

A Traveler's Tale

Mapungubwe: Of Baobabs and Rivers

by Santi Geere

As a child, my first experiences with the far North were filled with vivid memories of giant Baobab trees with smooth trunks. Each tree I had met on our frequent travels to Zimbabwe became a persona. My little self greeted each and every one when we stopped to have some 'padkos' along the way. Small as I was, I sensed that they held secrets, and imagined that they responded to me when I touched their old bodies. My second, and far stronger awareness of mystical, ancient whisperings, was that of the rocky hills...

Mapungubwe

Part I

**A dry season. The earth has turned into powdered dust.
Mama Africa has many faces.**

As we approach the Mapungubwe entrance, a Dali-esque Baobab points its root-like fingers accusingly to the pale blue heavens. The Mopani shrubs break the grey-brown monotony with splashes of rust and yellow. The giant umbrella roof of the reception area is amazing. Stately almost, yet without any airs, it melts into the landscape. I sense the quiet as we get out. A powerful current of energy is present here, and unchanging.

The SANParks staff are warm and friendly. We are issued with a map of the Park and the guard at the gate informs us of some Ellie sightings earlier on. We travel in an easterly direction towards Shroda dam.

As we turn onto the road, we are met by the vista of Mapungubwe Hill and the silhouette of a Pearl Spotted Owl. The dam across this lookout is as dry as cork. A few kilometers onward, there is a perfect specimen of Eland standing in the sparse shade of a sickle bush. The road winds downward into a valley. The views are forever- a purple grey haze of koppies as far as the eye can see. My childhood giants dot the road, awesome, battle-scarred by ivory tusks, their naked branches praying silently to an unblinking heaven.



Down in the valley, the magic starts. The Great Sculptor took time here. It is a desert garden of breathless proportion. I hear unwritten stories told by the wind.

New to the Park, we take a road, winding along the border fence. Dense riverine vegetation surrounds it. The road is very narrow but we are so amazed by the trees that we only realize a while later we would be in trouble if an Ellie chose to cross our path. There are bushbuck grazing amidst the Ellies! I always maintain that the Northern Ellies are far better mannered than their Southern counterparts. None the less, we quietly creep along with hammering hearts, as there are little or no escape routes should they decide to play a bit.

We sigh with relief as the road turns and broadens, but we are still surrounded by lots of Ellies, about fifteen in splintered groups. We watched them play and drink at a waterhole for a while and then made a dash for it as soon as they walk off.



We travel back on the road we came on and head for the Tree Top walk. The drive produces Zebra and a DONKEY! I need to remark that the animals were a bonus really, and my eyes weren't really looking to find them. It was the rock formations, the play of sunlight and the vast quiet of the Limpopo Valley that kept me spellbound.

The trees at the Tree Top walk have this presence of eons of knowing. I touch a Fever Tree and the silky yellow residue clings to my hand. The welcoming words of Rudyard Kipling at the gate entrance resonate in my mind "the great grey green greasy Limpopo, all set about with Fever Trees". Baboons and Vervet monkeys play on the ground below. High up, we come face to face with the trees. I touch them and they touch me. The air is clear and crisp. The boardwalk meandering to the river makes me feel like a secret explorer. And the birds, yes the birds come to greet us, some shy and some used to human meetings by now. We happily tick off quite a few new sightings in our Sasol.



But the great Limpopo was dry, a yellow band that lay silently over the landscape. The few pools of water are a last offering to a herd of Eland.

Part2

Leokwe camp-after the rains.

The sun was setting. Around me the hills turned into shiny hues of copper. The lushness of the veld emanates contentment. Night releases the heady fragrance of earth and crushed grass. I sit looking at a family of baboons romping in a puddle of water below our bungalow. The early evening breeze comes swirling in at 32 degrees Celsius. My city body starts protesting, my heart says, "feel this, experience it"... The quiet comes and then darkness. With darkness; a pensive silence.

It is time to make a fire. I sit watching as the bright orange flames cast a perimeter glow and then the PREDATORS arrive! Now understand- I respect life- but a barrage of Arachnids coming over the wall like Second World War soldiers arriving on the shores of Normandy? Red Roman Spiders? I could still take it, until one ran up my leg!! Aikona! The pensive silence was over. The rest of evening was spent with our feet on the chairs and (quite)a few Reddies...well sorry!



Morning breaks gently. I stand showering while I watch three different types of Bee-eaters sitting in a tree next to the outdoor shower. We are off to Mapungubwe Hill on a drive. Our guides were well-informed and chatted away. The veld is a different landscape, the grey of August replaced by abundant green, vibrant purples and pinks of veld flowers. We had a good Ellie sighting-twelve in total. At the diggings, our guide gave us a brief and opened the site for us to walk down into one of

the open sites. This was a great moment for me, as I stood there, knowing that once, on this now still plain, people had lived.

We took the steep climb up the hill, and it was there that I finally sensed the ancient voices of the rocks. I was captivated by the vastness of the horizon, and then, a large herd of Eland came into view. The moment was sacred. My African blood sang of moonlit nights and fires, of Eland and the river's tides. The Eland stopped, grazed and kept looking at me as I stood on the rocks.



Our guide told us this story: "How the Mopani tree came into being" There was once one green butterfly left on earth and the Great Spirit heard it crying. So it asked the butterfly why it was unhappy, to which the butterfly replied; "the Hornbill is going to eat me, and then there will be no more green butterflies on earth" So the Great Spirit created green leaves looking just like the green butterfly to confuse the Hornbill...these are the stories and the magic of this place.

Being a bean-counter, my sheer delight was the counting rock of hollowed sandstone; an ancient abacus! The guide said that they also played games on this rock, tsoro, and off my mind wandered again...



Back at the bungalow, we take a leisurely swim in the rock pool. 40 Degrees Celsius... and a couple of snoozing Red Romans tucked away in our towels! We saw about 10 species of bird whilst we were wallowing in the lukewarm water. By late afternoon we left to catch the setting sun at the confluence lookout. On our way, we stopped at the Tree Top walk.

The river was rushing onward, it gurgled its pleasure to all who would hear. The birds excitedly told us to listen as we walked down the boardwalk. Fruits of summer pulled the branches down. I touched my beloved Fever Tree again and smeared my face with its yellow powder. Such joy and frivolous abundance! As we approach the bird hide, the full effect of the summer fruits hit us in the face! The baboons have their very own loo in the sky. But we see African Fish Eagle, Egrets, Bee-eaters and three kinds of King Fishers. What a display of colour and cacophony of sound! The river has come alive with the promise of life that only water can bring.



At the confluence, the sun starts to dress for dusk. A warm breeze kisses our cheeks playfully. The Shashe and Limpopo are clad in silver for the occasion. Silence. Earth, water, wind and fire. The rivers are whispering as they make their way to the endless sea, the only way they know and have known since infinity. The sun becomes a golden red orb in the West. Another cycle is complete.

