

IT'S THE BUSH TALES THAT MAKE LODGE STAYS SO MEMORABLE

Good storytelling is the essence of a bush lodge experience, writes Helen Grange. The rangers at Idube and Lukimbi lodges are adept at this, and can choose a good wine to boot.

A LEOPARD named Makubela used to lounge around the swimming pool at Idube Lodge, but was killed last year by another leopard staking his claim on the territory just beyond the lodge perimeter. Makubela came home to die, of a punctured lung, and he's been so missed by the owners and staff that the new luxury suites have been named after the handsome, near-tame big cat.

It's stories like these – unmentioned in the marketing spiel – that create a sense and memory of a place, and they come as part of the deal at private lodges such as Idube, established 25 years ago in the Sabi Sand game reserve on the southwest border of the Kruger National Park. Like the tale of the mystery elephant who eluded staff for ages as they tried to figure out how one of the plunge pools was drained every morning.

Two weeks after I visited Idube, I received an e-mail from a friendly Swiss couple I met there, and I could feel their hankering – not for the expansive bed or tasty meals, but for the orange-pink sunsets, and the stories of the bush and its denizens, told with love by its keepers.

Local bush nuts among us also can't get enough of these stories, though I have to admit the luxury lodge screens out the blackjacks, biting insects and dangers so effectively it's well near being an IMAX movie experience.

Owner-built and managed, the four-star Idube is the ideal size to nurture intimacy and anecdotal journeying. It has 10 recently refurbished chalets that are comfortable and well-equipped, with indoor and outdoor showers and a private viewing deck. They are spread out on lawn and under shady trees where nyala and warthog families take refuge.

The main lodge's open lounge overlooks a riverbed and Shadulu Dam, a magnet for elephants, and there's a pool as well as an underground hide.

As with most lodges in this class, sticking to the morning and afternoon game drives timetable is sort of an unspoken rule. At Idube, should you skip the afternoon drive and opt to read in your chalet until after sunset, you have to wait for a guide to cross the lawn to fetch you for dinner, lest you get pounced on en route. As there is no room phone, only an emergency siren, there's nothing for it but to wait for the torchlight.

Unspoken rules apply to bedtime too. Though you can hold up the bar until after 10pm, you'll be the only guest doing it. But I'm with the Germans on this one: pre-dawn rambles and sedate, contemplative evenings are what make the bushveld getaway so soulful and restorative.

In any case, dinner in Idube's lantern-lit boma is sufficient bonding with the small handful of other guests. Game meats are often featured on the menu, and there's a well-stocked wine cellar.

Idube's sister lodge is Lukimbi, a two-and-a-half hour drive that takes you into the Kruger Park through the Malelane gate. This is a bigger lodge that meanders along the banks of the Lwakahle river, with a vast veranda that offers a generous vista of the bush and a watering hole.

Meals are a step up to haute cuisine, favouring platters of fruit, veggies, olives, hummus and pita, carpaccio and cheeses at lunchtime, to please the increasingly health-conscious European and American palates. Not for the boerevors and beer types!

What caught my eye at Lukimbi was the decor and art, an eclectic, colourful



In the southern part of the Kruger Park, Lukimbi Safari Lodge is luxurious, but also accommodates children well, as shown by the photo, right, posted on its Facebook page.

mix of southern African and East African-style furnishings, wall hangings and objets d'art, infusing an elegant ambience that establishments overly enamoured with local craft don't achieve. The swimming pool, which blends seamlessly into the bush and bar area, is another work of art.

Lukimbi has 16 suites, much more lavish and spacious than those at Idube, with private viewing decks. The cherry in them is a handcrafted marble bath with three-way windows looking out over the bush. Two ultra-luxurious suites have their own plunge pool, dining area and additional bathroom. The suites are connected to the main lodge by wooden

walkways and covered decks.

Not least because of its size, this lodge is child-friendly, and has a kid's safari programme with activities such as clay modelling, touch and feel walks, art classes, mask making, supervised swimming and bush alphabet. There's also a babysitting service available, with beds and cots available on request, and high chairs in the form of quirky wood-carved animals for toddlers to dine at.

There's a small gym near the pool, you can get a "Bush Buff massage", and for workaholics and bookworms, there's a lovely library with a desktop.

For wine lovers, Lukimbi has a great cellar (while I was there a visiting government minister ordered the last two of the most expensive bottles of Kanonkop for R1 405 each for his dinner entourage), and here your ranger doubles as barman who happens to know screeds about wine too. Be warned, though, drinks are extra, including those on the game drives, and you'll be surprised at how much they add to the final bill at R35 a gin and tonic.

The Swiss couple, who happened to be on the same trail and joined me within a day at Lukimbi, were enthralled by Lukimbi – "it was the highlight of our trip", they wrote in the e-mail – and couldn't get enough sightings of the "rheeno". What charmed me was the huge boma, a circle of man-made giant ant mounds and coves, on a floor bed of river sand, which takes on dreamlike proportions in the candlelight.

Bounded by three major river sys-



tems, the area surrounding Lukimbi offers a diverse array of habitats: vast grasslands dominate the northern portion, and the southern and central areas are heavily wooded and interspersed with lush riverine thickets. It's the ideal habitat for large herds of zebra, wildebeest and other plains animals, while the white rhino can enjoy the pans and wallows and the shyer black rhino can hide in the wooded areas. Elephants are plentiful and the river directly in front of the lodge is a favourite bathing spot. The usually elusive leopard seems easier to find here too, and birders have more than 420 identified species to look for.

● **IDUBE:** R3 000 a person sharing (until September). Special for May: R1 980 a person a night sharing. Call 011 431 1120 or visit www.idube.com

● **LUKIMBI:** R3 500 a person a night (until September); R4 500 a person a night for a luxury suite. Call 011 431 1120 or visit www.lukimbi.com



Idube is a safari lodge in the Sabi Sand Game Reserve. Past guests have praised the superb Big Five and smaller game viewing.