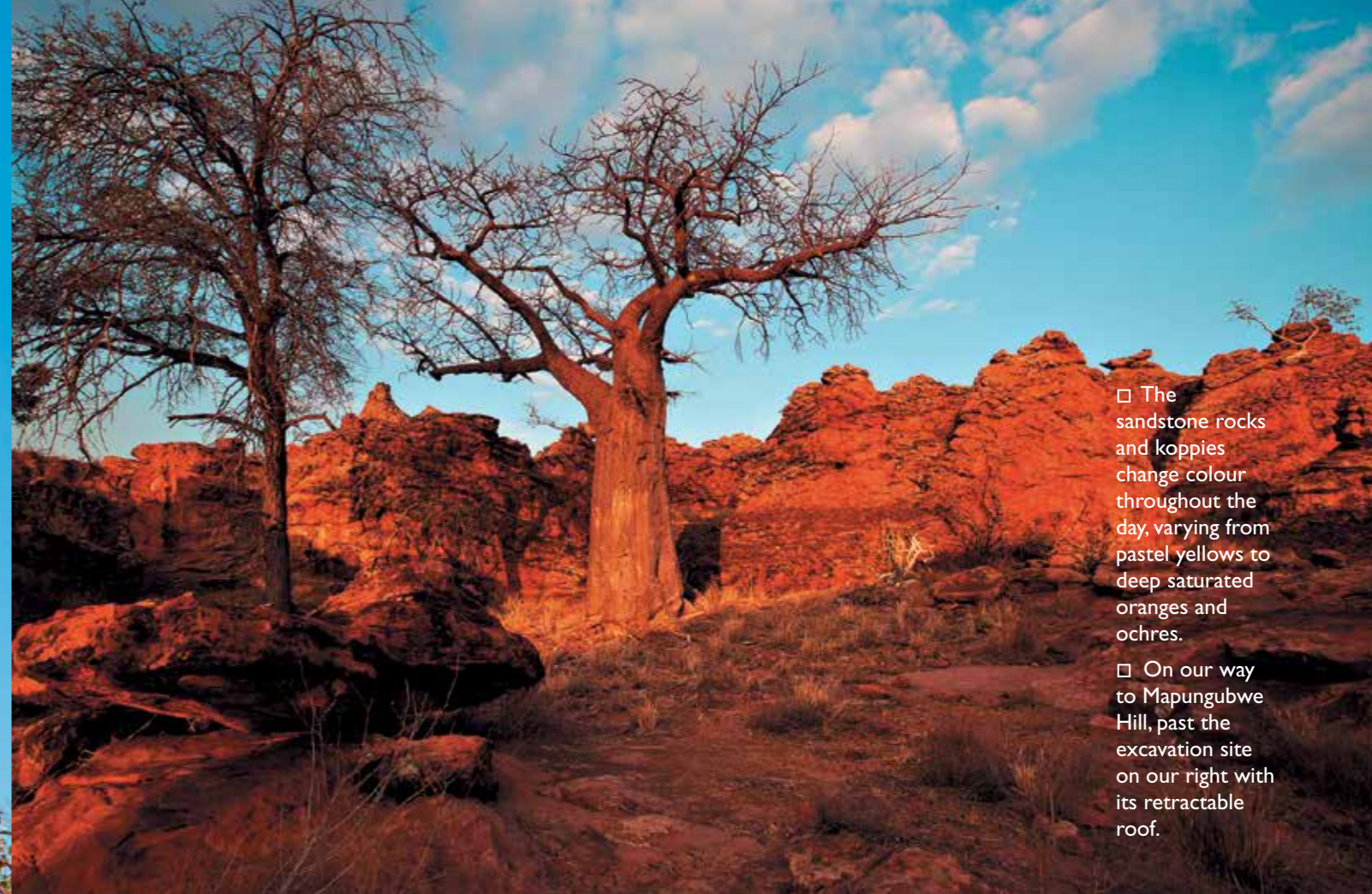
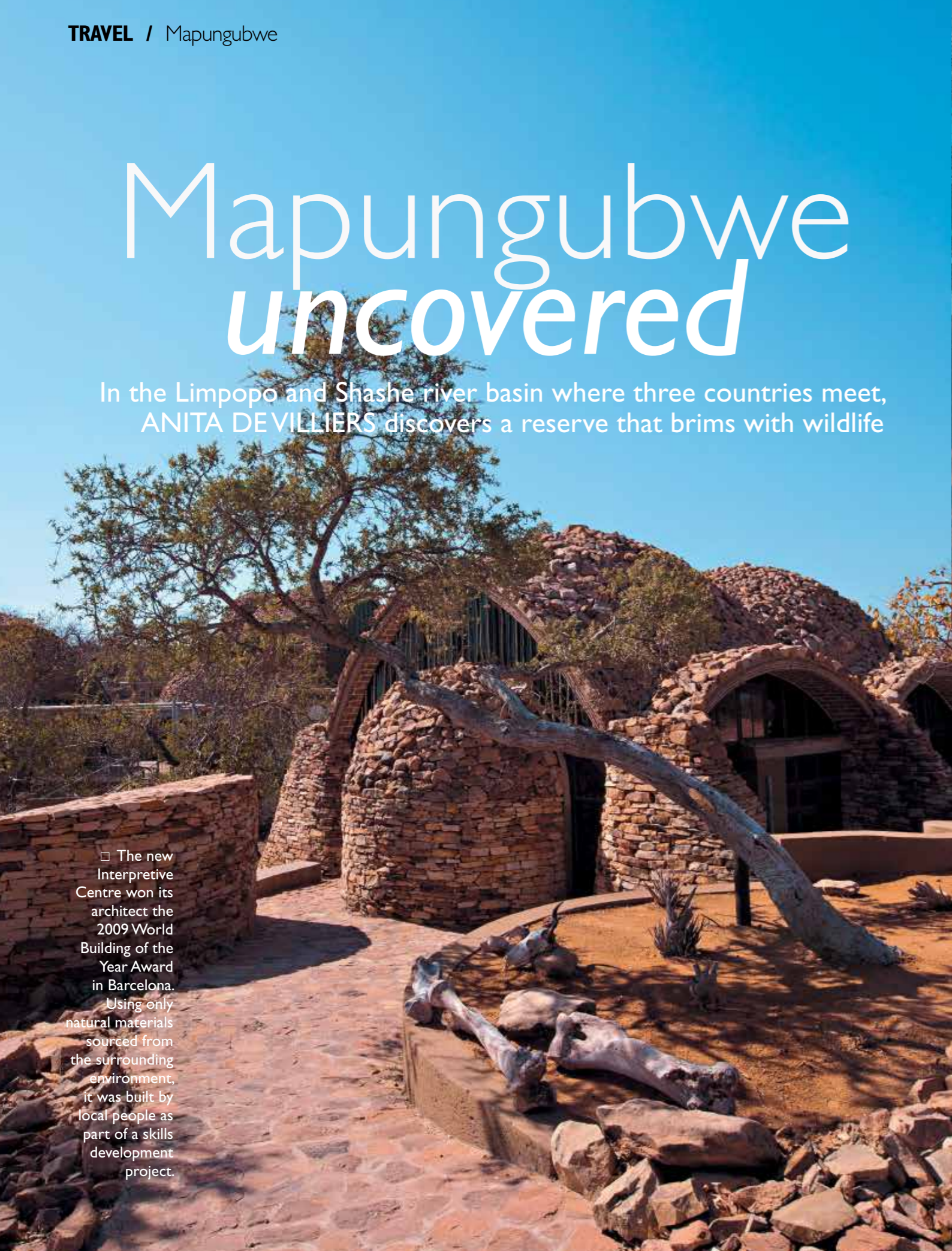


Mapungubwe *uncovered*

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

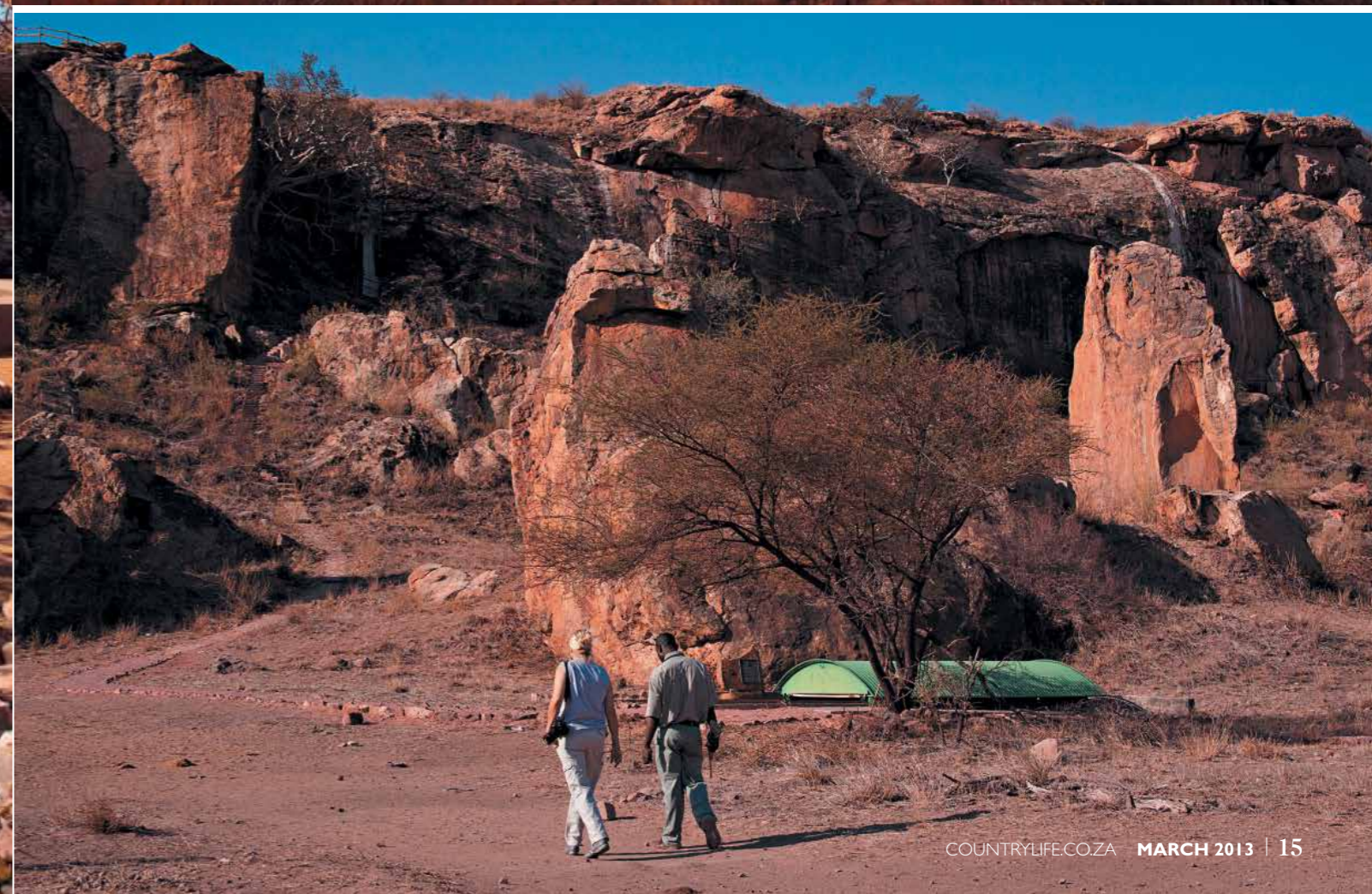
□ The new Interpretive Centre won its architect the 2009 World Building of the Year Award in Barcelona.

Using only natural materials sourced from the surrounding environment, it was built by local people as part of a skills development project.



□ The sandstone rocks and koppies change colour throughout the day, varying from pastel yellows to deep saturated oranges and ochres.

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





□ Interpretive guide, Johannes Masalesa, on top of Mapungubwe Hill. In the foreground is one of the oldest family board games, Mufuvha, as it is known in Venda. The game is played by moving pebbles between the hollows made in the sandstone surface.

IT WAS NOT AN ORDINARY DAY. IN FACT ALL the days that followed were extraordinary. Long before the first birds signalled dawn, a pride of lions audibly made their presence felt. Around the campfire the previous night, we had lamented that the tent's lapa was fully enclosed, but in the small hours of the morning, the architectural arrangement made a lot of sense.

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

The bushveld beyond the Soutpansberg was in the grip of a severe drought and the hide's waterhole attracted a continuous parade of wildlife

attracted a continuous parade of wildlife, including three large elephant breeding herds. For hours we watched the diorama of these ancient souls charging to this precious pool, drinking deeply, the youngest calves 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, baobab and mopani, prompting him to pioneer the idea of a transfrontier park that 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 the influx of elephants across the Limpopo would have on the environment. In the western section there is practically free movement of game across the river, and the park faces a very real problem of deforestation and eventually even desertification.

Mapungubwe National Park came into being through a long process of piecemeal acquisitions of farms along the Limpopo River. Tracts of private land still divide the western and eastern sections of the park, with Mapungubwe Hill and the newly opened Interpretation Centre on the eastern side. It falls within the Limpopo-Shashe basin that is part of the Limpopo Mobile Belt, the oldest mobile belt in the world, with rocks dating back from 2 700 to 3 700 million years.

Over millennia, subterranean processes and climatic erosion shaped this primordial landscape of sandstone koppies and cliffs, granite boulders and dolerite dykes. Tucked into the contours of this rocky terrain is Leokwe, the main rest camp named after the people who lived in this valley during the Middle

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

fading afternoon as we drove back to the camp in perfect silence.

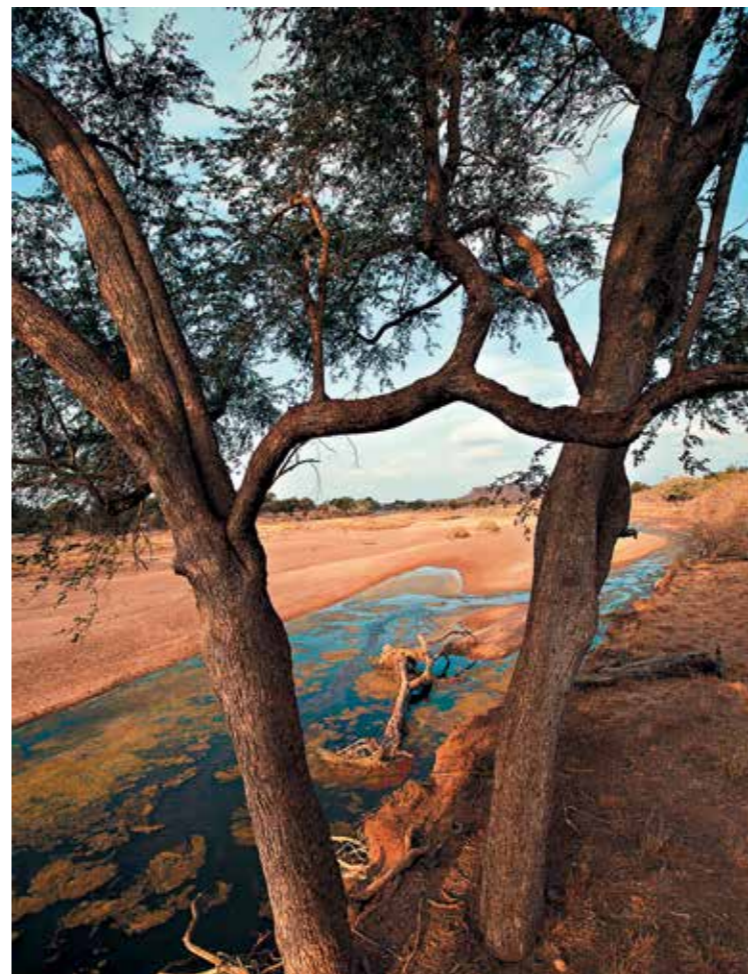
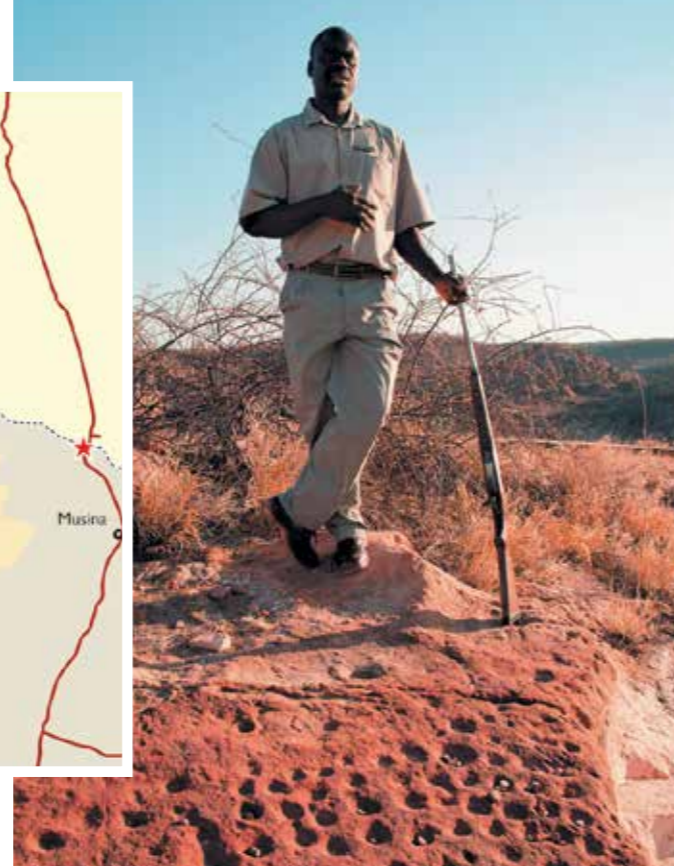
Vhembe, 'The Gatherer', is the Limpopo in one of its moods: a mighty mass of surging brown water sweeping away all in its path. But in a land so dry, its dominant demeanour is that of a wide sandy bed with subsurface water that the elephants sometimes unearth. Sunrise on the look-out decks at the confluence of the Shashe and Limpopo is gripping, and it draws a graphic picture of this point where the two rivers and three countries meet.

To get close to The Gatherer, there is a tree-top walkway upstream that takes you to within a few metres of the canopy level 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.

Lunch at the restaurant of the Interpretation Centre was lazy and laid-back, the temperature climbing into the high thirties. This modern structure that assimilates natural materials and cultural symbolism into its design, had won its architect,

□ The Limpopo has many moods, depending on season. It's difficult to believe that this wide sandbed can become a seething mass of water when the big rains come.

□ A breeding herd of elephant charges towards the watering hole at Maloutswa Hide.



- The main camp, Leokwe, echoes the shapes, textures and colours of this valley.
- A long tree-top walkway through riparian forest ends in this hide overlooking the Limpopo River.
- Magnificent baobabs grow in this park, some estimated to be older than 3 000 years.
- The Limpopo Forest Camp is spread under giant nyala trees. Each spacious tent is en suite and fully equipped.
- The dainty speckle-coated klipspringer is ideally suited to the rocky terrain of the park.
- Mapungubwe Hill is a natural fortress, with only one steep access route between two rock faces.



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. ■

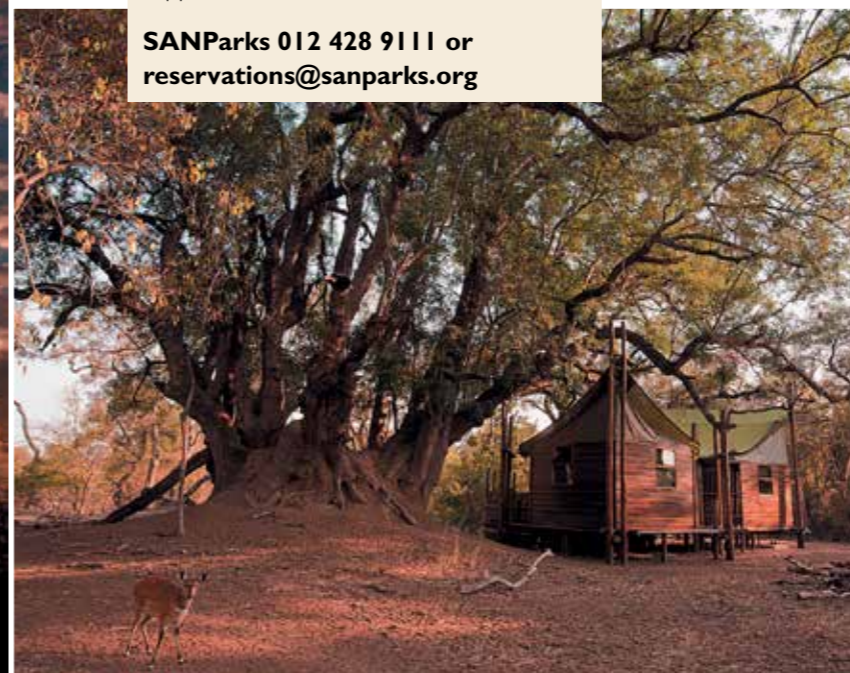
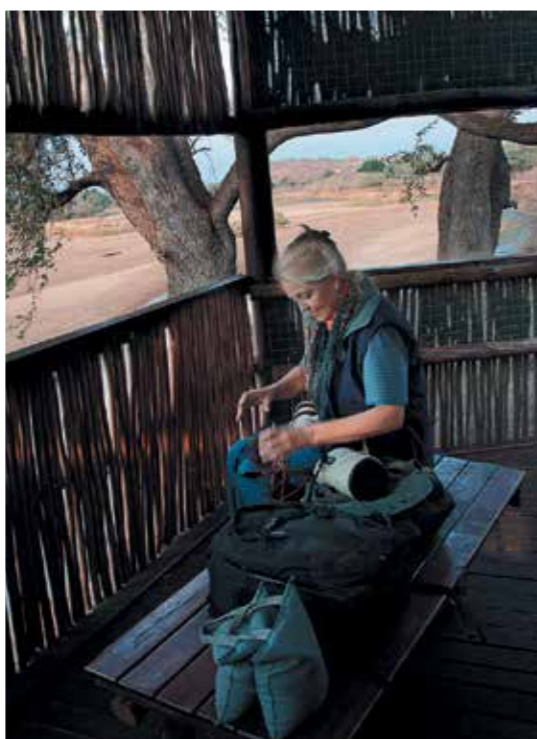
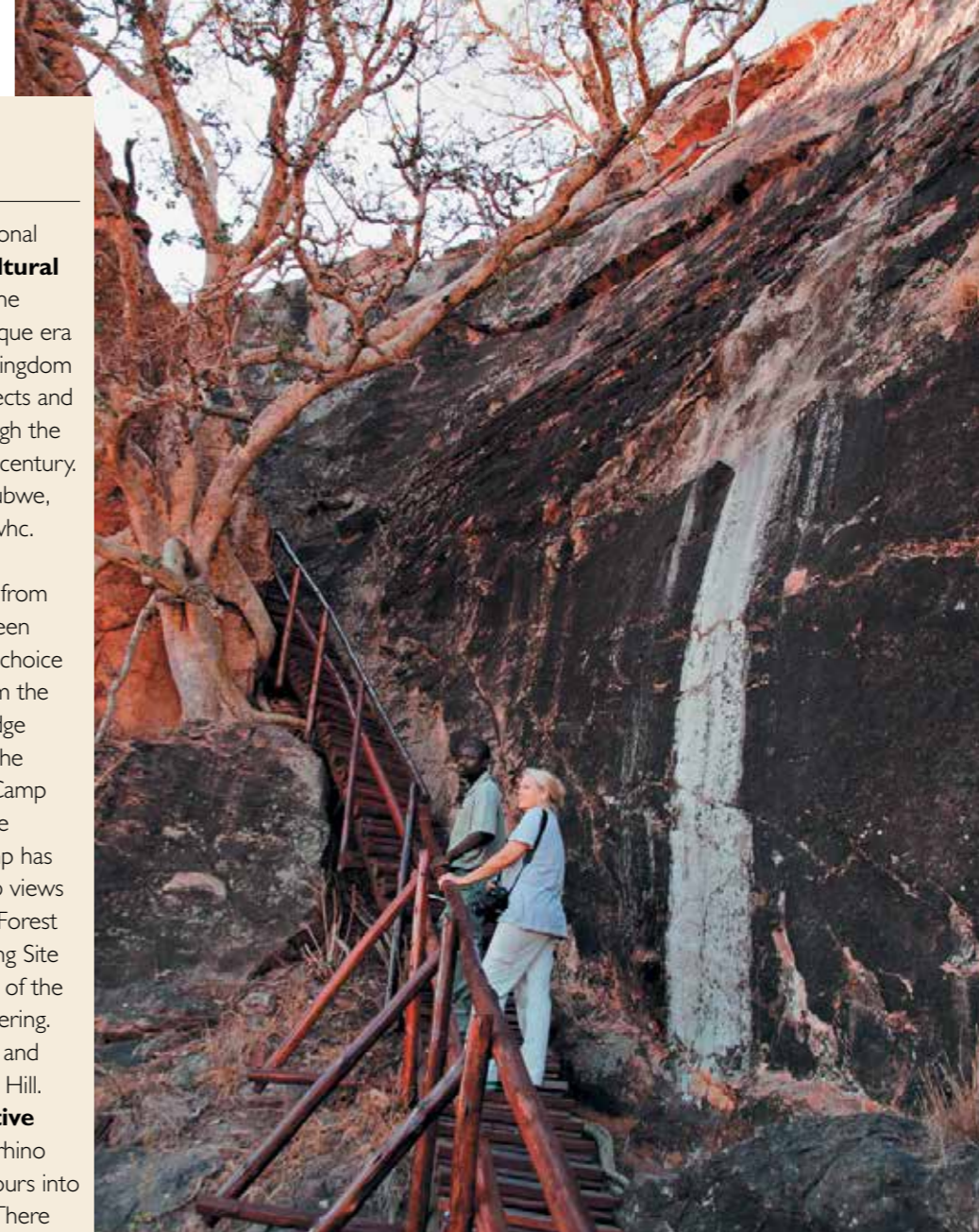
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CHECKLIST

- SANPark's Mapungubwe National Park is a **game reserve and Cultural World Heritage Site in one**. The cultural landscape represents a unique era of South Africa's history, that of a kingdom and a people who created art objects and traded with Arabia and India through the East African ports during the 13th century. For more information on Mapungubwe, visit UNESCO's website at: <http://whc.unesco.org/en/list/1099>
- Mapungubwe is about 530km from Johannesburg and is situated between Alldays and Musina. Visitors have a choice of **accommodation**, ranging from the luxurious to camping. Tshugulu Lodge caters for groups of twelve, while the fully equipped chalets of Leokwe Camp are ideal for couples or families. The secluded Vhembe Wilderness Camp has four two-bedded units with superb views over the valley. Both the Limpopo Forest Tented Camp and Mazhou Camping Site are situated in the western section of the park. All accommodation is self-catering. Daily activities include game drives and interpretive tours to Mapungubwe Hill.
- The newly opened **Interpretive Centre**, where the iconic golden rhino can be viewed, offers self-guided tours into Mapungubwe's cultural landscape. There are no shops, but there is a restaurant at the Interpretive Centre. Stock up on supplies in Polokwane or Musina.

SANParks 012 428 9111 or
reservations@sanparks.org



Mapungubwe National Park



LIMPOPO