



MY FAMILY AND OTHER ANIMALS

Left to right: Dave and Shan Varty, Richard Laburn, Bronwyn Varty-Laburn and Boyd Varty.

THE BIG FIVE

Eco-safari lodge Londolozi—the “protector of all things”—encapsulates the Varty family’s cherished African dream. CHRISTA D’SOUZA tracked them down

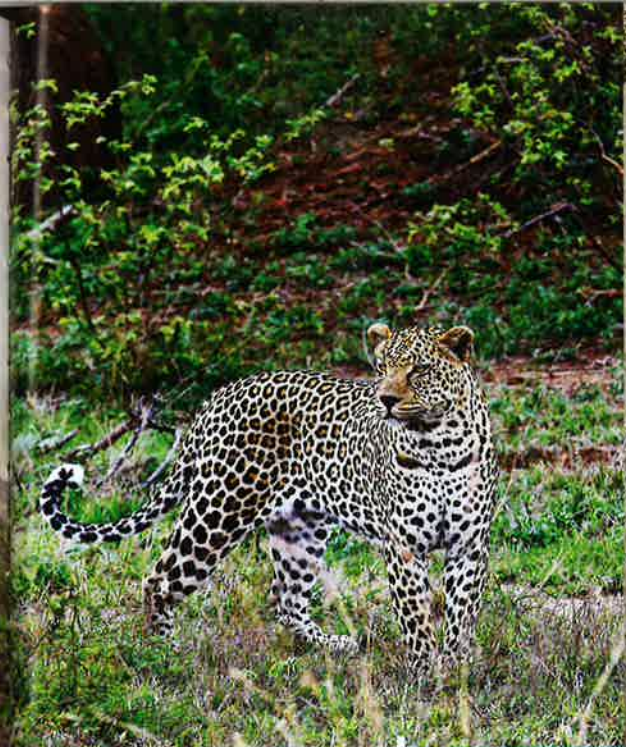
Boyd and Bronwyn Varty believe in omens. There’s a reason, in other words, I get to see my first leopard within three minutes of landing on the tarmac at Londolozi, the private game reserve on the western edge of Kruger National Park that has been in the Varty family for over 85 years. A sinewy, low-slung thing of beauty, she ambles in front of our Land Rover, then stops, lowers her haunches, has an elegant pee, and slinks on. This, Boyd explains, is a descendant of Manana, the small leopardess with the broken tooth their uncle John (“JV”) came across in 1979. Often he, Bronwyn and their parents Dave and Shan come back from camp to see her padding across the front lawn in

torchlight. An omen, they say. Just like the Bateleur eagle who had been hovering above us earlier and who, according to family tradition, holds the spirit of their grandfather, who came here in winter to hunt lions. “Yeah, grandad’s watching over us,” says Bronny, an immaculate mélange of beige, white and khaki on this sub-Saharan winter afternoon. “It makes for an interesting weekend.”

Meaning “Protector of All Things” in Zulu, and founded in 1972 by their father Dave and his buccaneering brother John, Londolozi is by no means the only family-owned safari super-lodge in the business. The Sabi Sands Reserve, on which it lies, is considered one of the best places to see the Big Five—lion, elephant, buffalo, rhinoceros and leopard—in the entire con-

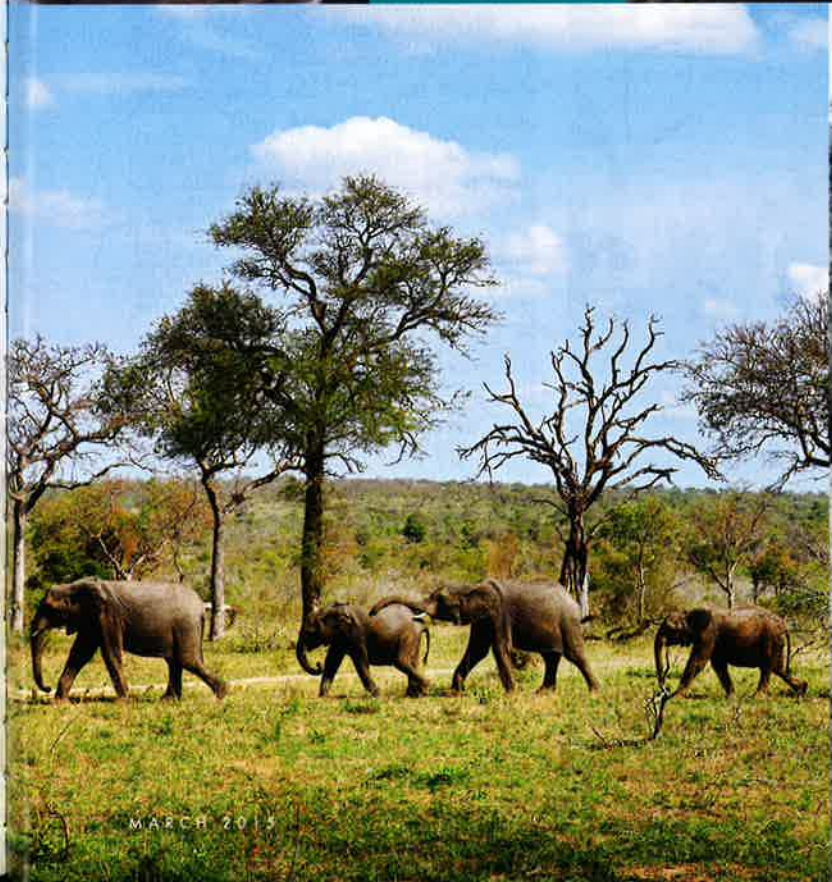
tinental. On one side of the teeny-tiny airstrip you’ve got the polo-playing Rattrays’ Mala Mala. On the other are the exceptional Singita Ebony and Boulders lodges, owned by the Baileses. Meanwhile, strung along the biodiverse banks of the Sand River, there are a number of eco-safari resorts offering 800-thread-count sheets and state-of-the-art showers while pushing the lighter-footprint message, protecting wildlife and employing the local community. But anyone who knows anything about the safari business in Africa will tell you it was the Vartys who invented the blueprint, who proved it was possible, and moreover right, to make a profit out of wildlife; Londolozi on which the luxury eco-lodge of today is based. The Conservation Corporation Africa, the

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THE GREAT GAME

Clockwise from above: Londolozi is famed for its leopard sightings; photographs of those who have helped shape the reserve in Founders Camp; JV drives a group of trailists across the Sand River, 1970s; a family of elephant; Nora Mkansi sewing; part of Londolozi's new businesses project to empower staff.



company they formed in 1991, ended up exporting the Londolozi model to over 45 other lodges. As Mark Getty, an early investor in CC Africa, says, "Dave and John belong in a group of visionaries along with David Attenborough, Jacques Cousteau... and Dian Fossey." Or as Nelson Mandela, a frequent visitor after his release from Robben Island and known to the Vartys through a mutual friend, the ANC freedom fighter Enos Mabuza, wrote in 1995, "Londolozi represents a model of the dream I cherish for the future of nature preservation in our country."

As custodians of Londolozi and passionate advocates for the restoration of the planet, Bronwyn, 30, and Boyd, 31, plan to take the model their parents so lovingly created way, way further. Having broken away from CC Africa in 2001 and resumed control of Londolozi in 2007, the next iteration is to create a global platform for what they ambitiously call a "new system of living", meaning a social-enterprise model that will benefit the

environment, wildlife and people. Where their father was instrumental in helping restore the land and the animal migratory paths that had been so devastated under apartheid, his children are hell-bent on restoring Africa's psyche.

Already, Londolozi has its own registered NGO, the Good Work Foundation, which was set up in 2003 and is currently rolling out learning centres to promote digital and English literacy in the neighbouring rural areas; there's also a medical health programme, a women's co-op, an online hospitality school and a Tracker Academy, which the family established with the Rupert family in 2008, and which enables young men in the community to make a living out of the ancient Shangaan art. Then there's JV's controversial project aiming to create a free-range, self-sustaining tiger population outside of Asia. Oh, and their "new small hobby", as Bronwyn puts it: a series of Self Transformation Adventure Retreats

created with Martha Beck, a Harvard-educated self-help author and life coach from California who just happened to visit Londolozi when Boyd was going through some "early-20s angst". Both he and Bronwyn are now master coaches of the Martha Beck programme, a method that involves "learning the language of energy and tracking the landscape of the body". That, plus the introduction of battery-operated Land Rovers, vertical farming, and so forth—it's all part of what the twin-like siblings call Project 2020. "If you restore the land, you see a tangible restoration of the spirit," sums up Boyd, his ridiculous good looks the perfect foil for his precise, intent manner. "I think a lot of the depression we see nowadays is undiagnosed homesickness for the earth."

The three of us are sitting out on the sprawling verandah at Founders Camp, one of the five camps (including Tree, Pioneer, Varty and the sumptuous Private Granite Suites) that together form Londolozi. Every so often an insolent vervet monkey will attempt to leap on to the buffet (think Ottolenghi-in-the-bush, with salads of strawberry and biltong, or blue cheese, mango and smashed peanut brittle) only to be shooed away by a waiter with a napkin. For pudding it's super-strong gin-and-tonic sorbet and superb espresso, the result of a recent initiative between Vida e Caffè, South Africa's upmarket equivalent of Starbucks, and the Good Work Foundation to train local baristas. "Yup", deadpans Boyd, "Thank God someone addressed that huge issue, huh?"

The story of Sparta Farm, as Londolozi used to be called, begins in 1926 at a boozy Johannesburg tennis party. Over a few gin and tonics, the siblings' great-grandfather Charles Boyd Varty and his friend Frank Unger decided, on a whim, to buy unseen a piece of land in the malaria-ridden Lowveld to indulge their passion for lion hunting. (At the time, lions were seen as cattle-killing vermin, and all the other game—antelope, wildebeest, zebra and so forth—had been decimated by the "biltong hunters".) And so the Varty/Unger routine began: the two families coming down by ox cart and pitching camp during the winter months when there was less tsetse fly, eating impala for breakfast, lunch and dinner, hunting lions at dawn



BEAUTY AND THE BEAST

The living and bar area at Pioneer Camp, decorated with horns, maps and Africa memorabilia.

and spending the evening singing round the campfire. In the 1930s they built four Shangaan-style rondavels—thatched mud huts—which still form the hub at Varty camp.

Everywhere here one feels strongly connected to the family, from the huge gnarly ebony tree under which Charles and Frank would hold their morning meetings, now extruding majestically through the centre of a verandah; to the meticulous faded ink hunting journals of the siblings' redoubtable grandmother Maidie; to the portrait of Princess Alice, Countess of Athlone, tiara way down on her forehead, who shot a lion here in the 30s. (The spot where she shot it is now always referred to as "Princess Alice's Bush".)

which it often did, the day quickly had to be re-billed a "walking safari", with JV typically leading the game drive in his trademark scuba-diving goggles. All this at a time when apartheid was flourishing, the threat of communism was only 60 km away in Mozambique and the Kruger National Park had been fenced off as a military buffer zone. "Everyone was thinking the country was going to burn, and here were my dad and my uncle starting a safari business," laughs Boyd. "Talk about tilting at windmills."

We're now sitting by the campfire before supper at the sprawling Varty family stead, built in the late 70s by Shan and Dave themselves, drinking a delicious low-sulphur red called The Stork, while

example, or had his leg all but severed by a crocodile. Perhaps the lowest point of all was in 2001, when the family were held at gunpoint in their Johannesburg flat by armed robbers. The incident sent the entire family into a very dark place, especially Boyd, who spiralled into full-on clinical depression. As he chronicled with gripping honesty in his memoir *Cathedral of the Wild*, he forged his way through with the help of Beck and various spiritual experiences, which included tripping on the South American hallucinogenic Ayahuasca.

Before our sumptuous feast of tenderloin for the girls and cauliflower steaks for the boys (both Dave and Boyd are now vegetarians), we all hold hands in an "energy ring". It is hard not to be struck

"IF YOU RESTORE THE LAND, YOU SEE A TANGIBLE RESTORATION OF THE SPIRIT"



Dave Varty was just 15 and his brother John 17 when their father Boyd senior died and the question of whether to sell or to keep the land arose. Though both had been expected to shoot lions by the age of 12, neither particularly inherited the family gusto for the sport, but nonetheless persuaded their mother Maidie, an ex-tennis pro known to all as "The Mother of Londolozzi" not to sell the land off.

Though game was much scarcer than it is today (the land had been ravaged by cattle farming, which black communities had been forced to practise after being ejected from urban areas under apartheid) and there were some days you'd be lucky to spot a bush hare, they decided to set up a photography safari business. By word of mouth, they soon found themselves ferrying guests down to Londolozzi for R3-a-day safari weekends (both were still at university).

In typical Varty style, it was very much a fly-by-the-seat-of-your-pants operation. Stink bugs would always make their way into the hot chocolate and tapioca pudding (all there ever was to eat besides impala); the water in the lavatories, if there was any, often reached boiling point; and if the one and only "Landi" broke down,

Boyd plays with Truffle, the family's adored new golden retriever puppy. It's the perfect storytelling environment, and there are so many good ones to be told. Like the one where they all nearly drowned in a white-water-rafting trip in Zimbabwe. Or the near-crash the family encountered when a woolly-headed stork flew into the windscreen of their rickety Cessna 182 and Shan had to make a forced landing. Then there's the one—my particular favourite—about the time a Saudi royal came to stay complete with his retinue of princesses and bodyguards, a fridgeful of the prince's blood and a portable Power Plate. The trip had taken weeks, if not months, to arrange, all the staff were on high alert, and the royal fixer was panicking because the prince hadn't brought his Clarins face wash with him. On a last-minute check, Boyd walked into one of the bathrooms in the Granite Suites and found a large baboon who, on being caught drinking out of the papaya hand-lotion bottle, leapt from surface to surface, relieving himself Jackson-Pollock-style all over the white walls and bedspread.

Those were some of the good times. There were the very, very bad times too. When Boyd nearly died from malaria, for

by the sensitivity yet steeliness of this extraordinarily self-aware family. Says Boyd, "If you think of how we were driving around today on what was a bankrupt cattle farm and how that was changed in one generation and exported all over Africa... Why can't we create another microcosm of restoration—restoration of the land *and* the spirit—and take it all over the world? Water recycling, alternative energy, effective waste management: that's one layer. The next is teaching people to heal themselves emotionally, because if you heal yourself you are more likely to participate in the restoration of the planet..."

Could this be their "new system of living"? It has to start somewhere, after all—so why not in Africa? □

Carrier (0161 492 1353, www.carrier.co.uk) proposes 5 nights from £3,670 per person based on 2 people sharing a Chalet in Varty Camp, including breakfast, lunch and dinner, selected beverages, walking safaris, two game drives per day, a daily group yoga class, international flights with British Airways from London Heathrow, internal flights with Federal Air and airstrip transfers. For a luxurious stop in Johannesburg en route, try the Saxon Hotel, Villas & Spa. (saxon.co.za)