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OFFBEAT

On Location in South Africa: Interview with a Safari Guide

A great safari guide is your window into the wild: their instincts and expertise are the ingredients that produce incredible wildlife encounters and invaluable lessons about the natural world. We chatted with South African-born field guide Bethuel Dennis Mkhonto about his work inside the Sabi Sabi Private Game Reserve, what it's like to see life and death in the bush, and how elephants teach us about ourselves.

By Lindsey Olander December 27, 2016



Tell us about yourself. How did you come to be a safari guide?

My name is Bethuel Dennis Mkhonto, and I was born in a village called Lillydale, also known as Kwinyamahembe, in South Africa's Mpumalanga Province. I grew up with my mother and my grandfather, who played the father role in my life.

My grandfather, a skilled hunter, was the breadwinner at home—he used a bow and arrow and set up traps to hunt small antelopes to feed our family. The way he used his senses (smelling, hearing, feeling) was amazing. I was fortunate to

spend most of my childhood among the woods and the animals, and I continue to spend most of my time in the bush, even after the death of my granddad. His knowledge lives inside me and makes me feel part of the natural world.

I grew up at church, helping people and giving advice, but because I could not afford to further my education at university for social work, I was forced to stay at home for two years until a company called the [Endangered Wildlife Trust](#) began a project to train disadvantaged youth as rangers or nature guides. I studied for four years at [Africa Nature Training](#) and six years at Mabula Private Game Reserve in South Africa's Limpopo province before applying to [Sabi Sabi Private Game Reserve](#), which is closer to my family. I know a lot about the vegetation that grows in Sabi Sabi because I grew up here, learning stories from my granddad, so it was like coming back home. I've now been at Sabi Sabi for about three years.



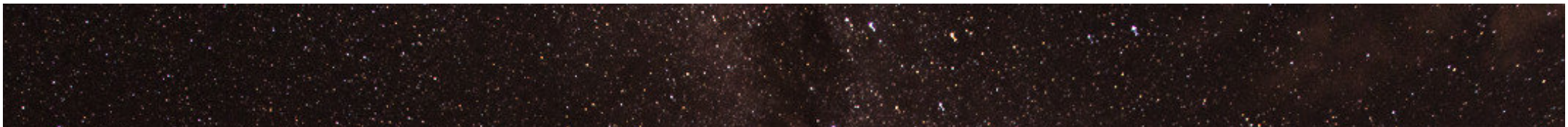


What is the best part of your job?

I love meeting people from different cultures and proudly sharing my knowledge about my beautiful country. There was a time when humankind recognized itself as part of nature and nature as part of itself, and dreaming and waking were inseparable realities. People used images of nature to express this unity. Most of them now live in the city, away from the truly natural world, so because of this, it is not surprising that people do not feel a part of it. They have little connection to and less concern of the natural world, so part of my job is to help them reconnect and to remember about how important nature is in our daily lives. The world is a distant, abstract object full of different creatures and plants, with no life or purpose of its own other than to take care of us.

Is there anything about your job that challenges you?

Unfortunately, it is hard for me to connect with people who do not speak English because even though they are excited when I show them the Big Five (lion, elephant, buffalo, leopard, and rhino), I feel deeply sad that I don't have a chance to share stories about my country and my culture. I want all guests to benefit from my knowledge of the bush and of all living things in the bush beyond the Big Five.







Describe an exciting wildlife encounter you've had recently.

This is the most difficult question, but I'll share one story: about a month ago, during a morning game drive, we were viewing a pride of resting lions when we suddenly spotted a herd of buffalo heading towards us. There were about four lionesses and eight cubs, but the buffalo did not see them. South Africa is coming off a bad year of drought, so herbivores like hippo and buffalo are struggling due to the shortage of food and are still weak when facing predators. These buffalo walked straight into the trap, where the lions were waiting to

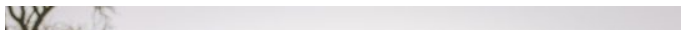
attack. They were not strong enough to fight or run, and within five minutes, two were on ground. After the kill, the lions went on take down two other buffalo. It was heartbreaking to witness the life lost, and some of the guests were crying. But it is the cycle of life. Life and death are the most creative processes we experience. Life is difficult for most to understand and death is difficult for most humans to accept. But while we have built tremendous fear around death, it only affects animals for a few minutes before life goes on.

What is your favorite animal in the bush?

My favorite animal is the elephant. Every animal has its talents, and studying those talents will reveal the kind of healing, magic, and power that you can develop in your own life. Animals almost become like mentors. Elephants show great affection and loyalty to each other. Older calves help younger siblings around the waterhole. Grown elephants help sick or wounded family members. In the elephant are ideals of true society—a mutual care of the young and respect for the elderly and sick. This is the foundation of a great person that you need to be in order to be successful in life.

What is the best season in Sabi Sabi for seeing the Big Five?

Sabi Sabi is always a great place to see the Big Five. Those who don't like heat should know that our warmest months are between November and mid-February. Those who'd prefer a greener landscape in their pictures should come between October until mid-April, while those who want an open bush and cooler temperatures should come from April to October. Our aim at Sabi Sabi is for each individual guest to end their stay with us feeling like they had the ultimate bush experience and were treated like a VIP.





Is there a particular lesson or story you love to teach your guests about regarding nature or your culture?

The wilderness is vital to mankind, for in the wilderness we strengthen our bonds with the earth and find peace within ourselves, and I believe it our duty to protect it. From an ecological perspective, each species is an essential part of the food chain, and the removal of one jeopardizes the function of all. Secondly, from an evolutionary perspective, each species has a unique genetic history and represents millions of years and adaption to the environment. The extinction of one species erases this history forever. Aesthetically, philosophically, and ethically, it is our responsibility to conserve such biodiversity so that future generations can appreciate it as we do today.

What advice do you have for people who are going on safari for the first time?

A safari isn't just about the game-viewing experience or seeing the Big Five. It is also about the enjoyment of exploring unspoiled natural areas, absorbing and tuning oneself into the atmosphere, learning to appreciate all aspects of nature and cultural heritage, and, most importantly, making memories with

family and friends—or starting over and giving yourself a chance to connect to nature on a spiritual level. Above all, stop stressing about seeing the Big Five and let the guide spoil you!





This interview has been edited for length and clarity.

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