

# A soothing African hideaway

The Zulu Waters Game Reserve offers a serene escape from the noisy urban jungle, writes **Craig Lewis**

**H**AVING recently enjoyed a visit to the Kruger National Park, it didn't take me long to yearn for a return to the solitude and serenity of nature. In fact, the first sight of traffic and taxis was all it took.

Mercifully, a serendipitous stay at Zulu Waters Game Reserve, which is nestled in the foothills of the Drakensberg mountain range, more than satisfied that desire.

Indeed, as aptly described on their website as "your own private African retreat", exclusivity is what sets Zulu Waters apart.

Offering just three overnight accommodation options at the magnificent Shaka Lodge, quaint two-bedroomed Nandi House or romantic Lake Cottage, Zulu Waters remains refreshingly secluded.

Along with my significant other, we had the pleasure of staying at Shaka Lodge, where our every whim was catered for, while we were effectively offered exclusive use of the 3000ha reserve, which served as an extravagant playground.

Upon our arrival we were warmly greeted by assistant reserve manager Mike Weerts and personal chef Mbongiseni Makhaye – who would be the go-to guy for everything under the sun – while host Lesley Terwin soon popped in to ensure we made ourselves at home.

As a fully catered accommodation, Shaka Lodge clearly places priority on ensuring the comfort and satisfaction of visitors, and Makhaye quickly prepared us a couple of cappuccinos to go with his home-made crunchies as we settled down in front of a crackling wood fire. That evening we were treated to a special performance by the Zulu Waters Dance Warriors, who set the hills alive with the sound of music as they danced, sang and beat their drums to a unique African beat that seemed to reverberate down my spine.

The group of "dance warriors"



The Zulu Waters Dance Warriors treat Zulu Waters Game Reserve visitors to exciting dance moves.

was formed nearly 10 years ago by local community member Nathi Mvelase, who aimed to provide youngsters with the option to take part in a productive "extramural" activity that also instilled a sense of pride in their history and culture.

Chatting around a boma fire, Nathi explained that despite financial assistance from Zulu Waters, funding for their traditional regalia and transport remained limited, although whatever they received was used to assist those in need.

One such group member is 16-year-old Mongezi Mayisela, who has been dancing in the group for the last eight years, but has virtually no eyesight and is in need of corneal grafts in both eyes.

Zulu Waters continues to raise funds to facilitate his much-needed surgery, and needless to say, it was

an extremely humbling experience to watch the tall teenager perform without displaying any semblance of his handicap.

The next day we were able to explore the wide expanses of the reserve a bit more, and a great way to do so is on horseback. A two-hour ride took us through burbling river beds and over the hillsides where herds of wildebeest, zebra and a variety of antelope roamed.

The likes of waterbuck, blesbok, red hartebeest and the massive, majestic eland – an iconic animal of the Drakensberg mountains – can be found in abundance at Zulu Waters, but in the late afternoon we went in search of the more elusive Cape buffalo.

Heading off on a game drive with jovial field ranger Joe Sithole, we managed to spot a herd of these

powerful beasts lurking in the undergrowth, eyeing us curiously as we approached, with the setting sun glinting off their hides in what was a quintessentially African experience.

Although the drive had left us a little chilled, we were very quickly warmed up by one of Makhaye's wholesome, hearty meals on our return to the lodge.

The talented chef, who learnt his trade at the Midlands Community College, brings new meaning to the words "service with a smile" and is undoubtedly the secret ingredient in Shaka Lodge's recipe for success.

Beneficially, the kitchen has an almost unlimited supply of fresh produce that is sourced on site, from venison to organic vegetables to tasty trout. "My motto is 'cook it now, serve it now'," Makhaye says. "You see we don't even have a microwave in the kitchen, so it's all about preparing a nice, fresh meal."

One of my absolute favourites was a dish of perfectly cooked ostrich steak, served on brinjal and topped with caramelised onion and pepper sauce, accompanied by veg and roast potatoes.

On our final morning, after a

**You see we don't even have a microwave in the kitchen**



wholesome breakfast served on Shaka Lodge's wraparound balcony that overlooks the surrounding plains, we mustered up the energy to head out on a guided walk.

I found myself wishing time would stand still as there were still activities such as fly fishing and clay pigeon shooting I hadn't yet had the opportunity to try.

But all good things must come to an end, and so it was with a heavy heart that I reluctantly began the journey back to my big city life and the inevitable sights and sounds of traffic and taxis.

For all reservations or more information about the Zulu Waters Dance Warriors, call 036 352 0100 or e-mail [info@zuluwaters.com](mailto:info@zuluwaters.com)

About the education trust:

Zulu Waters Game Reserve formed the Dalton Education Trust in 2008 as a way to give back to the surrounding communities of Dalton Bridge, Ezindikini and Mhubheni.

It has a specific focus on early childhood development, and aims to provide an intervention that addresses the current needs of the community, while also investing in the future of the area's children.

The Sakhithemba Resource Centre at Dalton Bridge serves as an anchor point for the two educational programmes that have been initiated, a network of Early Childhood Educators and weekly Psychomotor Education classes.

These focus on giving children the skills they need when entering formal schooling, and to be confident individuals capable of achieving their full potential later in life.

Another project nearing completion is the construction of a new crèche in Ezindikini.

To learn more about the trust, see [www.daltoneducationtrust.com](http://www.daltoneducationtrust.com)



Exploring the wide expanse of Zulu Waters Game Reserve on horseback is a must.



Personal chef Mbongiseni Makhaye serves with a smile.