

Telling Africa's Stories

AFRICAN STORYBOOK

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*Seeing the spectacle through the eyes of
my Fynn...had me wildly excited.*

Daddy & Son Safari: Part 2

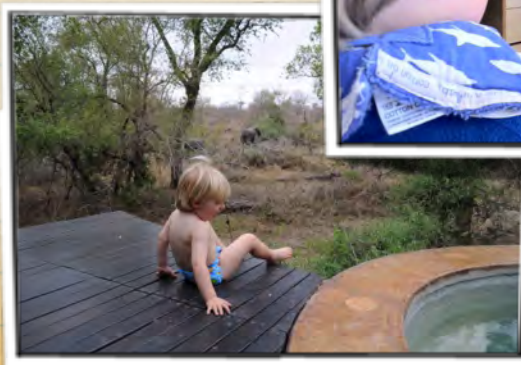
It feels like my first time. I'm observing a family of elephants stripping branches from a tree, some 20 metres beyond the deck of my chalet. But seeing the spectacle through the eyes of my Fynn of 31 months holds extra-special significance.

I drop his water-wings - the plunge-pool can wait 'til later. Mouthing and gesturing while trying to maintain some form of silence, I'm all too aware that we are about to share our first *serious* wild elephant experience.

Yes, he'd seen those impressive elephant herds six months previously at Addo Elephant Park, and he may be able to recite parts of that vintage classic, *Dumbo*, but this was different. He was now six months older - a crucial time of language, skills and recognition development in the miraculous creation that is the human brain.

'Efant', he says, matter-of-factly, pointing before turning his attention back to the long-deceased, floating bees in the pool. That had followed his 'hi, baby cow', a reference to his first buffalo (calf) we saw en route from the airstrip to the lodge.

'Losa', he says in his mother's German tongue, eyes wide and ears alert to that beautiful, haunting call of the mourning dove. Only found in the north-eastern parts of the country, it's integral to the bushveld morning chorus. I haven't heard it for over a year - but for Fynn it's a first. 'Duv', he repeats after me. The elephants continue with their silent meal.



*'Efant', he said, matter-of-factly, pointing, before
turning his attention back to the long-dead, floating bees
in the pool.*



Not designed for kids?



We're at a game lodge called Vuyatela, in Djuma Game Reserve – which itself is part of Kruger National Park. Light years removed from the wonderful, yet basic traditional Kruger rest camps, when I visited Vuyatela in 2000 it was the first contemporary-designed luxury lodge I had seen on the South African safari circuit. A beautiful space, dominated by bright colours and iconic South African designs on the cushions.

It hasn't changed much. While Fynn's Mom would relish it, here I am with a two year-old who doesn't quite appreciate the designer African touches in the bathroom. But he turns the soap-rack into a boat and the games begin. This is quality bonding.

We're in the last room, number eight, and while I opt to leave the rest of the guests to enjoy their dinner in peace.

It's raining, softly, when we wake. I skip the morning game-drive, and Eugene the manager organizes for us to have our own vehicle on an afternoon outing. There are many hours to pass, and the usual distractions are absent; no playing in the park, no house-chores, and no TV. And I've only brought one toy - his tiny, die-cast, white model Concorde (a hand-me-down jet).

Serendipity has it that Eugene is a good uncle to his niece, and he relates to my challenge. Hoisting Fynn onto his shoulders, he shows him the elephants gathered at the lodge waterhole before introducing him to the pair of abandoned bush-babies he's nursing in a shoebox, behind the kitchen. 'Big hug' says Fynn to the wide-eyed, 100 mg, almost hairless creatures.

We spend the next hour sifting through autumn leaves in search of bugs. There are crawly things and new birds all along the path

back to our chalet, with the comical hornbills and loud, darting francolins taking his fancy. Back at the room he settles into a new DVD on my laptop, before finally nodding off. It's two hours after his normal nap – his routine is out the window.

Lunch arrives on a tray, but word around camp is that lions have been spotted mating not too far away.

So we scramble up the long path to the vehicle, I'm carrying my (large) camera bag, plates of food, his bottle - a hungry toddler on game-drive isn't a good idea - and a 16kg Fynn.

Free of a car-seat, he stands, wind-in-the-hair and me holding him by his pants. He quickly makes friends with the ranger / tracker team of Nick and Lucas, and a game of hide 'n seek at the sundowner-stop ensues. I can't tell who's having more fun.

When Nick catches Fynn, juice in hand, hiding under the parked vehicle, he

notes a look of extreme concentration on his face. In the name of openness and sharing, with the sun about to dip from view and nightjars starting to call, my son announces proudly to the bush: 'I'm doing poofie'. I quickly realize I didn't bring a nappie. Fynn seems relieved, while Nick and Lucas chuckle.

And we'd forgotten all about the lions.



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PS - Vuyatela has just changed focus, and is now focusing on the local market as a 'lodge for hire', with a chef and a guide - the whole place to yourself.