

Save the Elephants-South Africa

Bush School June 2011



What a wonderful weekend to look back on! Saturday morning found us checking up on 8 cutely made bunk beds, locking the windows against monkeys, and then heading in the car towards Acornhoek, the local village where, to a town thumping with African beats, we picked up 8 little girls, and set off back to the Timbavati Bush School.



Apprehensive at first, but soon, as it does, chatter took over the car as the girls got to know each other, and having settled in, we got straight into the fun. These girls came from the local community of Acornhoek/Tulamahashe, which is based on the border of the Kruger National Park. Despite their close proximity to the game reserve, many of these children have never had exposure to the bush, or animals. For us educating comes through immersion, through getting hands on with trees, dirt, and tracking. As the Senegalese poet, Baba Dioum states, "In the end, we will protect only what we love. We will love only what we understand. We will understand only what we are taught."



The afternoon continued with Moses, a local guide, teaching the girls medicinal uses of the trees in the area, which tree to use as a toothbrush, which tree could be the toothpaste, and which berries are safe to eat. After a brief impala-dung-spitting contest, the bush walk continued, with the girls learning how to tell bird tracks from lions, and old tracks from new ones.



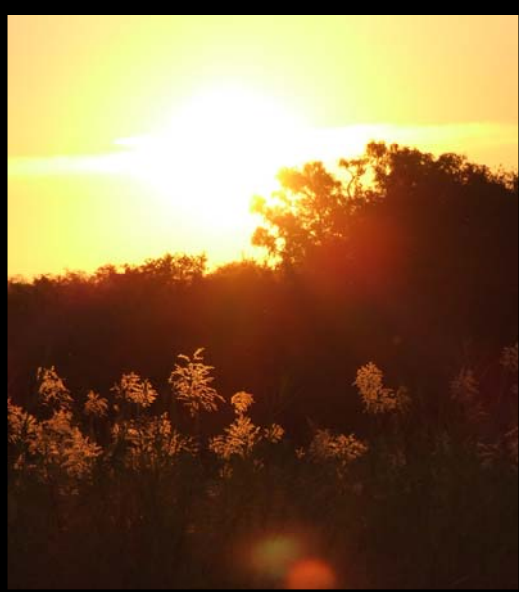


It was with big excitement that the girls returned to camp that afternoon for some lunch, before settling down and getting creative in some arts and crafts...using beads and glitter as well as sand and leaves to create picture frames. As the afternoon cooled off and the evening settled on us, we huddled around the fire to enjoy a “Talent Show”, with the girls splitting into groups and doing little songs and dances for us in the firelight, accompanied by Moses.

It was with the sounds of laughter and song ringing into the night that our first evening of Bush School came to a close.



Day two dawned bright and early, as sunrise found us already snuggled in the car and en-route to the STE-SA office for a day of game drives and elephant tracking. A very successful day with many of the girls seeing leopard, lion, buffalo and elephants for the first time.



Squeals over the tall giraffe and the beautiful zebra made us realise the specialness of being able to see this on a daily basis...something that is a privilege that not everyone is privy to. The highlight of the day, of course was the girls learning telemetry with Michelle Henley, the resident elephant researcher... it was rewarding for us to watch the girls listening intently to her explanations, and then help her using the antennae to track one of our collared elephants.



After a picnic lunch in the shade, a very tired and dusty, but happy bunch made their way back towards the Timbavati Bush School—heading on to an evening of chicken curry and drumming and dancing around the fire.

The ladies from Motswari Game lodge donned brightly coloured skirts, beads, and ankle rattles, and

came to perform for us... the thumping of their big leather drum beating passion and pride of the Shangaan culture into the 8 little girls, who after much squirming on their chairs, were up on their feet too... feet pounding in the dirt in time to the beat... voices raised together in beautiful African song! It was great fun, and the time passed too quickly in a flurry of colourful skirts, drumbeats and swirling bodies! Eventually bed time came after a wonderful day. To the beautiful and radiant ladies from Motswari who came to dance for us- we thank you. You inspired joy and brought pride!



The last morning of bush school had us warming up around the fire early... reminiscing about the previous two days.. so much learnt, not only about the bush, about life, about tradition and culture, and also about oneself I think... After a couple hours of bush lessons in their workbooks, the girls were ready for the “Treasure Hunt” that we had prepared... using many “Bush Clues” to test their new knowledge. It was endearing confusion that ensued—as many of the girls somehow managed to find the winning clue, without finding any of the preceding ones. (yes... we were crawling under bushes and collecting clues long after bush school finished!) Either way, it was fun though! And the prize giving that we ended with was enjoyed by all, as everyone received their little gift bags, and cacti plants to grow at home.

After breakfast and packing up, it was with hugs all round that we loaded everyone back in the car, and waved a sweet goodbye. Such a wonderful time of bonding, of growth, of learning- how to spend time together, how to respect different cultures, how to be tired, and happy and hungry together, how to cook for 30 people, and how tell the time from shadows.



I think we all took something special away, whether it was our hand-decorated frames, or the letters from the kids, the photos of the elephant tracking, or just a special memory. In all I think we each carry something very unique and individual away from this experience, something that we will remember, and that will live on. I think—that the STE-SA Bush School June 2011 was a resounding success!



We of course have many people to thank. To the children involved- thank you. It is with your youthful and curious spirits that we find hope for the future! To Michelle, Moses, Colin, Summer, and Sarah (the STE-SA Team) – well done, and thank you for making it what it was! Then to the many wonderful people that not only sponsored their time, but also the delicious food that we and the kids enjoyed all weekend; to Plaston, LeBamba and Pick 'n Pay Hoedspruit... through you we managed to cover almost all the groceries and provided great snacks and yummy dinners! Thank you for your investment in the bush school! We really appreciate it! To Charles De Villiers for the use of his wonderful bush school, a big thanks you. And to Edith Theron for the sweet elephant-print gift bags...thanks-the girls loved them! There were of course numerous people in support roles, helping keep us sane, helping wash pots and pans, and just being THERE! To all of you- our **heartfelt** thanks....

