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## Keep It Simple...

In pouring rain (so the story goes) on December 29 1979, down the sodden dirt roads of South Africa's Timbavati Game Reserve, Paul Geiger drove his foreman's heavily pregnant wife to the doctor to give birth. The child born that day, Godfrey Mathebula, is today head guide at Motswari. For Godfrey, it's not just a job, he belongs to the land. He is of the soil he walks on. And in the 30 000 hectares of Motswari, featuring mopane trees and elephants and the occasional white lion, is found his story. And many, many others...

So a lodge is a lodge is a lodge. When comparing like with like, this pretty much holds true, especially when considering the fittings, competence of the guides and standard of food whipped up in the kitchen. The big separator, however, is found in its narrative, the attitude of the staff, and the feel of the place. It's the combination of these that makes it dead simple for an establishment to distinguish itself from the competition.

Easier said than done maybe, but at Motswari - in South Africa's Timbavati Game Reserve, part of the greater Kruger Park - I found a destination seemingly getting it right. The fact that it has a relatively high occupancy over this past year of crippling recession means that this lodge is doing something right. In and amongst the simple thatch and traditional *rondawel* huts I discovered the lodge's remarkably simple X-factor.



The veranda - where lunch is served, framed by a flamboyant tree. Exotic yes, but non-invasive!. Below: Diesel's been used for decades.



*In the pouring rain (so the story goes)...down the sodden dirt roads...he drove his foreman's heavily pregnant wife to the doctor.*





*Bread fresh from the oven, the Shlalarumi river running for the first time in five years, cutting off roads - and Siphive Maholobela caught on her cleaning rounds.*

Just like any contemporary corporate bible will tell you, success starts with the people. Motswari's cleaners, cooks and guides exude a certain confidence, a belief in themselves not always found in the game lodge environment.

The first hint as to a different way of thinking is found in the attitude of the owners, the Swiss South African Geiger family...and that rainy-night drive Paul Geiger made to the doctor in Acornhoek, outside the reserve.

And then there's the GM, Katherine Bergs. On arriving as a tourist 20 years ago, almost as if following a script, Cathy fell in love with Motswari. She gave up her job working for a bank in NYC and returned to the lodge as a receptionist. In the process - yes, still with the script - she met her husband to be, also working at the lodge.

Cathy's extended stay here is significant. She has found in its women stories so significant that she's written them up. In showing an interest in the personal

circumstances of those who work for them, the owners and management have given them a voice. It explains Siphive Maholobela's impish grin. And Netta Makhubela's cheerfulness. And there are 20 similar tales, all of which seem to liberate the tellers (typical of an aspiring writer, Cathy's a bit shy about her first literary effort, but it's a surprising, compelling read).

We could've been anywhere in the developing world. But the fact that I was guided by Godfrey Mathebula around the land on which he was born - that we saw a white lion cub later that day, witnessed a river flow for the first time in five years and was told of 83 leopard sightings the previous month - rooted this tale firmly in Africa. In this case in South Africa's Timbavati.

With *mopane* veld dominant and the grasslands to the south, plains game occur in pockets rather than herds. And for those interested, the Big Five are regular visitors. But its Motswari's stories that make this a standout experience.

