

At night, the bush comes alive with the stirring of the nocturnal hunters, the vigilance of their prey and the cycle of life



NASIKIA: 'I HEAR, I FEEL'

Nasikia Camps in Tanzania is a legacy of love, vision and authenticity. A living memorial to Naseeb Mfinanga who, together with his wife, Donna, had a dream...

WORDS KATHY MALHERBE

It was 25 million years ago that Mother Nature heaved capriciously and tore apart the earth's crust, creating a jagged rift along Eastern Africa. Massive chunks of earth and rock sank between parallel fault lines, flanked by the rift mountains. The Serengeti was born.

Then, a million years ago, her Ngorongoro volcanoes spewed out mineral-rich lava, nourishing the granite landscape so that, after the rains, the plains are awash with short, sweet grass. For this reason the Serengeti, or 'endless plains' in the language of the Maasai, is the most famous wildlife habitat in the world.

It is said that the Great Rift Valley is where all humanity evolved and that it is hard-wired into our DNA.

This is perhaps one of the reasons why Australian nursing sister Donna Duggan, after doing voluntary work with HIV-positive mothers and babies in Tanzania, made Tanzania her home. The other was meeting Naseeb, who at the time was selling leather shoes and selling them in his little shop.

The attraction was instant. So was the idea of starting a feasible business together.

The rest is a tale of two charismatic entrepreneurs. 'Visionaries build what dreamers imagined. We started with one battered Land Rover,' she says of the beginning of Maasai Wanderings, a destination management company that handles the logistics of travel.

They soon realised that referring travellers to other camps was not going to grow their business and so the first of Nasikia Camps

It's the life of Riley for predators in the Serengeti, which was declared a conservation area in 1959



opened in 2008. The dream was to create an authentic camping experience where guests could feel at one with the bush (*nasikia* means 'I hear, I feel' in Swahili), while still being comfortable and pampered. The duo's luxury mobile camps were followed by the first permanent camps with en-suite bathrooms in 2015. There are now five camps, and the fact that the entire business is self-funded is testimony to their determination and passion.

The newest camp, Ehlane Plains – *ehlane* means 'wilderness' in Zulu – is a worthy memorial to a man who persevered to find the ideal place to 'hear' and 'feel' the bush. Tragedy struck before Nas could see Ehlane Plains finished: he was one of 11 people who lost their lives on 15 November 2017, when a Cessna aircraft crashed above the Ngorongoro Conservation Area in northern Tanzania.

A SENSORY ADVENTURE

After flying with Air Excel to Seronera airport, you travel by road to Ehlane Plains. The camp is unobtrusive and so much part of the bush that it's not until you are almost upon it that you see it. We were the first guests at the new development, so it was a bittersweet moment to step through the door into the magnificent realisation of Nas's dream. A dream that his team are determined to perpetuate.

'I don't know what we would have done without Charles Mwanisawa, the Nasikia Camps operations manager,' Donna says. 'After the accident, he kept morale up within a very emotional team during the construction of Ehlane Plains. He is a well-respected leader and pivotal to me in fulfilling Nas's vision.'

As is guide extraordinaire Johann Lombard, who heads up Camp Development. He says, 'Nas chose the site for Ehlane Plains because it is in the Soit le Motonyi area, which had been closed for 22 years for cheetah conservation. He bought into the idea of minimum impact on the environment, which is monitored by very strict codes managing the footprint.'

Ehlane Plains is a destination in itself. A day spent in the camp, enjoying the hospitality of the affable and gracious staff and the magnificent food created by the diminutive gourmet chef, Khalid, is a chance to absorb the African bush and just be still.

That's not to say the game drives aren't magnificent. Lombard, a conversationalist, conservationist and teacher, along with Eddy, the spotter, guide visitors across the plains sprinkled with koppies and the occasional umbrella tree.

You can spot a tripod of a giraffe eating wild cucumbers off the ground. A martial eagle with deeply

feathered legs, holding its prey in its talons, with that 2,5m wingspan wrapped around it protectively, much like a child shielding test answers from another learner. Two tawny eagles covet the prize but are kept at bay.

Two female lions with their cubs, replete after feeding on a freshly killed wildebeest; a satiated cub, its pot belly scuppering all chances of balancing on a branch, eventually gives up and lies paws up, with the sun on its distended tummy. It's the life of Riley for predators in the Serengeti, which was declared a conservation area in 1959.

A topi antelope with a striking reddish-brown to purplish-red coat, glossy in the bright sunlight, poses on his catwalk – a termite mound. It's clear why the Maasai call this stance *bugamina* ('look at me'). In the river, a large, smooth boulder of a hippo suddenly immerses itself and reappears beady-eyed. A leopard melts into the bush as the sun drops off the horizon abruptly.

In the African bush this doesn't signal the end of the day but the start of a 12-hour night shift. The bush now comes alive with the stirring of the nocturnal hunters, the vigilance of their prey, and the cycle of life.

Nas's vision is complete. You hear, you feel.

AFRICA AS A STATE OF MIND

What the couple had in mind with these ventures encompasses not only wildlife experiences but also creating job opportunities for locals. More than 200 Tanzanians are employed by the companies, at the camp as well as in Arusha, where the tents are manufactured alongside an engineering, carpentry and design workshop. Donna says it's all about empowering and multi-skilling.

Even though she lost her soulmate and has to raise two children aged five and 11 alone, giving up was never an option. 'There is a word in Swahili, *kupambana*, which means 'to keep struggling, hustling'... with the goal of moving forward to be where you need to be,' she explains. 'I have people relying on me who need jobs and, more importantly, through the Naseeb Mfinanga Memorial Trust I need to ensure my husband's legacy continues, that his spirit lives on. I know he would never want me to give up the fight to reach our goals.'

When you leave Africa, as the plane lifts, you feel that, more than leaving a continent, you are leaving a state of mind and part of your DNA. Whatever awaits you at the other end of your journey will be of a different order of existence.

You are reminded of the quote: 'So Africa smiled a little when you left. We are in you, Africa said, you have not left us yet.'

Donna's philanthropy both at the schools in the area and in the camps is woven with warmth and caring. It is not surprising that the locals refer to her affectionately as Mama. If your legacy is how many hearts you touch, the difference Nas and Donna have made and keep making is immense. ■

The trip was made possible by Nasikia Camps and Maasai Wanderings, Air Excel, and Arusha Coffee Lodge by Elewana Collection. To find out more visit nasikiacamps.com or email andrew@tourismcorp.co.za

INVESTING IN THE FUTURE

Maasai Wanderings and Nasikia Tented Camps – and Donna, in her personal capacity – support five primary schools and facilitate with partners to feed more than 4 000 learners a day. A visit to one of the schools, Matim Primary School in Le Manyatta, makes you realise that it's not only Nas's legacy that will be left behind one day but Donna's too. In addition, she is supporting 118 secondary school learners and four university students. So far her programme has produced doctors, lawyers and accountants, and these learners eternally grateful for the chance to be educated.

The principal of Matim Primary School, Mr Lingo, says, 'Since Donna started helping the school we have moved from 66th position to 18th in the National Grade 7 exams. There used to be six learners to one desk and now three; we have a library, a lunch programme, computers on which the teachers are being taught, more classrooms, garden clubs, netball kit and school uniforms.'

The learners' commitment is astounding. They walk long distances to arrive at school by 7am and the first hour of the day is spent cleaning the classroom and grounds. The school has nine class rooms for the just over 1 000 learners – still a tight fit, but far better than it used to be.

From left, Johann Lombard, Mr Lingo of Matim Primary School, Dorria Watt and Kathy Malherbe

