

Development

LISA ALLEN



WE BUILT A *safari* LODGE

Deep in the South African bush, a unique safari resort merges the outside environment with the interior, allowing guests to live in relaxed luxury alongside elephants, lions and leopards

Developing an opulent safari lodge deep in the South African bush is not for the faint of heart. Don and Nina Scott gave their architect a good brief for the award-winning camp where visitors can include prides of lions, leopards, and a family of the spiral-horned nyala, a type of antelope.

“We said to the architect, Nicholas Plewman, don’t fight with the bush,” says Don, one of six owners and shareholders in Tanda Tula, which roughly translated means to “love the quiet”.

Opened in 2023, Tanda Tula is a luxurious lodge in the 550sq km Timbavati Private Nature Reserve adjoining Kruger’s central region in South Africa. It offers seven suites and two family units.

“We wanted to have a light footprint,” says South African-born Don, who initially trained as an aeronautical engineer but as a child had high hopes of living deep in the bush.

“We wanted the inside to be outside and the

outside to be inside, that’s why all the glass doors of the suites open right out.

“In the bushveld environment it can get hot, but it’s not hot every day. It’s beautiful to be that close to nature. I wanted to draw the eyes outside.”

Built for 22 guests, Tanda Tula has been designed for couples, honeymooners and large family groups – over Christmas it housed a family of 12 Americans.

Villas are spacious, with large private pools overlooking the dry sand Nhlaralumi River.

Tanda Tula’s main lounge has floor-to-ceiling glass opening onto views of the riverbank, with a cone-shaped chimney as a centrepiece.

“The family villas are a game changer for us,” adds Nina Scott, another Tanda Tula owner, who designed the interiors of the glass and canvas suites using PowerPoint. “We are seeing intergenerational travel going nuts,” she says,

adding that in peak season she could sell the family villas three and four times over.

“It helps that we have lived in lodges for more than 25 years,” she says. “We have come from basic camps with no electricity. We know what we need in this environment.”

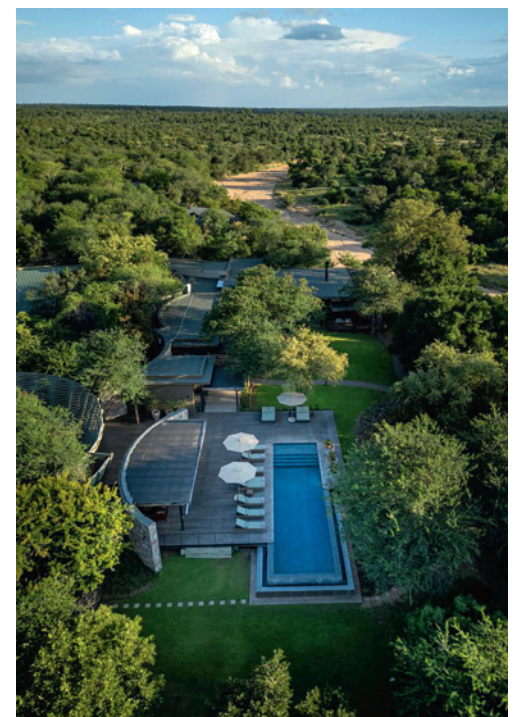
Sitting at breakfast, you can spy zebra, elephant, buffalo, and lions drinking from the natural wallow on the perimeter of the fenced camp. “It was always known to game,” says Nina.

However, the owner/operators, who include Foremen Mathebula, have put in triple-strand fencing around the lodge’s perimeter to stop elephants, giraffe and Cape buffaloes from getting through. Despite the precaution, guests are not allowed to walk around the camp at night for fear of animals such as leopards breaching the fence.

“Foremen, who is from the Shangaan tribe, is our shareholder, he is the camp’s manager, [one



At Tanda Tula, guests rub shoulders (almost) with wildlife, which can be seen in the trees, around the suites and bathing near the resort's infinity pool, below. Leopard at Tanda Tula, left, by Mark Goldstein



of] six shareholders, some of whom work as operational managers," says Nina.

She and Don have been at Tanda Tula for a quarter of a century and the decision to redevelop Tanda Tula came about because the old camp of 12 tents was getting tired.

The only difficulties arise when the surrounding rivers flood, cutting off the remote camp from the main township of Hoedspruit, situated at the foot of the Klein Drakensberg town in the Limpopo province.

Flooding can leave several access roads impassable, but guests can be flown in or out by chartered plane or helicopter if need be.

"The old camp had been around for 25 years. It was tired; we had stretched the infrastructure to the limit," says Nina.

"The idea was, let's build something for the next 25 years; it was like a re-set," added Don.

"We wanted to modernise and decolonise the

safari stay. We are all guilty of perpetuating a colonial twist."

Indeed, the new suites are modern, open to the wild, and are thoughtfully styled with earth-toned textures.

For the Scotts, the most important thing with Tanda Tula, which employs 64 staff, is control of the land.

"Land tenureship for any hospitality business is very important," says Don. "We have seen safari camps having to move because they don't own the land."

Inside the villas, Nina used Kiaat, a southern hardwood indigenous to South Africa, for the joinery, while the villa fascias are recycled railway sleepers.

Bathroom tiles were handmade at the Wolkberg Casting Studio in Cape Town or Johannesburg.

Guests, mainly Americans, stay an average of

three to four nights, but one could easily stay a week – enjoying two action-packed safaris a day. Guests are also invited to participate in anti-poaching activities, taking helicopter flights with accredited rangers and pilots if they stay three nights or more.

It took a year to get the plans approved, with the build starting in March 2022.

Says Nina: "I was clueless, I did the [interior] design all on PowerPoint. I have a good sense of space, it was a little like a lick and a prayer, but it all came together."

Meanwhile, Tanda Tula's owners are planning to develop a sister camp for about 18 guests. "It will be slightly more elevated in design," says Nina, who will again do the interiors.

**For rates and specials, go to: tandatula.com
The writer was a guest of Tanda Tula and The Classic Safari Company**