

## JOINING THE HERD - ONE GUEST'S PERSPECTIVE

I have been an "elephant person" for longer than I can remember. My mother tells me that a small lead elephant given to me by my grandfather when I was very small became my favourite toy, followed by a felt version made by her for my next birthday. Many, many years later, in 1987, my first trip to Africa - to the Kenyan locations of the film "Out Of Africa" - provided spectacular lion sightings but only distant elephants. My first elephant was a huge one-tusked bull who walked past our vehicle in Tanzania's Ngorongoro Crater close enough for me to smell him. That was in 1990 during a once-in-a-lifetime trip from Khartoum to Victoria Falls in a 1944 built Catalina amphibious plane. Later that same trip we landed on the Chobe River at Kasane (no airport there in those days). During our one game drive in the park that evening I saw more elephants than I had ever seen before. In the early hours of the next morning, standing beneath a tree watching three elephants browsing just outside camp with tusks gleaming silver in the light of the full moon, I fell in love with Botswana and with its magnificent elephants. I would be back.

Since then I have had many remarkable encounters with elephants in the wild. Watching from a vehicle in the Chobe surrounded by elephants digging for minerals as a tiny calf came right up to my door and two aunties guided him away with gentle trunks around his body. Sitting on a fallen tree close to the Nogatsaa water hole as the biggest, wrinkliest old bulls I had ever seen came to drink. Travelling by small boat on the Chobe River watching elephants drinking, swimming and at play and losing count at over 400. I have visited the well-known elephant families and the big tuskers of Amoboseli, Kenya. I have helped with a study of the desert dwelling elephants of Namibia. In the mid 1990s I was privileged to take part in a study of elephant behaviour in Zimbabwe's Hwange National Park where I learned how to identify and record individual elephants, how to record behaviour at waterholes and what the elephants were eating (over 1500 Acacia erioloba seeds in one pile of dung was a notable example). So when I read about "Grey Matters" in the Bradt Guide to Botswana some time in 2006 I knew that I had to visit them.

February 21st 2007 was the memorable day that I first met Doug, Sandi, Jabu, Thembi and Morula. After an early breakfast at Stanley's Camp I arrived at the meeting place with four other guests. Seeing the elephants approaching I excitedly said to our driver "Oh look, that must be Jabu in front, and is that Thembi next and Morula behind her?" "Yes", he said, "have you been before?" I hadn't, but I had been reading about the elephants on the website!

Sandi met us and went through the safety guidelines to be followed during our time with the elephants, who had gone with Doug to browse in a nearby clump of trees. Then we followed the elephants and met Doug, who introduced us to the kindly, patient, magnificent Jabulani and told us his story. No prizes for guessing who was the first to feel his trunk and put their arms around his left foreleg. So began a magical few hours with these very special elephants.

I had not known exactly what to expect. What I found was that Doug had trained the trio to produce aspects of natural elephant behaviour, such as holding out their ears, when he asked them to. After each behaviour his words "All right" told them that they could finish and then they received a reward. One thing I had been particularly hoping for was to have the chance to hear up close and see some of the elephant vocalisations that I had heard so often in the wild. I was amazed that Doug had trained Jabu and Thembi to produce some of these on command. To be able to hold my palms against Thembi's forehead to feel the vibrations while she rumbled and to stand right next to Jabu while he leaned back and blasted a trumpeting sound was simply wonderful. Having spent hours watching elephants eating and drinking in the wild

in the hopes of seeing inside their mouths I was thrilled that Thembi would open her mouth and allow Doug to show us her teeth and tongue. I was even more surprised that even flash photography did not phase her.

Having read on the website about Morula's traumatic early life I had been expecting to find a rather shy elephant. It is a credit to Doug and Sandi that she is so happy and above all so trusting. She will walk with her trunk on your shoulder and she is the one who welcomes guests into the herd with a gentle "kiss" on the cheek (after which I only pretended to wipe my cheek with the towel offered by our driver).

It's difficult to pick a most memorable moment. It may be cheeky Thembi scratching her eye with the end of her trunk to make herself the centre of attention. It may be Morula placing the end of her trunk in the palm of my hand without being asked. It may be the thrill of being allowed to stand in amongst the trio just like Doug and Sandi had done. But perhaps most of all it would be walking beside Jabu and then, at Doug's invitation, walking ahead of him and holding out my right hand. Then at Doug's softly spoken command "Jabu beak" the feel of the end of Jabu's trunk in my hand as we walked. Later "Jabu all right" and the trunk was gone, but the memory will remain for ever. Walking hand in trunk with this wonderful elephant was deeply and profoundly moving.

After the first morning's picnic lunch I was so glad that I had already arranged to go back again the next day. At the end of my second visit the next morning Doug invited me to give Jabu one last hug before I left - "He likes hugs" Doug said. A long time ago when I worked with horses I used to end the day with my hands smelling of horses. Now I went back to camp with the smell of elephant on my hands - and left them unwashed for as long as I could!

By chance in my tent at Stanley's Camp was the August 2006 issue of "Africa Geographic" magazine in which there was an article about elephant back safaris - "On The Back Of Giants". Included in this was a photograph of a guest having her hat taken off, or put on, by Thembi. The caption read "Some operators do not ride their elephants, but instead offer 'interactions' where guests may touch, feed and sometimes walk with the animals. Those behind a campaign to ban elephant back safaris, however, are equally against the use of elephants in this way." Grey Matters was not mentioned and in fact the article was entirely about organisations that offer elephant riding.

I was horrified to read about the capturing of 7 to 16 year old elephants for training for elephant back safaris. However I would be the first to reassure anyone thinking of visiting Grey Matters that here the elephants always come first. Doug has trained them to produce only natural aspects of behaviour on command. Everything he asked them to do while I was there was behaviour that I have observed for myself in the wild both before and after my visit. Thembi's hat trick shown in the article reflects the way that young elephants sometimes place a bit of browse on their heads, proof of which can be found in a photograph in the book "African Elephants" by Clive Walker and Nigel Dennis. Most importantly guests visiting Grey Matters do not feed the elephants. For elephants to associate guests with food would totally ruin any possibility of natural interaction. (An example of this with a different species was Giraffe Manor in Kenya when I visited it in 1987. Visitors fed the giraffes and consequently the animals were only interested in food. At least one giraffe became exceedingly bad tempered when the food ran out.) At Grey Matters correct behaviour is rewarded with horse-type nuts or, as a special treat, an onion given only by Doug or Sandi, and never given by visitors.

On the day that I left Stanley's Camp my transfer to the next camp by small plane was delayed by an hour. When we drove to the airstrip for the second time I saw the Groves and the elephants on a day off. Jabu was standing a little way apart eating with one of the elephant handlers sitting in the grass not far away. Thembi was standing with Morula lying relaxed at her feet while Doug and Sandi were sitting in the shade close by. In my mind I was there for a moment next to Sandi and Doug, just watching the elephants being elephants. Then it was back to earth and I gave a final wave as we drove on to meet the plane that would take me on to the next part of my trip. The pilot asked me which camp I had come from. When I said Stanley's and mentioned the elephants he asked "Are those the ones that dance?". What could I do but laugh!

That night I dreamed that I was with the trio when *Acacia erioloba* was in pod. Jabu pushed a tree with his forehead, making the pods rain down on me and the other elephants.

Now, back in the UK and returned to the stressful world of my 'day job', I treasure the memories of my magical time with Jabu, Thembi, Morula, Doug and Sandi. I feel part of a wonderful, remarkable extended family, a family that includes three very special elephants. In some small way I do indeed feel part of the herd. Already I am saving again and, as I said to myself in the moonlight that night in the Chobe in 1990, I will be back.

Rebecca P Over  
United Kingdom  
March 2007.