Mapungubwe uncovered

In the Limpopo and Shashe river basin where three countries meet, ANITA DEVILLIERS discovers a reserve that brims with wildlife.

The new Interpretive Centre won its architect the 2009 World Building of the Year Award in Barcelona. Using only natural materials sourced from the surrounding environment, it was built by local people as part of a skills development project.

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On our way to Mapungubwe Hill, past the excavation site on our right with its retractable roof.

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Iron Age. This was our base for the latter half of our Mapungubwe expedition.

The weekenders had left and we were lucky to be the only takers for the Sunday afternoon tour of Mapungubwe Hill, guided by Johannes Masalesa. “Jan Smuts, he is my friend,” was his opening line, sure to catch the attention. “My great-great-uncle told me all about him, how much he loved the plants and the animals. And he loved peace.”

Johannes’s great-great-uncle was the son of Mowena, the man pivotal in the course of events that led to the discovery of Mapungubwe Hill in 1932. Eight centuries of oral tradition had kept the mystery and deep fear of this ancestral site alive, forbidding the local people to even face the hill. With his back turned to the hill, it was Johannes’s great-great-uncle who eventually showed the discovery party the access point to this seemingly unclimbable sandstone citadel.

The official version of the discovery and the history that unfolded, as archaeological discoveries fleshed out the facts, are well-documented. But here, with us, was a man with a side of the story that spoke of a deep knowledge and love of this enigmatic land. Our shared roots in this valley of the Limpopo, or Vhembe, as the river was known to the local people, bled into the crimson and ochre of the terrain is leokwe, the main rest camp named after the unclimbable sandstone citadel.

Decades of politics would ensue before the park was eventually opened in September 2004. At that time there already was concern about the impact of the influx of elephants across the Limpopo, and the park would straddle the Limpopo River and stretch into Botswana and Zimbabwe. Decades of politics would ensue before the park was eventually opened in September 2004. At that time there already was concern about the impact of the influx of elephants across the Limpopo. Pride of lions audibly made their presence felt. Around the campfire the previous night, we had lamented the loss of the riparian fig and fever tree forest, ending in a hide right above the riverbed. First to welcome us was the sound of green pigeons and from the hide we witnessed the heart-rending hour-long drama of a tiny warthog failing to scale the steep riverbank and follow its parents into the bush. Mom and dad eventually reappeared and the family was united, happily trotting away in search of greener pastures, tails in the air.

With such an early wake-up call, the 4x4 was packed by first light and we were ready to explore the western section of Mapungubwe National Park in the far northern region of Limpopo. The road from Forest Camp to Maloutswa Hide took us through a terrain that had changed drastically since my previous visit in 2004. Where once was mopani woodland and giant leadwoods, acacias and apple leaf trees, was now large tracts of skeletal landscape.

The bushveld beyond the Soutpansberg was in the grip of a severe drought and the hide’s waterhole attracted a continuous parade of wildlife including three large elephant breeding herds. For hours we watched the doormats of these ancient souls charging to this precious pool, drinking deeply the youngest cakes splashing about as they tried to draw water through their gawky trunks. The vision of Mapungubwe as a wildlife reserve was long in the making. Even before the discovery of the now famous artefacts on Mapungubwe Hill in 1932, Jan Smuts had found solace and inspiration in this wild landscape of sandstone, boulders and mopani, prompting him to pioneer the idea of a transfrontier park that would straddle the Limpopo River and stretch into Botswana and Zimbabwe.

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Mapungubwe / TRAVEL

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Peter Rich, the World Building of the Year Award in 2009. We were drawn into the coolness of the centre, where our journey through Mapungubwe’s history unfolded like a cultural pilgrimage, culminating in the vaulted rondavel with its sole exhibit, the golden rhino.

The small golden rhino has achieved iconic status, representing one of Africa’s earliest kingdoms, an advanced society that not only traded in gold and ivory, but produced precious objets d’art (c. 1200 – 1280). There are several other archaeological sites, including an area associated with the Zhizo Pottery tradition (c. AD 700 – 900), as well as 150 documented rock-art sites. This bounty led to the proclamation of Mapungubwe National Park as a World Heritage Site in 2003, a status that will hopefully help protect this valley from modern pressures such as a coal mining industry whose tentacles creep ever nearer to this ancient, fragile land.

What would Smuts say if he were to return to the ruins of his old cottage on this land that he loved so much? I’m sure he would find it just as beautiful and inspiring. But I also think he would find a landscape under new pressures: a natural and cultural legacy that needs wisdom and passion such as his to protect it.