying a succulent oxtail dinner may include the sight of an elephant family feeding over the horizon.

And because the fences only really keep the elephants out of the camps, there is the routine rule that guests must call for a security escort come nightfall in order to move about the camp in safety. Although masters of the luxury safari experience, one gets the impression the Vartys are not hoteliers, but rather pioneers willing you to fall in love with the land as much as they have. Their employment of the tribal communities that share the region makes for a family environment that includes the Shangaan people, who make an integral contribution to the Londolozi experience by way of their warm and inclusive style, eagerness to share in their culture and innate skills in the bush.

In addition to the cardiac-inducing opportunities for sighting the big five, every five steps provide Hambane with ways to show the utility of the plant life that serve his people in lieu of pharmacies, grocers and churches. He pulls from the ground the leaves of Devil's thorn and rubs them between his fingers with some of the water from his canteen; a gooey shampoo appears, as well as what Hambane explains is used as a birthing lubricant. We walk another 50 meters and meet with a Buffalo thorn adorned with daunting spikes. Buffalo, because those are precisely the creatures that back into this bush to cover their rear in the event of a lion pursuit. Hambane adds that the dead are buried with these branches to help transport the spirit: the spikes pointing up for the direction of the new journey, and the spikes pointing down to the earth so as not to forget the spirit's humble beginnings. We also see a hearty Tambuti tree, with its precious rare wood used for enviable, expensive furniture, but also highly poisonous, emitting toxic fumes if burned. Hambane mentions it's advantageous, however, for fishing as it renders fish blind. As I'm walking, I can't help but notice all the gargantuan elephant dung I'm artfully avoiding. Hambane picks up a massive patty and grins. "We love to burn this ... sniff this," he says, "beautiful remedy for headaches and mosquitoes."

In a kaleidoscope of swarming burnets, I return to camp for rosbos and sweets in hand-wringing anticipation of a game drive scheduled at dusk. The venture includes Ranger Graham Marais and Tracker Like Gumede, this time in a specialized Land Rover that can mow down the thickest of brush. Somehow I understand I'm about to see things that will impact the rest of my days as Gumede climbs aboard his perch at the front. It's elevated and protrudes from the rest. While he looks suspiciously like a hood ornament, he is anything but. As we set off against the setting sun, Gumede immediately engages all five senses to communicate to Marais just how far we are from the trail of a hungry leopard. It's not long before he hops

Getting there:

Londolozi is located in the Sabi Sand Reserve next to Kruger National Park. www.londolozi.com

Driving: Londolozi is a five-hour drive from Johannesburg.

Flying: South African Airways from Johannesburg, Durban or Cape Town to Kruger Mpumalanga International Airport in Nelspruit. Request a two-hour ground transfer to Londolozi or connect on Federal Air for a 20-minute flight to the Reserve.

out and traces a vague print in the sand. He shows the outline with his finger, and I marvel at how one could spot this nothingness from a moving vehicle. He further asserts it's a male. A few further steps deep in concentration, he pinches the ground and puts the sand to his face. Gumede quietly announces the leopard was here about 10 minutes ago. How does he know this, I wonder aloud to Ranger Marais. "He found his urine. Fresh. The smell of popcorn." I am left to wonder if he is pulling my city slicker leg.

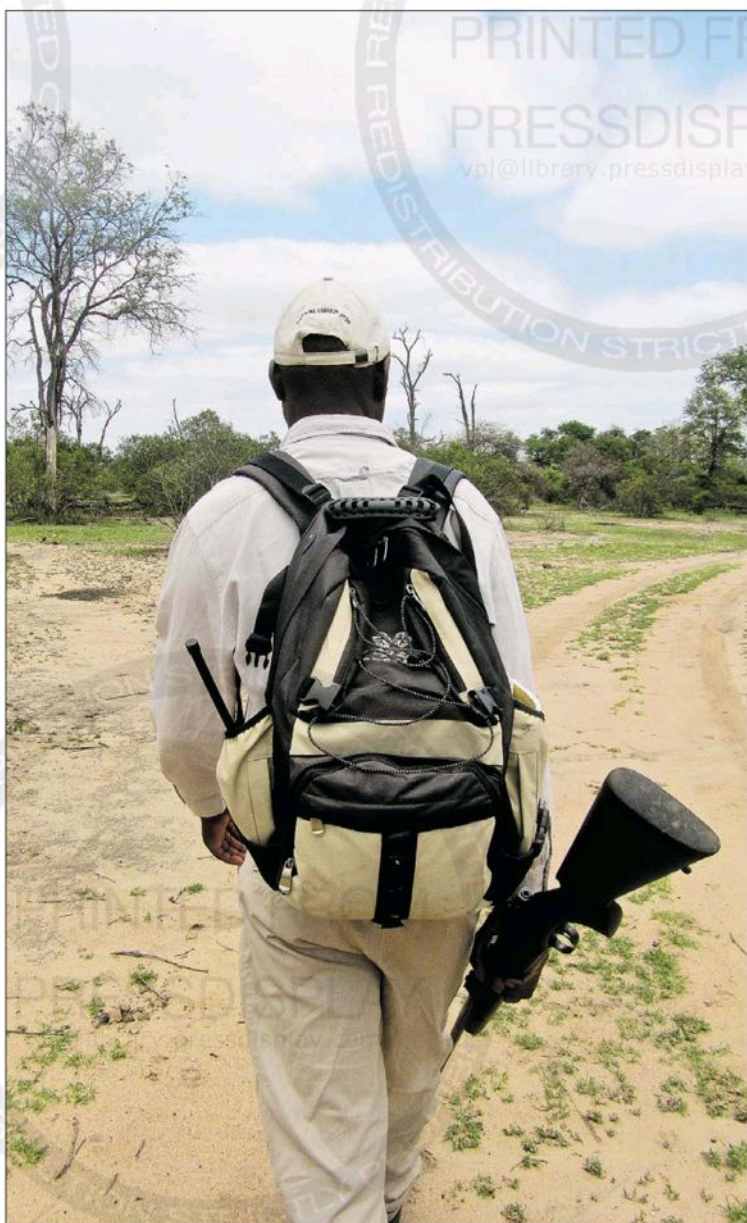
"FAMBA," Gumede commands in Zulu. Move.

Apparently not. We are now at high rocky speeds to catch up with the stealth and opportunistic hunter. My heart comes to a screeching halt along with the Rover as we see him, his spotted majesty moving quickly with a heavy appetite and knowledge of impales nearby. The sun is setting and he is pacing nervously about, annoyed with a hyena that is wryly tagging along, hopeful of intercepting his kill. As the hyena greedily bobs around, the leopard springs up a tree and waits for him to lose his scent so he can hunt in peace. We approach, and I am aghast at our proximity to this panting, muscled set of fangs.

Patience is our reward. The hyena gives up and the leopard leaps down to stalk his prey. We give chase and what follows is an exhilarating privilege filled with fear and gratitude. We don't speak. I realize my face reveals the same awe as these gentlemen's who spend their entire lives among these beasts; this miracle, it never leaves them.

We return to camp, in the black of night. We are greeted by the rest of the Londolozi family, awash in the glow of 100 candles and one million stars in the sandy Boma of the bushveld. We dine on hearty African cuisine atop white linen amid some of the finest storytellers I've ever met. Satiated and stunned, a guard escorts me to my luxe cabin. I sit on the edge of my bed, overwhelmed by the day and the deafening and murderous cries of lions, rhinos and undetectable prey battling it out for one more day on this planet — all outside my sliding door equipped with an innocent latch. I look down at my oozing legs — swollen and infected from the bites of insects better left a mystery. Tonight, I say to myself, I'm the happiest I've ever been.

"There I saw people of all races living in harmony amid the beauty that Mother Nature offers. Londolozi represents a model of the dream I cherish for the future of nature preservation in our country." — Nelson Mandela



Tracker Like Gumede instinctively picks up on the telltale signs that wildlife are nearby or not, like hoofprints in the sand and urine trails. — SUBMITTED PHOTO