

GIRAFFE FRAMED BY TOWERING FEVER TREES.



WHERE THE wild things are

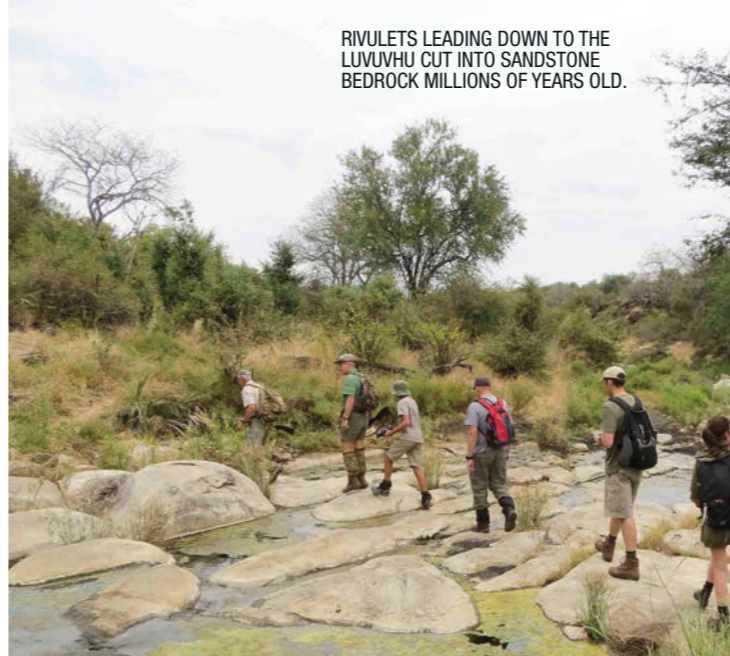
Magic place, magic age, magic time. Clive Thompson sets up and guides wilderness trails for children in their last year of primary school, and their parents. He believes it's a critical time for one-on-one bonding.

It's gone midnight in Wilderness Safaris' Pafuri bush camp in the remote northern reaches of the Greater Kruger Park. Bruce has just been woken by a loud, rasping growl right outside the tent he is sharing with his 12-year-old daughter, Heather. Peering through the tent flap gap, he sees a large male leopard pacing through the camp. The trail guide alongside them gets up to shine a powerful torch towards the sounds, but the shape has already slipped away into the night. Come daybreak, only his tracks speak for him. Heather sleeps on – she'll hear all about it from her dad in the morning.



ABOVE: CLOSE ENCOUNTERS IN THE FEVER TREE FOREST: SHINGAI MUSHONGA & ANTHONY SMITH POSE FOR A PIC WITH ONE OF MAKULEKE'S GIANTS. BELOW: GUIDE JOHNA TURNER SHARES HIS ABIDING PASSION WITH THE GROUP ON THE BANKS OF THE LUVUVHU, A TRIBUTARY OF THE LIMPOPO.

RIVULETS LEADING DOWN TO THE LUVUVHU CUT INTO SANDSTONE BEDROCK MILLIONS OF YEARS OLD.



CLIVE THOMPSON TAKES JOE BAGGOTT THROUGH SOME OF THE FINER POINTS OF TRACKING.





CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: HEATHER TANNER, HOLLY JOUBERT, RAE ATTRIDGE & REBECCA BROWN CATCH UP ON THEIR READING IN A GNARLY NATAL MAHOGANY – A SAFE PLACE IN AN UNFENCED CAMP.

Grade Seven is a fleeting, special age for kids. On the cusp of adolescence and then adulthood, they're also still children, fresh-eyed and radiant. Still unashamedly adoring of their parents ('I love spending time with my dad,' says Holly. 'He's the most amazing dad in the world.'). Bursting with enthusiasm for life. Too good to last.

And then there are their parents: captives of busy professional lives, with little time to engage – except for snatches over dinner, the weekend sport shuttle and the odd school concert. As Rebecca put it, summing up her and dad Robin's experience on the trail: 'I love spending time with my dad because he's usually working. He's very busy and quite stressed. He sometimes works at home at night.'

That's where Discovery Trails comes in: it's one of the last opportunities for fathers – and mothers – to share an absorbing adventure with their boys or girls, as children. The one-parent, one-child formula makes the experience more personal and intense for both of them. Janovin, part of a father-and-son group, describes the experience as 'by far the best thing my Dad and I have done as a father and son. I will always remember it!'

the close encounters with all things large and small – from elephants to tortoises – with plenty of tracking, learning and bush discipline thrown in too.

And then there is something compelling about the intimacy of the evening fireside chats under a vast, undimmed Milky Way with the wilds just beyond the circle of light.

A wilderness experience makes a powerful impression on young minds, and having a parent alongside brings a relationship gain. Bonding does not need to be contrived in the wilderness: when you're facing off a bull elephant at 20 metres, camaraderie happens. Joe, 13, agrees: 'I'll never forget our encounter with that elephant in the fever tree forest; it's part of what made things special for both of us.'

So far, it's mainly the fathers who have come with a son or daughter. The dads' fireside confessions explain why: 'We've been instructed by our wives to get off our office butts and spend serious time with our kids while they're still kids!' And they've relished the experience. Although family groups are welcome too, there is something special that happens when one parent has the chance to relate individually to their pre-adolescent child. The one-plus-one

dynamic is quite different from the two-parents-plus-child triangle. New connections emerge.

For Joe, that 'special time' has lasted beyond those few days: 'We love looking at the photos. And now we try to spot birds together in the garden as we learnt a lot about birding on the trail.'

Janovin says the point is not to get away from other family members. But being alone with his dad, Gert, was exceptional. 'I didn't know anybody else there besides my dad... so it was like he was my best friend for a while.'

Michaela's dad, Chris, echoes these sentiments: 'Sure, it would have been nice to have Mom there, but sometimes it's good to break out of your comfort zone. Dads love their daughters, but I don't think they always understand them fully. Doing something like this together strengthens your relationship as a father and child; it solidifies that bond.' ❖

ABOUT THE MAKULEKE CONTRACT PARK:

Owned by the Makuleke people but administered by SANParks, the area is accessible only to the guests of a select few eco-tourism operators. A share of the trail revenue goes to the Makuleke.

An ecological treasure trove, the contract park's 22 000-odd hectares contain Kruger's greatest biological and geographical diversity. All the big five are there, as well as the largest array of bird and plant species on offer in the Park.

Discovery Trails is the initiative of a number of dedicated trail guides intent on promoting conservation within a unique wilderness area, supporting the Makuleke people, and fostering stronger parent-child relationships. Trails run over five days/ four nights and cost about R6000 per person.

For more information, see www.discovery-trails.org/intergen-trails or email enquiries@discovery-trails.org.