

A ROYAL MEETING PLACE

Denford was a big man. Smartly dressed in a black suit and tie, he met us with a friendly smile at our hotel in Harare for the easy one hour car journey to the 'meeting place of the king'.

It was May and with my wife, son and daughter we had just returned from the bountiful grass pans of the Kalahari, teeming with springbok and gemsbok, and later left behind a waterless yet fascinating Okavango Swamp with its arteries patiently waiting the seasonal, life-giving flooding. While our grown up children returned to their commitments in Sydney, Margie and I sought a place of solitude where to unwind after the rigours of a camping safari travelling the untamed sand tracks of inner Botswana.

Pamuzinda, Shona for the *Royal Meeting Place*, is a safari game lodge situated 97 kilometres south west of Harare near the small village of Selous. The area was once a favourite hunting ground of the legendary hunter, soldier, explorer and writer Frederick Courteney Selous from whom the village took its name.

Established in 1967 the Lodge is located in 2400 hectares of natural bush and grassveld in a region known for its diverse range of habitat suitable for a rich variety of introduced game species. The twelve individual thatched roof lodges, each with its en suite bathroom, are set in seclusion amongst the cooling shade of acacia and mopane trees, and perched on the edge of a small lake seasonally fed from the nearby Seruwi River. This blissful setting is the early morning haunt for sometimes eland, buffalo, zebra, impala, waterbuck and the occasional giraffe that can be seen from your room feeding in the rising veil of mist that envelopes a silence only disturbed by the soft cooing of African doves.

African time is announced by the beat of drums which herald the active guests to a full course breakfast in the large high pitched, thatched roof open dining room beside the swimming pool and lake. Those retreating from the stress and punctuality of the city, can slumber on undisturbed and perhaps have breakfast brought to them later by one of a tribe of attentive and polite staff.

There are normally three daily game viewing activities including an exploratory walk, otherwise you can relax around the pool and bar absorbing the peace and tranquillity of the Lodge's surrounds.

For us, the magic of early morning was not to be missed and at six o'clock after a wake up call and steaming cup of tea, we set off on a game walk with Maynard our guide. The bush had already woken and was alive with the excited chatter of birds and the guttural roar of a rutting impala ram as he herded his females away from the amorous intentions of a determined interloper.

Our footsteps fell silently on the soft earth, wetted overnight by unseasonable rain, as we followed and studied the intimate, telltale patterns of animal tracks which busied our path ahead. As the early morning mist rolled in and before the first rays of sunrise struggled through, the animals along our way stood silently as shadows in a mantle of white. This is but one of many moments that the first time visitor to Africa will savour which, together with others, will generate the magnetism that will perhaps draw them back to this continent again and again. After breakfast we set off with Mark, the chief guide, for the mid morning game drive in an open Land Rover. There is an impressive list of thirty odd mammals and 160 birds which have been seen at Pamuzinda. Though we had just returned from an extensive safari through the main wildlife regions of Botswana, here was an ideal opportunity to observe and film a great variety of game at close quarters in their natural surroundings, assisted greatly by the personal attention and local knowledge of an experienced guide only too willing to impart a deluge of information. Lion, cheetah and hyaena are enclosed in areas away from the rest of the animals and excellent photography of them can be achieved.

At dusk we returned from the afternoon game drive with a feeling of fulfilment after Luke's keen eyes rewarded us with a good sighting of a family of sable. This magnificent antelope had successfully eluded us in Botswana. On entering our lodge, the sight of finding our once dirty safari clothes neatly laundered and ironed - all part of the inclusive cost - really made our day. It was now time to change and relax at the bar in front of the fire and enjoy the close company of staff and other guests. Later, we would continue recounting the adventures of the day around the large dining table, where the fresh evening air was tempered by a brazier of hot coals placed under its centre for our comfort. As we sat down to an elegant table setting and the conversation centred on an exciting proposal to introduce horse riding to the growing list of daily activities, the head waiter signalled our attention. He then proceeded to inform us in explicit detail the menu and choices selected by the chef for the evening. A sumptuous cordon bleu five course dinner was set before us, served with good

local wines in the company of our kind hosts Hans and Diana Strydom. Afterwards as we contentedly fell to the intoxicating spell of our over proofed Irish coffee, the staff quietly sought the individual wishes of guests for the various activities drawn up for the next day. We chose the serenity of a canoe trip down the Mapfure River which forms part of the Lodge's new boundary. Perhaps one day we might return to enjoy the freedom of a horse ride through the African bush to gaze in intimate silence at the diversity of wildlife it nurtures.

For the wildlife enthusiast, Pamuzinda is a marvellous place to get those undisturbed photographic and film shots. Enhancing its international status, a conference centre with private facilities and catering for 26 people is situated in seclusion within the grounds. For those just wishing to relax between international flights or business commitments and be pampered in an exclusive atmosphere of luxury, then this is the place to meet.

Pamuzinda is indeed a meeting place fit for a King.

THE END