

SPECIAL RESERVE

Spotting the Big Five in South Africa is exciting enough, but enjoying a safari in five-star luxury is an experience like no other, writes *John McDonald*.

The phone on my bedside table rings. I know who it will be. Clive, our safari guide, an affable fellow with a vibrant laugh, waking me from slumber pre-dawn to get ready for the day's safari experience. We are guests at the andBeyond Homestead at Phinda Private Game Reserve in KwaZulu-Natal, on the east coast of South Africa.

In 1991, andBeyond purchased a 13,000ha swathe of ecologically degraded pineapple plantations, cattle ranches and sisal and game farms with the intention of creating a wildlife sanctuary that would work in synergy with local Zulu communities.

The land was regenerated and many animals, including the Big Five (elephant, lion, rhinoceros, leopard, buffalo), returned to their natural habitats. Today, the reserve – now fenced to keep the many endangered species in and poachers out – covers 28,555ha of mixed-landscape bushland thanks to buybacks from locals.

The adventure begins even before we reach the reserve. Transfer is via small plane from Kruger Mpumalanga International Airport at Nelspruit (a 30-minute flight from Johannesburg) – which, by the way, has a great little place called the Fever Tree Bar that serves bargain-priced cocktails and local beers and wines – and flies over the verdant rolling hills of Swaziland to land at the ochre-coloured airstrip at Phinda. Then it's our first trip in our best friend for the week – a customised Toyota LandCruiser that seats six. Well, actually it seats nine – two more in the front seat and one more on a scouting chair mounted on the bonnet. This is where Benny, Clive's sidekick, sits for the majority of our outings. Except when there are lions and leopards passing by... He sneaks back into the car then. Very wise.

It's an hour's ride to the Homestead, and what a thing of beauty it is. The original complex burnt to the ground in 2016 but,

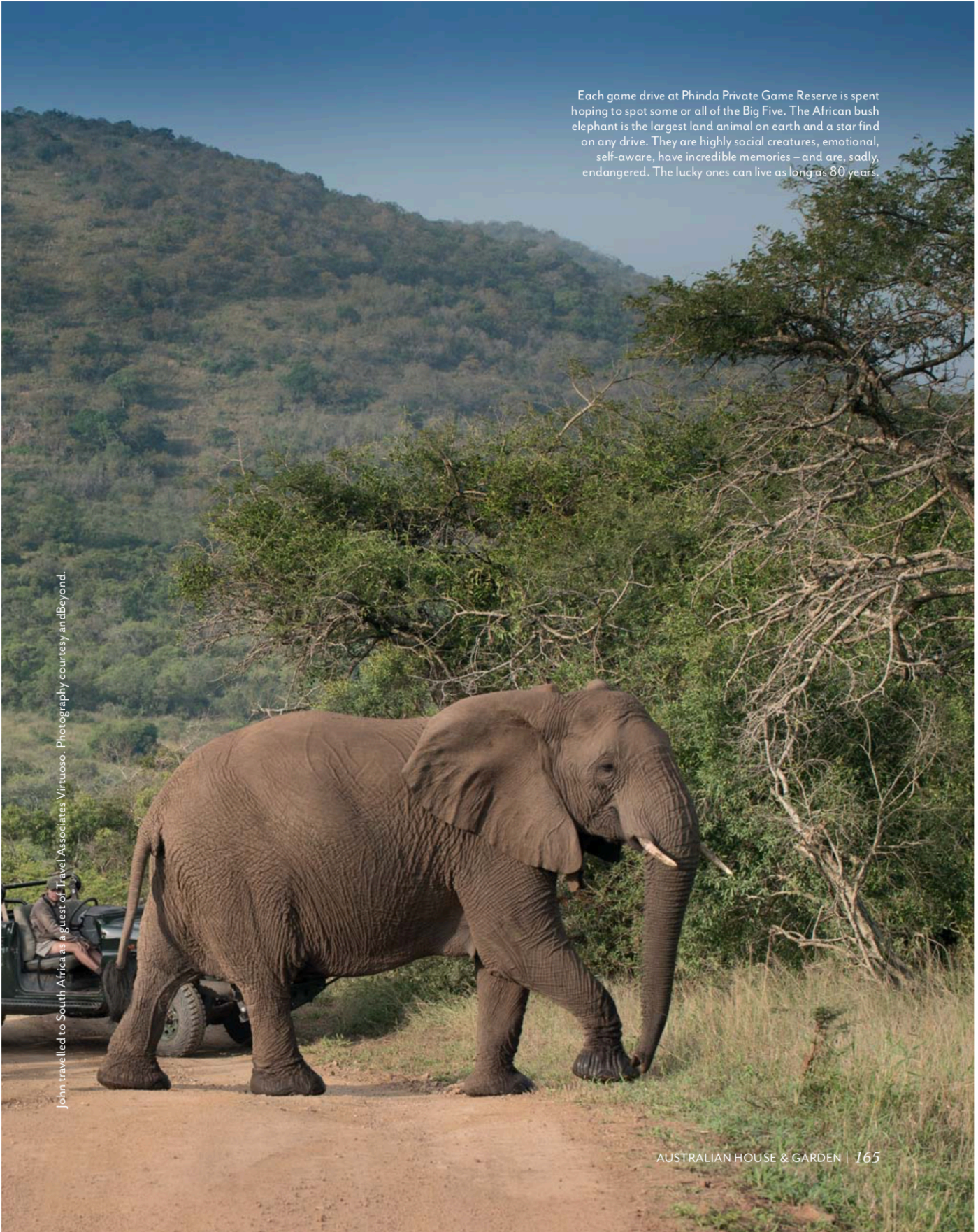
determined to have it rise like a phoenix from the ashes, the company enlisted Johannesburg-based Nicholas Plewman Architects and Fox-Browne Interior Design to create "a smaller and more intimate, but also even more luxurious, safari experience", says architect Jess Homer. There are four hyper-deluxe king villas, a bunk room, a spa and massage treatment room, and a library devoted to the history of the property. The swimming pool borders a watering hole visited by wildlife, a sunken fire deck and an enclosed *boma* fire area with a dining table made of a single slab of Rhodesian teak. The aim was for all materials and furnishings to be "100 per cent natural wherever possible", says Debra Fox of Fox-Browne.

The décor is a celebration of Zulu heritage and the surrounding landscape has informed the colour and texture palette. "We chose to partner with the best Zulu craftspeople in the region," says Debra. ▶



Each game drive at Phinda Private Game Reserve is spent hoping to spot some or all of the Big Five. The African bush elephant is the largest land animal on earth and a star find on any drive. They are highly social creatures, emotional, self-aware, have incredible memories – and are, sadly, endangered. The lucky ones can live as long as 80 years.

John travelled to South Africa as a guest of Travel Associates Virtuoso. Photography courtesy and Beyond.



H&G TRAVEL

“We scoured markets and commissioned the best weavers and artisans to work with us.”

Each day begins with a lengthy game drive, rain or shine, that includes morning tea served with a ‘chokomocharula’ – mocha mixed with Amarula, a rich creamy liqueur made from the fruit of the marula tree. Then it’s back for a hearty breakfast, followed by, perhaps, an educational session about poaching and conservation. Lunch, then another game drive, followed by a truly delicious dinner and parlour games. We also have the option to engage in experiences such as participating in the collaring of elephants and notching of sleeping rhinos’ ears for tracking and research purposes. Or yoga!

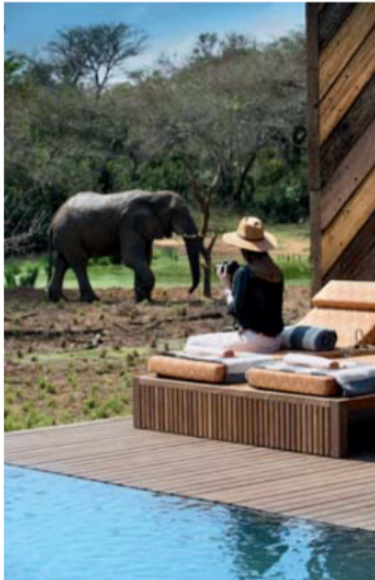
For me, the best experience is seeing the work andBeyond does with the Africa Foundation in communities situated close to its lodges. We take a trip to two local villages. Here, the two bodies have spent years and millions of dollars in developing programs and building projects to benefit the local Mduku and Mngobokazi communities. We tour the Khulani Special School, the Mduku Clinic – a boon to the region thanks to its roster of comprehensive medical services – and the Nkomo School where, to our absolute delight, we are swamped by scores of joyfully smiling, laughing, cheeky youngsters.

This is a premium experience and the property must be booked as a whole, not by the villa. But I guarantee it: if a group of family or good friends rents Phinda Homestead, they will experience the wildlife and community trip of a lifetime, feast like kings, drink lots of chokomocharula – and remember it forever. **H&G**

GETTING THERE You may need to spend the night in Johannesburg before departing for Phinda the following morning. **Fairlawns Boutique Hotel & Spa** in Sandton, about 30-40 minutes from the airport, offers luxury accommodation in a range of spectacularly decorated suites. From about \$470 per night; fairlawns.co.za.

THE PLAN There are five andBeyond lodges at Phinda, all with different styles and numbers of suites and/or cottages. Speak to a Travel Associates Virtuoso travel adviser to plan your safari on 1800 531 494; travel-associates.com.au/virtuoso.

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP Dancers from local Zulu communities can be booked for special events or groups. The living area of the Homestead is a stunner. Morning tea on safari. Cheetahs are seen everywhere. A poolside visitor.



THE HOMESTEAD IS LUXURY ITSELF AND THE DAILY GAME DRIVES ARE EXPERIENCES NOT TO BE MISSED.

