

They're stars of the show

Only elephant pair in KZN to interact with humans

BARBARA COLE

RAMBO and Rachael, two 25-year-old elephants, are proving to be a big tourist attraction in Hluhluwe.

And it is all because of the unique chance that tourists have to get up close and personal with the giants – but only after signing an indemnity form used in all risky situations.

And initially, the visitors' encounter which enables them to touch the elephants, is from the other side of an electrified fence.

"And that's because they are still wild animals," stressed game ranger Willard Banda, who gives an informative presentation about elephants and Rambo and Rachael in particular to the rows of fascinated tourists at the Bayete Zulu Boutique Game Lodge, north of Hluhluwe, deep in the heart of the region known as the Elephant Coast.

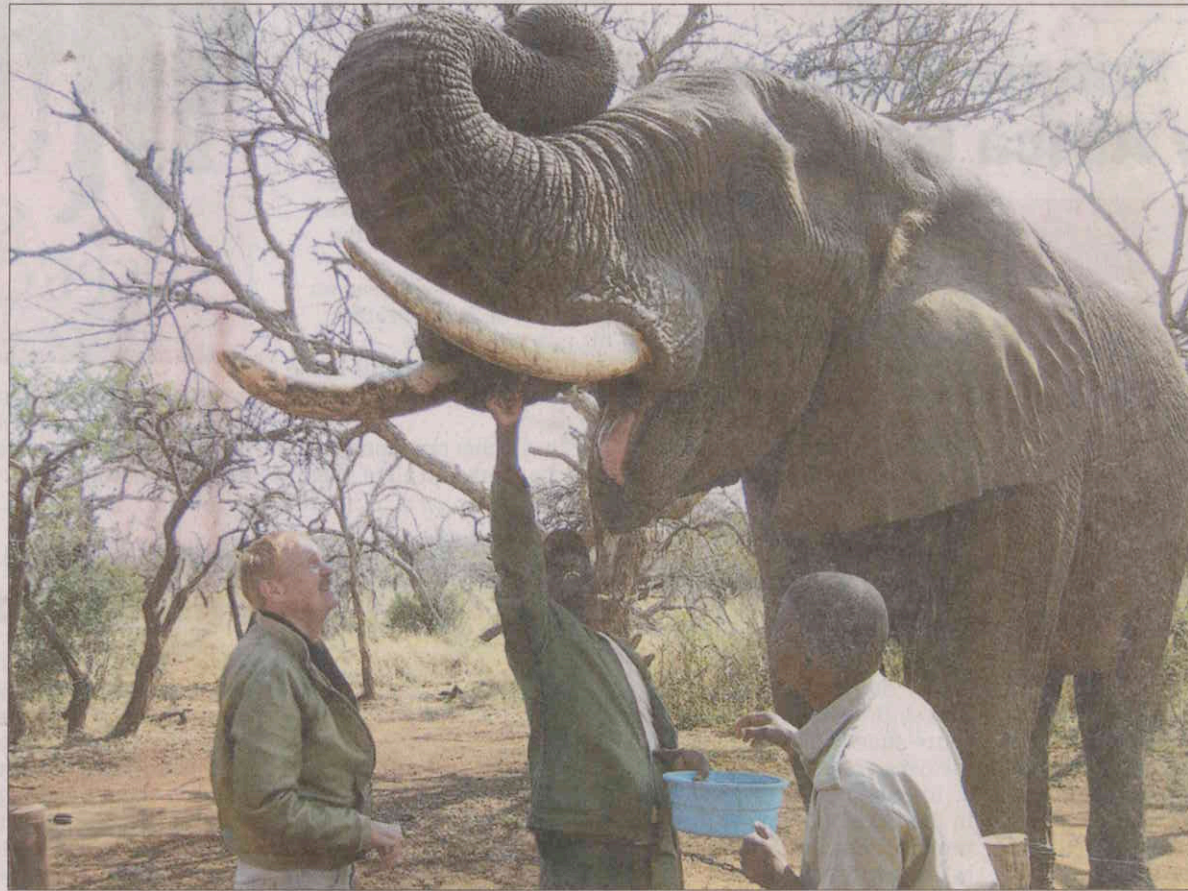
While there are several similar elephant interactions elsewhere in South Africa, the Bayete Zulu experience is the only one in KwaZulu-Natal.

It is easier to interact with Rambo than Rachael, because Rambo has experienced the kindness of humans more than Rachael "and is a lot more relaxed with people", Banda tells tourists.

Both elephants were born in the Wankie Game Reserve in Zimbabwe and their parents were culled when they were under a year old. They were rescued by care-givers.

In a "message" to visitors in a brochure, Rambo "says" that he was scared and angry and that his foot and chin ached with abscesses.

"While foraging, plastic caught in my trunk and became as painful



DURBAN tourist Peter Cole (left) checks out Rambo's teeth with the help of minder Donald Phiri (centre) and game ranger Willard Banda

PICTURE: BARBARA COLE

and infected as my mouth and foot... the daily medication scared me, yet I trusted my care-giver and knew her kindness would help me heal."

It was this love that was shown to him which now allows humans to get close to him.

When the elephants became too large for their space, they were sent to a new care-giver, where they matured and gained confidence but

when the land was divided and sold off, the new home-owners ran away from them.

"In our teenage insecurity we chased cars, pushed them into dams, the occupants gaping fearfully from bird hides. We knew no herd but ourselves and never had a matriarch."

But then, four years ago, they were rescued again and found a home at the 2 400ha Bayete Zulu

Game Lodge, "many times larger than our former home".

Although the elephant interaction has been going on for a year, the lodge has a policy that if Rambo and Rachael are having "a bad day," they are not forced to get involved in the presentation.

They wear tracking devices so that Rambo's minder, Donald Phiri, and Rachael's minder, Maxwell Dinala, can find them.

But how do they get them to move to the presentation area, the tourists wondered?

"We just tell them: 'Let's go to the main gate'," Banda explained.

And amazingly, they do as they are bid, silently emerging through the treeline "on their tiptoes like ballet dancers" to take up their places in front of the wide-eyed visitors, who come from all over the world.

As for the public – limited to 30 visitors at a time – they are warned not to scream at the tops of their voices, nor to run around and never to stamp their feet.

"And don't make any swift movements in front of any wild animal as you are telling it you are ready for a fight," Banda advised.

After telling about the life and times and elephants (they have six sets of teeth, can communicate with one another from a distance of 40km and are the only animals able to recognise themselves in a mirror), tourists are then able to take it in turns to slip through a gap in the electrified fencing to touch the elephants.

The once-shy Rachael will now touch visitors and they can carefully touch her while Rambo lets tourists stroke and hug him, and even to look into his mouth to see his teeth.

Rambo is also a dab hand at playing with a makeshift football.

Booking is essential and reservations have to be made by 9am. The charge is R275 an adult and R150 a child. To get in touch, telephone 074 100 5221 or e-mail: elephants@bayetezulu.co.za. To get there: travel 26km north of Hluhluwe and at the Baobab petrol station, turn on to the P450 for 9km.