

The Elephant Managers Association

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After hankering for it since *Heart of Darkness* in the Eleventh Grade, I'm finally going to Africa. Somewhere over the Congo, my first African sunrise looks like any other from an airplane: sublime. Looking down upon the world, the distribution of dark and light travels across the globe unevenly, with the upper and nether regions receiving meager allotments of day and night as seasonally appropriate and things pretty much ever equal at the equator. Now, wintertime, and daylight is fat behind and skinny ahead – a yin to the yang of night.

Botswana's Okavango Delta is out of the way, multiplied. One must first travel the length of the African continent, alighting at Johannesburg in the Republic of South Africa. Air Botswana takes you from the RSA to the town of Maun (they rhyme), gateway to the Okavango. There you can choose between a long, bumpy ride in a 4x4 or a short, bumpy ride in a single-engine plane-let. I resign myself to visions of a none-too-sober pilot instructing me to "take the stick" in midair as he crawls out to bang the engine back to life. Unexpectedly, however, I am expected, and met at the airport accordingly, by Sandi Groves. She runs Grey Matters, a Delta-based tourism operation, with her husband Doug and 1.2 gregarious *Loxodonta africana*, Jabu, Thembi and Morula.

Jabu, short for Jabulani (“happiness” in Zulu) was born in 1986 in Kruger National Park. He’s a genial fellow with a twinkle in his eye whose monolithic size is matched by a massive sense of calm, which quickly puts at ease all who meet him. Doug refers to Thembi as a “princess”; Sandi calls her other names upon occasion and thinks she’s spoiled rotten. Her name is an abbreviation of Tembikile (“trust”) and she is the smallest of the three, though the same age as Jabu. Thembi, highly strung and outgoing, seems keen on attention and volunteers an impressive array of behaviors accordingly. Morula has the head of an elephant and the ears of an elephant, but a different elephant. She’s instantly recognizable by those large ears, and an idiosyncratic charisma that makes her many folks’ favorite.

Courtesy of Grey Matters, visitors to photo safari camps in the northeastern Okavango are offered a one-of-a-kind opportunity: to meet, interact and walk with the three elephants on a leisurely four-hour trek through the Botswana bush (with photo op stops aplenty) culminating in a picnic lunch for elephants and guests alike beneath a shady grove.

In addition, the Groves efforts have borne the Living With Elephants Foundation. It brings village, school- and street kids from the surrounding area out for experiences similar to the guests’, plus overnight stays, lessons in mitigating human-elephant conflict and the chance to learn about jobs in tourism. Even in Botswana, elephants have a big “wow factor” for many kids, but in a land where many have lost one or both parents to AIDS and neglect, many young visitors are just grateful for the attention.

Living With Elephants’ mission to “promote harmonious relationships between elephants and people” sounds like just the ticket on an increasingly crowded continent; Sandi’s presence, and

offer of a ride to Grey Matters' base camp in the heart of the Delta, is certainly a beacon of hope in the crowded Maun Airport. Baggage claim is full of burly rich guys with skinny Batswana carrying their multiple gun cases. I start having third thoughts about intellectual justifications of sport hunting in the name of conservation.

En route to the camp, in Sandi's 2004 Toyota Land Cruiser, we see more wildlife than in a whole afternoon of Animal Planet: lions, giraffe and baboons, oh my. We're definitely not in Kansas anymore. Plus wild elephants by the dozen, of course – the first I've ever seen – including cute-as-a-bug's-ear, brand-new calves. Waving a welcome as we pull off the track from Maun and into a sandy driveway is Douglas Groves.

Raised in Oregon and ensconced in southern Africa since 1988, Doug is a lanky, boyish 51, and radiates an adolescent energy one does not habitually associate with gruff-but-lovable elephant people. Doug's composed as they come when it counts, though. Out with the trio one afternoon, Doug startles a solitary lion. The cat comes close and Doug calls Jabu lackadaisically, like it's "oh, not this again". The three spin, double back and *charge*. The lion leaves. Further foraging follows.

"I am family," he says by way of explanation.

It is Doug's affinity for animals that's taken him on a journey from a childhood of snakes and spiders to full herd member status among the animals that have become the biggest part of his life thus far. Fifteen years at elephant facilities along the West Coast of the United States scored him a job transporting and training four elephants to South Africa for a film production in the Knysna

area, *Circles in a Forest*. Even better than the film itself was the fact that, after shooting wrapped, its elephants were to be granted a permanent home on the continent of their birth. Said home was provided by Karkloof Falls Nature Reserve, near the eastern coast of southern Africa. It was there Doug met and began the process of working with Jabulani and Tembegile – a process that would continue into the next century.

Sandi, meanwhile, was studying zoology and botany at Natal University and volunteering weekends at the reserve when she met Jabu and Thembi, then four years of age, along with their caretaker. She describes herself as “enchanted”. After Doug had a near-fatal encounter with a rhino, he and Sandi reflected upon their next step, briefly considered nine-to-fives and tropical fish, and ultimately committed to a future together – one including elephants as well.

The following year, the park’s owner opted for a change of direction and it was re-christened as Game Valley. Apparently there was no place in the valley for elephants, and he agreed to sell Jabu and Thembi to Sandi and Doug – provided it was at a profit (the pair was now trained, after all) and find them a new place to live. Such was provided by Glen Afric, a farm between Johannesburg and Pretoria, which the Groves used as a basis for freelance film and television work; projects included the popular series *Okavango*. On the show, Jabu played a young bull suffering from a mystery ailment. In the end, it’s revealed that he’s just lovesick for Thembi – the vet diagnoses a “broken heart”.

Further films followed, but Doug had a dream. He dreamed of his elephants supporting themselves via ecotourism, as in Asia, not amidst spectacle or by carrying tourists on their backs, but by educating them, as ambassadors for conservation. Apartheid-era South Africa, however,

was a pariah nation by the early 1990's, and tourists stayed away in droves. As Doug and Sandi mulled their options, long days of filming, far from home, were beginning to take their toll on all concerned.

As he raised his trunk to drink one afternoon, and without preamble, Jabu's eyes rolled back in his head and the elephant who's "like a son" to Doug sank into convulsions. It was several seconds until Jabu struggled to his feet and dragged himself, drained, to lean against a shady tree, but to Doug it seemed an eternity. Attendant on the episode was a heavy drainage of pus from the elephant's ear – over the years vets and MD's have speculated a severe infection could cause convulsions. Thankfully, the presenting symptoms have never recurred.

Still, Jabu's health, and the toll his loss would take on Thembi, posed looming questions in Sandi and Doug's lives. They set about making enquiries, with an eye towards adding a new member to their most unusual herd, a misfit elephant who needed them as much as they now seemed to need him or her.

More than 300 miles away, by a gambling casino in an ancient volcanic crater, her nose in a picnic basket and staring down the barrel of a gun, she awaited them.

Mary entered the world at the south end of Southern Rhodesia in 1977. She spent her infancy, well tended and secure, among a network of kin. At or about the age of two, her mother and extended family were shot down before her eyes. She and a male cousin were sent to live with a family who didn't know much about raising youngsters, and the two received free rein, getting up to whatever antics they could devise and, predictably, growing increasingly errant. Delinquency

got deadly when Mary's pathologically precocious partner in crime sent someone to the cemetery at the tender age of ten. A drastic decision developed, and the cousin was castrated.

He went by the name of Zorba, and after an extended convalescence it became abundantly clear his aggressive temperament had mellowed not one bit. Borakalalo, a newly carved out game reserve near notorious Sun City, South Africa, let it be known they needed a pair of elephants. The family, at this point, was all-too-happy to oblige by sending Zorba and Mary. Introductions of mature bulls among orphaned sub-adult populations in Pilanesberg and Umfolozi-Hluhluwe have proven successful in alleviating hooliganism among young males, but Zorba hadn't any such influence in his life. He had no sooner settled in than he began to test his strength against Borakalalo's rare white rhinoceroses, eventually killing seven of them.

Derek Albertson spent a great deal of time in the park when the pair resided there, and became quite familiar with their ongoing tendency towards mischief. "There's this fisherman by Klipovoor Dam," he recalls. "Big Afrikaans, cooler box full of beer. His wife's in the tent watching her soapies. He gets a poke on the shoulder, thinks it's her, turns around... and there's Zorba and Mary. He waddles to the middle of the lake, which is only about a meter deep, shouting for her. Now she comes out, spies the ellies crushing beer from the cans in the cooler, and runs back in, yelling at him to watch out for hippos and crocodiles."

The next he heard, Zorba had been shot for tipping over a safari guide's car, plus rhinocide and assorted crimes against pic-inic baskets. As far as Derek knew, Mary had been killed too.

When next he saw her she was living with the Groves, and was called Morula.

Shortly after her acquisition, an opportunity presented itself to realize Doug's vision of minimal-impact elephant tourism. Randall Moore had recently begun his elephant ride operation in the Okavango Delta. A photo safari operator invited Doug to Botswana to develop a competing concept, which he happened to have at the ready. Now he had but to relocate his family – elephants included. The move was filmed in its entirety and included in a Discovery Channel feature, *A Herd of Their Own*.

Once in Botswana, Sandi and Doug had to make a fresh start from virtually nothing. They camped wild, not far (and a world away) from their premium-paying safari camp guests. Water for drinking and bathing was collected from a nearby swamp. Staff consisted of two individuals who had never before worked with elephants. Seasonal floods meant they relocated to higher ground. Over the years, the Groves have added a well point, water tank and wood-fired water heater. There's a secure enclosure for the elephants now, where they are when they aren't foraging from dawn to dusk, and hundreds make a special trip to meet the trio each year. Additional staff now numbers five local handlers and keepers.

I always thought the palette of sunrise and sunset in the States owed mostly to pollution. Savoring the infinite reds, purples and yellows of a pristine Delta dawn to the sound of Radio Botswana's 6:00 AM cowbells, I see I am mistaken. As Jabu jostles a jackpot of nuts from a fan palm, and Thembi and Morula make quick work of his harvest, Doug articulates the words inscribed in the heart of many I've met working alongside elephants on five continents: "They are the driving force in my life."

Longevity runs in the family – Doug recently rode elephants and fought fires with his 76 year-old father – but he knows the three may outlive him by more than twenty years, remaining spry as his body begins to betray him. With this in mind, he and Sandi have established the Thembi Trust, sort of a pension fund for the whole herd. Yet Doug hopes his legacy may stretch further still.

Enlisting the enormous emotive energy of his proboscidean pals, Doug would like to broaden the scope of his educational endeavors. “Using a cross-cultural, inter-species approach, we hope to inspire and empower our guests, and especially student visitors, to assume responsibility for their personal and planetary health and happiness, to grant them ownership of their futures by learning to choose a path based upon universal principles and personal ethics, not short-term gratification.” He also has visions of an elephant bed and breakfast for guests, and a science and research center for all – once he knows his elephants’ futures are secure.

And Doug always keeps one eye open for an individual of passion and commitment to carry on his vision once he’s gone.

Any takers?

You can learn more about Jabu, Thembi and Morula at <http://www.livingwithelephants.org>.