

Walking with Elephants

By a Stanley's Camp guest

Standing over two metres high at the shoulder, Jabulani – known as Jabu for short – is a massive African elephant bull, carrying a pair of impressive ivory tusks and weighing more than three tons. A mere flick of his heavy trunk would be enough to disable or kill a human, yet now he stands still and quiet, his trunk questing over the face of his adopted Doug Groves, his adopted ‘father’, in infinite gentleness, his liquid eyes blinking in slow tranquillity.

Doug met Jabu and his herd-mate Thembi in 1988, they were two-year-old calves, orphaned in a culling operation in South Africa’s Kruger National Park. Like any young children who had seen their extended family violently executed, they were emotionally traumatized and insecure, desperately in need of a stable and structured family to make sure they avoided the delinquent behaviour frequently seen in young elephants of their circumstances. With fifteen years’ experience as an animal trainer in the USA, and a passionate love of elephants, Doug was perfectly qualified to take on the task. With elephants living to well over seventy years old, Doug was aware that by taking on Jabu and Thembi’s welfare, he was making a commitment that went even beyond his own lifetime. A few years later this responsibility deepened even further when he was asked to adopt Marula, a highly-strung and emotionally needy young elephant also orphaned in a culling operation.

Doug’s wife, Sandi, shares his commitment to caring for the trio, and the couple and their ‘herd’ have now found a home in a community concession area among the swamps and floodplains of the Okavango Delta. Here the elephants have blossomed from vulnerable children into admirably well-adjusted teenagers, and have become the ambassadors for Living With Elephants, an education-based conservation programme. Under the Living With Elephants project, small groups of local children are invited to meet the three elephants in Doug’s care, to see them close up, learn about their lives and even to touch them. A unique understanding is thus established, helping to resolve the tensions between elephants and the rural villagers who see them as a threat to their crops.

Living With Elephants also allows visitors to Botswana to experience the magic of a close-up elephant encounter. Staying recently at Sanctuary Lodges’ Stanley’s Camp, a luxury safari camp close to the elephants’ home territory, I set out one morning to meet the trio for myself. As a lifelong elephant addict, I’ve watched wild elephants at close quarters numerous times, and even had the chance to approach them cautiously on foot. Nothing, however, had prepared me for the shock and awe I felt when I first found myself gazing up at Jabu’s massive bulk, positioned just a foot or two away. It was hard not to feel a sense of terror, so aware was I of the immense power that radiated from him. I bit my lip at Doug’s invitation to approach closer, hardly daring to breathe as I raised my arm to touch a free African elephant for the very first time. As my I made contact with Jabu’s warm, serrated skin, I felt an almost physical jolt, as though some invisible current had run up from the African earth beneath his feet and coursed through into my body.

As I ran my hand round inside his leg to feel the baby-soft skin of his armpit, and saw the eyelashes, longer than any diva, that fluttered from his benign, light-brown eye, I

realised just how many details of an elephant's being I'd overlooked in all my years watching from the inside of a vehicle. I gazed fixedly at the soft, downy hair that grew in the crease of his earhole, at the tiny flakes of mud attached to his skin, at the graduated wrinkles at the top of his trunk. His stentorian breathing filled my ears, his rich, earthy smell invaded my nostrils, and the warmth radiating from his giant body seemed to envelop me. So overcome was I at my first elephant encounter that I found it hard to concentrate on what Doug was saying, and I only managed to regain my focus when we left Jabu feeding contentedly on a patch of bush and moved over to see Thembi.

Ever the princess of the group, Thembi blew through her trunk and scraped her ears noisily along her sides in her eagerness to get our attention. Back legs crossed jauntily, she happily demonstrated the 'wave' Doug has taught her, curving her mighty trunk over her head and wagging the tip in salute. She patiently opened her mouth to show us her huge, flat molars, and turned around so that we could admire the long, wiry hairs of her tail. Doug patiently explained that social cohesion and mental stimulation is vital to the development of a young elephant's character. As leader of the herd, he has taught his young charges over seventy verbal commands, all based on behaviours, sounds and movements that occur naturally in the wild. The elephants are in no way trick or circus animals – they live in the bush alongside herds of wild elephants and frequently interact with them, foraging for food themselves and sometimes taking off on mysterious elephant errands for days or even weeks at a time.

As the morning goes on, we amble beside the elephants, watching them feed, rumble to each other, wallow in mud and nudge each other good-naturedly out of the way of the choicest leaves and branches. Doug's eyes shine with love and pride as he points out that Thembi, the baby of the herd, can now reach a high branch that a few years ago would have eluded her. "She's getting so big" he murmurs gruffly. As we head through the bush, Doug invites me to 'lead' Marula by the trunk. Tentatively, I stand in front of her and hold out my hand; immediately and trustingly, she places her trunk tip in it and we move along, her great feet pacing just behind me and her great forehead swaying gently above mine. The wonder of this massive animal placing the most delicate part of her body in a stranger's hand sends a shiver down my spine.

Eventually the elephants lead us to a sandy clearing, and a sumptuous lunch table covered with white linen. As the Stanley's Camp staff serve up our buffet, the elephants stand quietly a few metres away, enjoying their midday meal of chopped leaves and branches. After lunch, Jabu comes to stand massively by the table, his huge bulk looming incongruously behind the wine glasses and salad bowls. As he demonstrates his vocal abilities, I stand again in front of him and place my hands on the top of his trunk, feeling the muscles flex and shake as he trumpets.

As time comes for me to take my leave of the trio, I reflect that in just a few hours, I've come to feel a fierce love and protectiveness towards them, and to understand perfectly Doug's determination to keep them safe. I find myself wishing fervently that I could find a way to make people understand just what a privilege it is to walk the earth at the same time as such an amazing animal. Doug and Sandi's work does just that, and surely no-one who has been lucky enough to become part of their herd could fail to resolve that no matter how difficult it may be in this shrinking world of ours, man and beast must learn one day to share their living places in harmony.