

SPA OF THE MONTH

THE SHARPEST UPDATES ON HEALTH-CENTRED DESTINATIONS

EDITED BY ISSY VON SIMSON



EXCLUSIVE FIRST LOOK

A SOUTH AFRICAN SAFARI CAMP WHERE MANDELA SAW THE BIG FIVE FOR THE FIRST TIME IS DRAWING ON THE BELIEFS OF SHAMANS, HEALERS AND OPRAH WINFREY'S LIFE COACH TO CREATE THE MOST PROGRESSIVE WELLNESS RETREAT IN THE BUSH

BY FRANCESCA SYZ

PHOTOGRAPH: ELSA YOUNG

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WHEN NELSON MANDELA WAS RELEASED from prison in 1990, his friend Enos Mabuza sent him off to escape the paparazzi at Londolozi, a game reserve in South Africa's wild eastern lowlands owned by the Varty Family, with a ground-breaking conservation ethic that placed equal importance on the protection of the land, its wildlife and its indigenous people. Before long, Mandela had moved out of his guest quarters into a spare room in the Varty compound and a lifelong friendship between him and the family followed.

The story of Londolozi began in 1926 when two friends from Johannesburg, Charles Boyd Varty and Frank Unger, came up with a plan to buy an almost inaccessible piece of land on the banks of the Sand River, camp under its 1,000-year-old ebony trees, and run hunting safaris there. They did this until 1969, when Varty's grandson Dave – co-founder of CC Africa, now &Beyond – his wife Shan and brother John took stewardship of the place, ditching guns for cameras and launching South Africa's first photographic safaris.

Londolozi is now home to five smart little camps spread out along the river within a six-million-acre conservation area teeming with lion, rhino, elephant, buffalo and leopard. This summer, its most exclusive offering was beautifully revamped: the three-bedroom Private Granite Suites, positioned perfectly for watching elephants frolic from its new bar, and the 10-bedroom Varty Camp, which sits in the footprint of the family's original mud rondavels. The look is simple and elegant, each room a cocoon opening out onto a deck cantilevering over the water, with a shaded dining area and plunge pool. The stilted restaurant, a calm space filled with contemporary African art, glows like a lantern at night. But more intriguingly, Londolozi has just launched its first spa, the Healing

House, at Varty Camp. Offering nature-based experiences, this could just be the most forward-thinking wellness offering in Africa.

I first visited Londolozi 10 years ago, at a thrilling moment in its history when the Vartys had just returned to run the place again after a 10-year break, bursting with renewed determination to drive forward the conservation tourism model they had pioneered. Back then, Dave and Shan Varty were the driving forces and their children, Bronwyn and Boyd, had just joined the team. Fast forward a decade, and the kids are leading the charge. During that time, extraordinarily, they had trained under Oprah Winfrey's life coach, Martha Beck. Her belief that the senses are deadened by desk jobs and smartphones and that you need to learn to listen to your body, the ultimate navigational tool, to tap into your innate wisdom struck a chord. They also studied with Navaho medicine men and Peruvian shamans, two groups who put sound, the original healing fix, at the centre of their rituals. Then they set about creating a spa that would draw on all these ideas, while harnessing the energy of the African wilderness.

Now I am back here again. It's dawn and I'm in the bush in search of rhino, light-headed with excitement, and lost. I stop and scan the ground and the sky for clues. I listen. And I mean really listen, like you do when you're in bed and you think there's a burglar downstairs. With Boyd and tracker Sergeant Sibuyi following me, I retrace my steps until I spot a fresh clump of mud on a branch, causing me to change direction. We get to a large termite mound. Sergeant clambers up to the top. Smiling, he beckons for me to join him. On the other side is a female rhino and her baby. I've just stalked a wild animal.

This exercise is all about reactivating our internal instincts, relearning to trust our inner guidance system and not being afraid

Above from left: the deck of a Private Granite Suite at Londolozi; a bathroom at Varty Camp. Previous page, the main living area at the camp

PHOTOGRAPHS: ELSA YOUNG

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to go back and try again. It's one of the experiences offered during the five-day Healing House retreats, the first of which takes place this month. I spent four weeks at an ashram in India when I was 14. It attracted a lot of faux-enlightened Californians in floaty scarves, so I usually shudder when people talk about healing and finding themselves. But there's a simple logic to all of this that I like – the unshakeable belief in nature's ability to quiet the mind and reset the imbalances caused by our disconnected modern lives.

I'm sent off on a silent game drive with guide Andrea Sithole and Sersant. We spend a while at a waterhole watching two elephants. A leopard dragging a warthog up a tree. Four lions intertwined in sleep on a hill. Silence, I'm told, acts as a doorway to a deeper part of ourselves. Here, it creates the opportunity to feel completely safe while being surrounded by wilderness, in a wordless space without chatter, where one can stop trying to name and capture everything.

There are sunrise yoga sessions on a shaded deck and meditative breathwork classes with woodland kingfishers chirruping away in the background. And, of course, the spa itself. Healing House also features Shan Varty's sister BeJay Watson, a yoga teacher, reiki master and energy healer, among other things, with the kindest, gentlest nature. The main space is an open-sided room, with a terrace stretching over riverine forest. Down a little walkway are the treatment rooms, a Himalayan salt sauna and freeze pool. You can book anything from knot-busting massages with therapist Christina Fox to more progressive sessions with BeJay, including biophony and sound therapy. I try it all.

For the biophony, which stimulates a nervous-system-repairing pre-sleep state of relaxation, I wear headphones through which

sounds of nature are played. It knocks me out. Sound therapy takes place in a cocoon-like room. I lie in semi-darkness, BeJay bonging tuning forks, Tibetan singing bowls, gongs and an extraordinary single-note monochord that makes my body hum like a beehive. It's strangely moving. When I sob – just the twice – between treatments, she stretches out on the day-bed next to mine and chats to me quietly. This is a dreamy space in which to unravel.

What they're doing at the Healing House feels like a natural progression in the global wellness movement, at a time when the desire for experiential travel has been eclipsed by the search for something more transformational, motivated by a need to shift perspective and perhaps even develop as a human being. It's hardly surprising that more people are turning to shamans for a bit of nurturing – and to be reminded that all life is connected. What elevates Londolozzi's offering above the rest is that it combines a curated wish list of the best ancient healing techniques with time spent creatively in an unspoiled place where wild animals roam free.

Will one Healing House treatment change your world? Probably not. An entire retreat? If you let it. I enjoyed everything I tried, although probably on more of a primal, tension-busting level than an intellectual one. While I can now confirm it's a lot easier to meditate under a giant ebony tree than it is on a crowded London Underground train, my visit to the Healing House really did feel like coming up for air. 🙏

Knighon Reeve offers four nights at Londolozzi Varty Camp from £4,245 per person, including flights, all meals, local drinks and safari activities.

The first Londolozzi Healing House retreat will take place 14-18 November 2018, with two more scheduled next year. knighonreeve.co.uk

Above, a seating area in a Private Granite Suite at Londolozzi