

# UNDER A TREE

## IN AFRICA

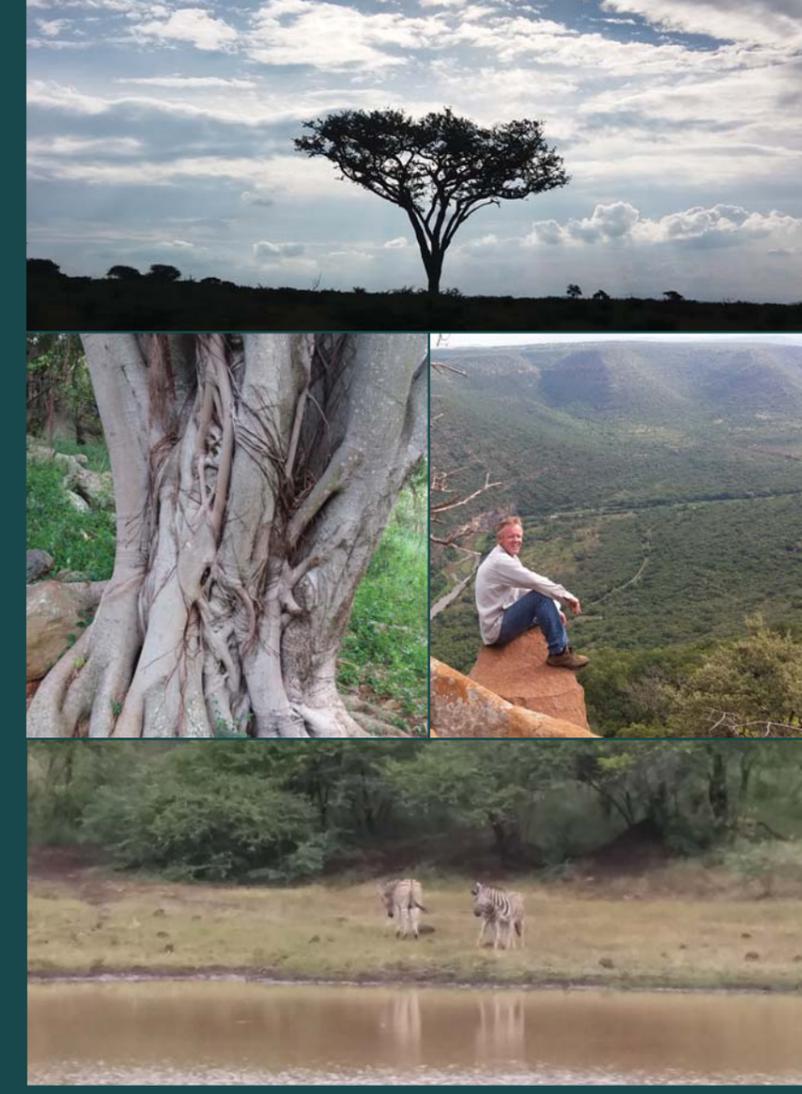
BY CHARMAINE MANICOM, EE PUBLISHERS

**O**n the way home from a trip to the Wild Coast over the Christmas Holidays, my partner Kenny wanted to show me what he described as one of his favourite places, Weenen Game Reserve in KwaZulu Natal, near Estcourt. Driving into the reserve, the neat, serviceable entrance and buildings and well-kept gardens didn't overwhelm with allure. But the big indigenous trees hinted at something perhaps more interesting within.

Our initial greeting from staff was on the opposite end of the warm and friendly spectrum which was quite disappointing, but we're grown-ups and were fresh from a lovely holiday, so we shrugged it off and were signed in by a friendlier staff member. We had the campsite to ourselves, which was a huge plus but at the same time a bit sad. The huge trees, anthills and the view of nothing but bush for miles created an ambience that surely should have been enjoyed by bigger numbers of visitors. I wondered

why (not for the first time) it is that simple beauty is disregarded for over-hyped, over-priced resorts. The cottages are popular, I'm told, with a bookings waiting list.

We set up camp, the tall Acacia trees making us feel awfully African-adventurer with our pukkah canvas tent, not-so-pukkah blue gazebo, and a dinky kitchen stand which gave me the best washing-up view I've ever had, over the grass and thorn trees to the hazed hills beyond. It didn't hurt that



there was a power supply and we could plug in the kettle for our first cup of tea, though it was a bit of a camper's cop-out. The game reserve has a variety of buck, zebra and giraffe and other large animals, so the walking options are limited. We tried the short trail to the nearby dam and bird hide, coming across masses of butterflies, and rhino middens writhing with all sizes, and a couple of colour varieties, of dung beetle. Their clumsy antics amused and inspired us for a while – no maps or GPS or life plans, just blind determination to get that ball of poo across the road.

It was cool in the hide and as we sat, trying to avoid eye contact with the begging terrapins (there are stern signs on the walls not to feed them), a family of zebra came down for a drink. The zebra seemed only mildly alert (there are no predators so it was probably just

a little primal prickle on the backs of their necks that they couldn't fathom) as they approached the water. After they had all drunk the water slowly and serenely, one of the youngsters started nibbling the ear and ankle of its sibling, which started a steadily-escalating but friendly scuffle which was lovely to watch. The mothers and aunts grazed quietly nearby, not once coming over to intervene and not appearing to need to, unlike I did in some of my kids' fights when they were youngsters, which probably said more about my parenting than the youngsters' behaviour. After that, a mother warthog came down with three nervy young, sticking very close by. We watched them for a while, feeling soothed and heart-warmed afterwards by the happy-family displays of our fellow earthlings, a few chromosomes-removed.

The reserve may not boast all modern conveniences, but it

punches above its weight in the toilet stakes. At the hide and also at the view site later we found attractive huts with toilet paper, a basin and running water: so civilised.

A winding afternoon game drive punctuated with sightings of red hartebeest, giraffe, and a mother and baby rhino, as well as a very bold jackal, led us to a picnic area and view site. Getting out of the car I expressed a little disappointment with the view. Kenny commented, "Just got out of the car and you're judging it?!", and led me the opposite way down a path to a giddy view over the Bushman's River Valley, which is a worthwhile experience all by itself. A well-prepared guide leaflet is issued by the park, and we used it extensively as it details trees and animals, insects and routes. There's also a little information around the rich history of the park, including the stone structures, which date

from the Stone and Iron Ages to Boer time.

We stopped at an enormous Natal Fig tree for a pre-sundowner beer and snack, then headed back to camp to light the braai and prepare for our evening meal. As the sun went down and a storm started to build, a herd of red hartebeest settled near our camp. We just squeaked in with our meal before the storm arrived, and again, I had

an interesting dishwashing session under the gazebo with the storm wind and rain swirling around most exhilaratingly. Later, Kenny shone the torch to see if he could pick up any cat's eyes (real ones) but instead we had umpteen pairs of red hartebeest eyes shining back at us. If they could have, they would have told us to kill the light and let them get some sleep. By now, the rain was pouring down, and I went off for a shower in the ablution

block – clean, if clinical compared with the cute loos on the trail.

My concern, always, with places like the Weenen Game Reserve, is that it's not utilised enough, and as we know, everything has to pay for itself in this age of Capitalism or it falls away. So please, do yourself and everyone a favour and go there. It's 5000 ha of loveliness.

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