

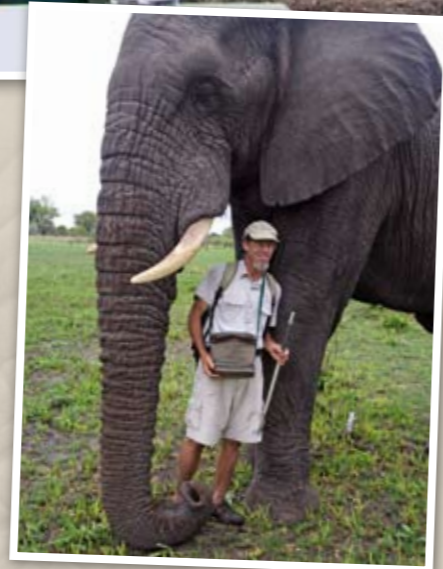


ALL PHOTOS BY EMMA GREGG

# An elephant at my table



What's it like to stand so close to an elephant that you can see every hair on its trunk? In Botswana, a well-established project encourages local children and interested visitors to meet elephants on intimate terms. **Emma Gregg** investigates.



Above: Doug Groves with Jabu, the bull elephant  
Top: One more for lunch: Jabu looks for a chair his size



**H**ave you ever felt the texture of an elephant's armpit, or stared closely at the surface of its back teeth? Have you wondered whether the joints in its legs should be termed knees, elbows, wrists or ankles, or considered that its trunk is, on the inside, not one tube but two, since those sticky-looking nostrils lead to twin nasal passages which go all the way up? Did you know that an elephant's front footprints are round, while its back footprints are more oval in shape? Have you any idea how much dung the average healthy bull deposits in a day – or how much ejaculate he produces in the course of a minute-long session of elephant passion?

Along with cats and dogs, lions, tigers and bears, elephants are familiar to us from babyhood – but why is it that so many of us just take them for granted?

## Doug is an unlikely-looking latter day Doolittle, but he talks to his animals a great deal. And they talk back

Doug Groves of Grey Matters, a Botswana-based company that runs the Living with Elephants Foundation, has a deeper concern – many children growing up in rural Botswana are positively fearful of elephants, convinced they're at best malevolent and in extreme cases, killers. For people living in close proximity to wild animals, it's an uncomfortable misunderstanding, and one he's keen to address.

"Our goal is to encourage harmonious relationships between people and elephants," says Doug. "We identify circumstances in which conflict between people and wildlife can arise, and look for solutions through discussion and educational programmes. Most of Africa's elephants live outside protected wildlife areas, and achieving peaceful coexistence between them and the human community can be a challenge. But I believe that if kids are given an understanding of elephants, they're less likely to grow up to be poachers."

Doug, an American zoologist whose career with the world's mightiest land mammals began in Californian zoos, has three young adult African elephants in his care: Jabu, Thembi and Morula. All three were orphaned by culling operations, Jabu and Thembi in Kruger Park and Morula in Zimbabwe. Jabu, the bull, and Thembi were traumatised two-year-olds when Doug adopted them; Morula was an unwanted pet. The trio now live in a bush enclosure (safe but not shackled) and have an ambassadorial role, demonstrating

the essence of 'elephant-ness' to the groups of schoolchildren from nearby communities who are invited to take part in Doug's educational sessions.

Anyone holidaying in the region can book a meet-the-elephants session, too. To find out more, I join Doug and his three charges on their home patch, a private concession close to the southern border of the Moremi Game Reserve in northern Botswana.

We meet in open bush next to a thicket of tasty-looking trees. Jabu, Thembi and Morula are munching nearby. Doug, a small, wiry figure in battered khakis, shouldering a large satchel stuffed with elephant treats, is an unlikely-looking latter day Doolittle – but he talks to his animals a great deal. And they talk back. On command (issued in firm but gentle conversational tones) they approach one by one; on a signal each one vocalises a greeting. "Jabu, ears", says Doug, and Jabu immediately spreads his ears wide. "Jabu, lift", says Doug, and Jabu lifts his considerable trunk.

It's immediately apparent that this is going to be an interactive session. We're invited forward to examine each elephant closely. We stroke their dusty flanks and smooth ivory, feel the softness of the skin between foreleg and belly, peer into their mouths, marvel at the improbably heavy tube of spiralling muscle that is the trunk. We're shown the gnarly soles of their feet, designed for grip and to mould themselves over any roughness in the terrain so that they can walk with near-silent steps. And the elephants obligingly demonstrate their vocal range, from trumpeting (a sound which is actually snorted rather than voiced) to rumbling.

Then it's time for a stroll. We set off together, each of us taking it in turns to walk just ahead of gang-leader Jabu so that he can drape the end of his trunk over a human shoulder or rest it in somebody's hand as we amble through palm-dotted grassland. As a way to experience the bush, it's a charming variation on taking the dogs for a walk.

"I'm not interested in having people ride these elephants," says Doug. "Do that, and you change the relationship between person and elephant completely. Walking beside them we're interacting with them on much more equal terms." I can see what he means, as Morula amuses herself by grabbing bundles of succulent grass and Jabu 'borrows' people's hats.

After about an hour and a half we come across a dappled glade where lunch has been spread out on folding tables. >>

### Plan your trip

To meet Doug's elephants, you need to base yourself at one of two luxury bush retreats, Stanley's Camp or its smaller, younger sister, Baines' Camp ([www.sanctuarylodges.com](http://www.sanctuarylodges.com)). While Stanley's offers a classic Botswanan safari experience – think roomy tents on timber platforms, days driving through pristine bush and fireside dinners around a large camp table – a stay at Baines' is more intimate and individual. Each of the five suites at Baines' has a dreamy four-poster and a private deck overlooking a small lagoon with a resident hippo; on warm, dry nights your bed can be wheeled out onto the deck to let you sleep under the stars. There are individual touches in the construction of the camp, too: the walls are partly made from old drinks cans, gathered in a massive community clear-up. Both camps entertain their guests with game drives and mokoro trips, and offer the Living With Elephants Foundation's Elephant Activity ([www.livingwiththeelephants.org](http://www.livingwiththeelephants.org)) as an optional extra.

Top left: Doug shows us the two "fingers" at the end of the African elephant's trunk; Asian elephants only have one  
Top right: Jabu's mighty foot



Friend for life: the trio welcome a new member into their herd



Walk this way: accompanying Jabu, Thembi and Morula on a stroll

Jabu, Thembi and Morula are sent off to forage nearby while we settled down to relax, and Doug tells us about the time that the trio rescued him from a perilous situation. “As I was walking alone beside a dense clump of trees I unknowingly disturbed a young male lion. He was furious and came at me, snarling. But the elephants charged him, shoulder to shoulder, heads down, trunks tucked up, and the lion turned tail. They carried on chasing him, trumpeting like mad. Who knows what might have happened if they hadn’t intervened. They probably saved my life.”

Doug and his wife Sandi have been training up a small team of Botswanan assistants in elephant husbandry. “I know that our little herd can never be rehabilitated into the wild,” says Doug, “and they’re likely to outlive Sandi and me. So I have a responsibility on my shoulders. They mean as much to me as family and I have to be sure that they will be cared for once I’m gone.”

Such is the charisma of the trio that it seems unlikely that they’ll ever find themselves short of friends and benefactors. Jabu, having finished his lunch, makes an appearance at our table and poses for photographs with all the confidence of a film star.

Later we drop in on Doug once again as he conducts one of his educational sessions. The crowd of kids are rapt, squealing with delight when one small girl is brave enough to step forward to have Jabu relax his long trunk onto her head. The whole assembly then doubles up in hysterical laughter when Jabu gives the wide-eyed girl a bristly, slobbery elephant kiss. This elephant will go far. 🐘

■ Emma Gregg travelled to Botswana with Abercrombie and Kent ([www.abercrombiekent.co.uk](http://www.abercrombiekent.co.uk)).



Outdoor classroom: Doug leads an educational session for local schoolchildren

“If kids are given an understanding of elephants, they’re less likely to grow up to be poachers” Doug Groves

### The knowledge: *Loxodonta africana*

- An elephant’s natural lifespan in the wild is up to 65 years – perhaps this is why they’re credited with such long memories
- An adult male measures up to 4m at the shoulder and 7.5m in length and weighs up to 7500kg – but this is just one thirtieth of the weight of the world’s largest mammal, the blue whale
- Elephants are one of the few animals which continue to grow in bulk throughout their lifetimes
- Elephants can run at a speed of 40km/h
- In a tussle between an elephant and a rhino over drinking rights, the rhino is likely to come off worse – an elephant is capable of killing a rhino with its tusks
- Elephants are confident swimmers
- An elephant’s trunk is a boneless nose made of heavy, helical muscle; it’s used for communication, feeding, picking up objects and liquids, smelling and touching
- When drinking, an elephant can suck up 10-12 litres of water into its trunk at once and squirt it into its mouth
- The tip of the trunk is highly dexterous and can pick up individual berries
- An elephant crossing deep water will use its trunk as a snorkel
- Both males and females normally have tusks (enlarged incisor teeth), though some populations are tuskless due to genetic abnormalities
- Tusks continue to grow throughout an elephant’s life so a broken tusk will regrow; the points are constantly worn, honed and sharpened by abrasion
- Elephants have five toes on each foot, which they drag slightly when walking – this is how you can tell from an elephant’s tracks which direction it was moving
- When an elephant flaps its ears sharply, it’s probably angry, but when it flaps them rhythmically, it’s normally trying to cool off or shoo away irritating insects
- A single elephant can eat 200-400kg of vegetation per day and eliminate around 155kg of dung in a 24 hour period, at intervals of around 1.5 hours
- Most of the elephant’s diverse diet passes through undigested, so their dung is full of twigs, fruit, seeds, bark, leaves and pods which are sometimes scavenged by other animals and birds
- At least one third of the tree species in Central Africa depend on their seeds passing through the digestive tract of the forest elephant (*Loxodonta africana cyclotis*) before they can germinate
- Mating typically lasts less than a minute; the bull produces of 1.5 litres of ejaculate