


DEPARTURES



LY. AUGUST 2010

Summer

DISCOVERING
SEASIDE
TUSCANY

SAILING
TURKEY

GOLFING OREGON

BIKING THE
TOUR DE
FRANCE

ELEPHANT
SAFARI
IN BOTSWANA

PLUS
A SPECIAL
ALL-AMERICAN
BLACKBOOK

HUDSON VALLEY
BAL HARBOUR
WATCH HILL
NAPA

George

Frank

Sirheni

Ilaki

Witness

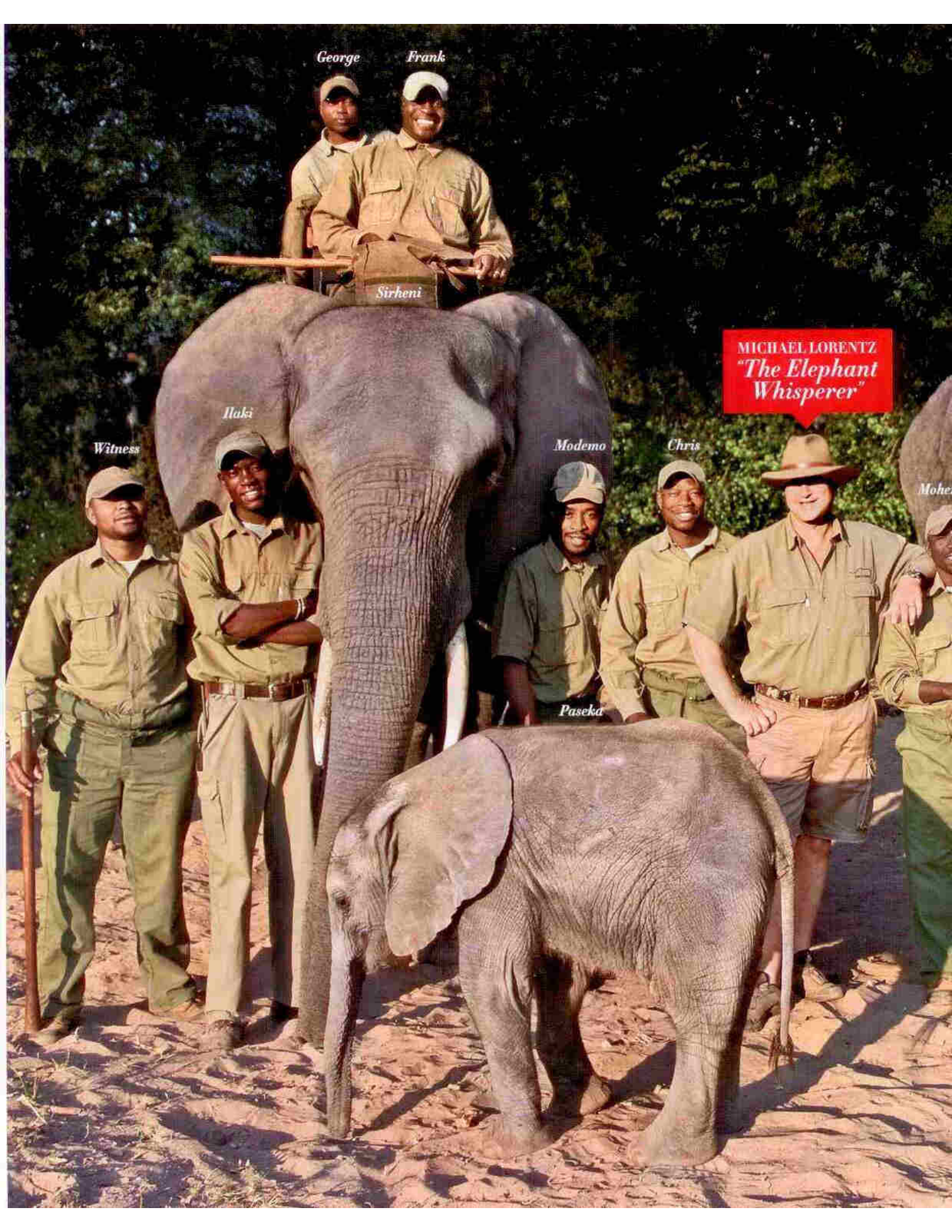
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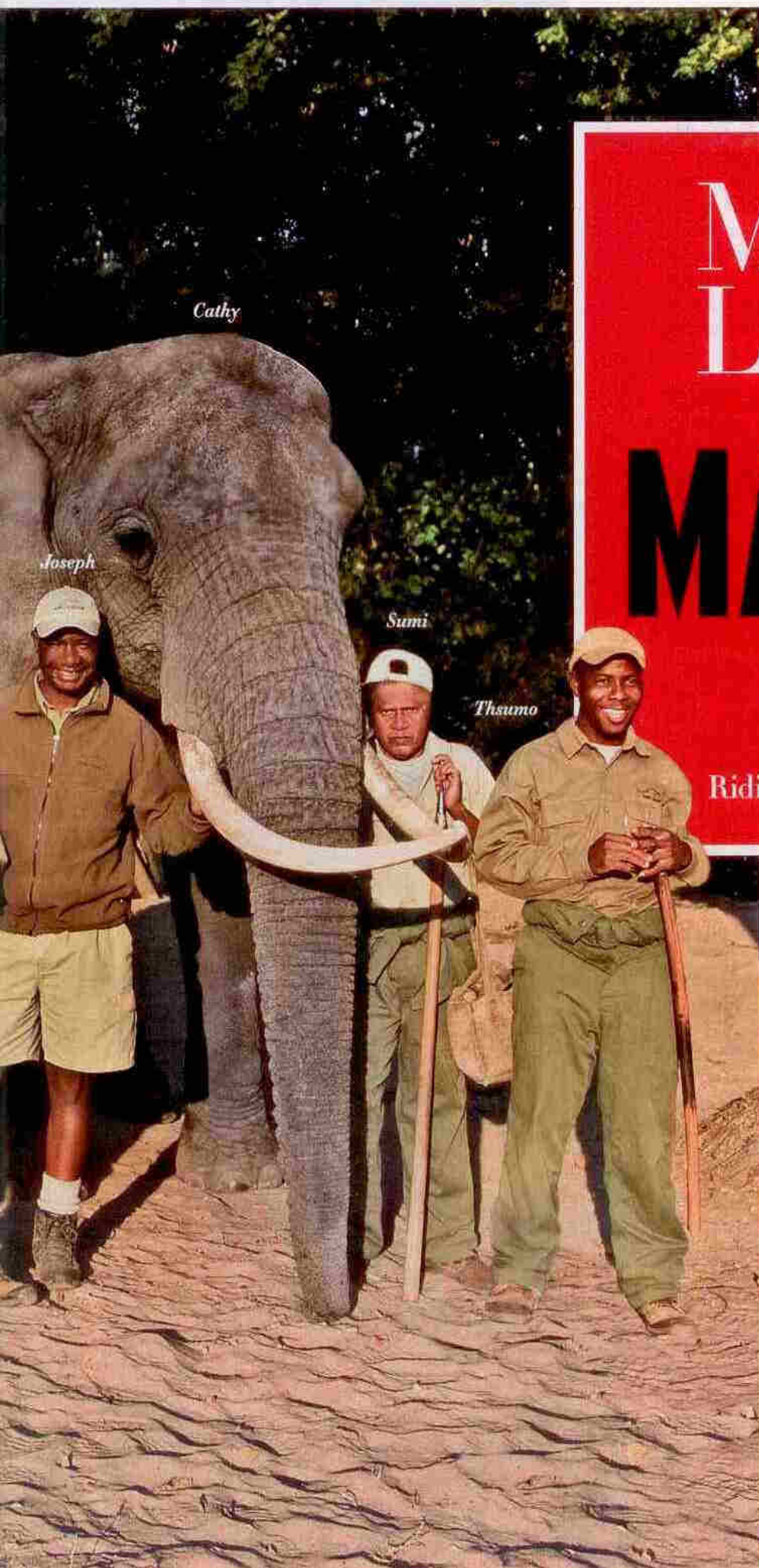
Chris

Paseka

Mohe

MICHAEL LORENTZ
*"The Elephant
Whisperer"*





MICHAEL LORENTZ AND THE MAHOUTS OF ABU

Riding with the elephants in Botswana.

NEW YORK—ON THIS IMPOSSIBLY BEAUTIFUL April evening, the temperature is much closer to that of Botswana's Okavango Delta than to Midtown Manhattan this time of year. Stars seem to sparkle in the early evening—or is it just the lights of Tiffany's, Bergdorf Goodman, and, yes, as one invited guest pointed out, Joan Rivers's penthouse? Right now, wildlife expert and guide Michael Lorentz is surrounded by a gaggle of curious New Yorkers invited by two of his biggest supporters to hear his tales of Botswana and romantic safaris on elephant-back through dusty savannahs and across lagoons filled with crocodiles and hippos. *New York Times* reporter Guy Trebay, pencil in hand, takes notes for "The Gimlet Eye," his cheeky weekly column on the comings and goings of the city's own urban primates. The very social Jamee Gregory asks for Lorentz's card, later dropping a note, "We've always wanted to go. But now we have the man to take us there."

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Written by
RICHARD DAVID STORY

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ALEXANDRA BRYNER

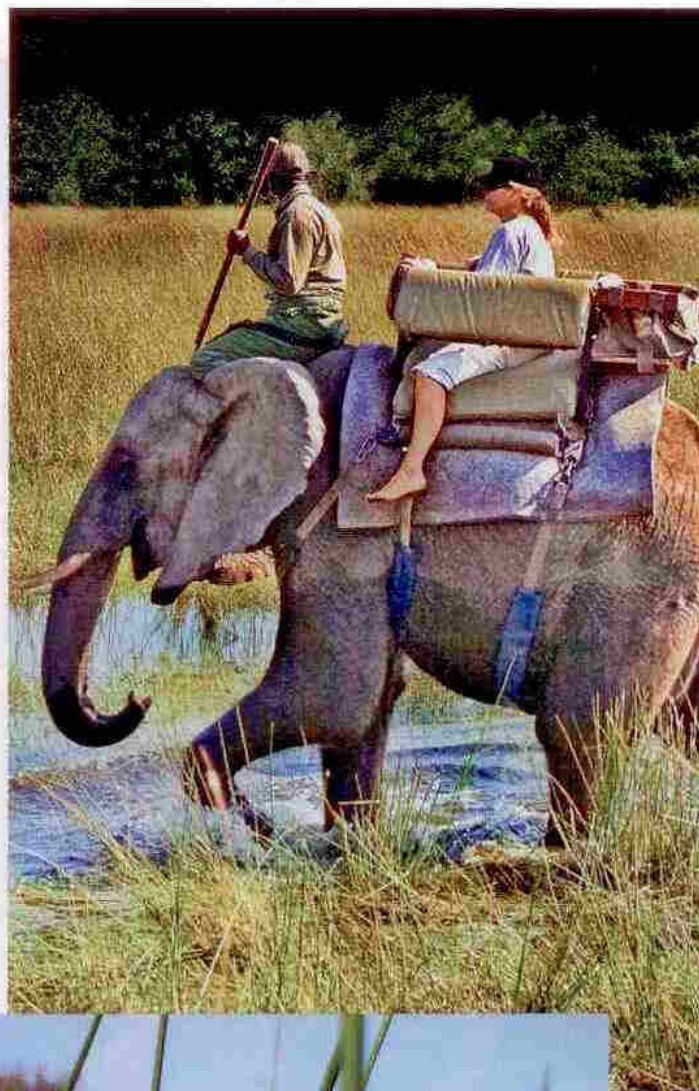
Here, on a tenth-floor terrace suite of The Pierre hotel, The Elephant Whisperer has come to talk specifically about Abu, the tented camp he manages in Botswana that accommodates eight, possibly ten, guests who come to live among the creatures he so loves.

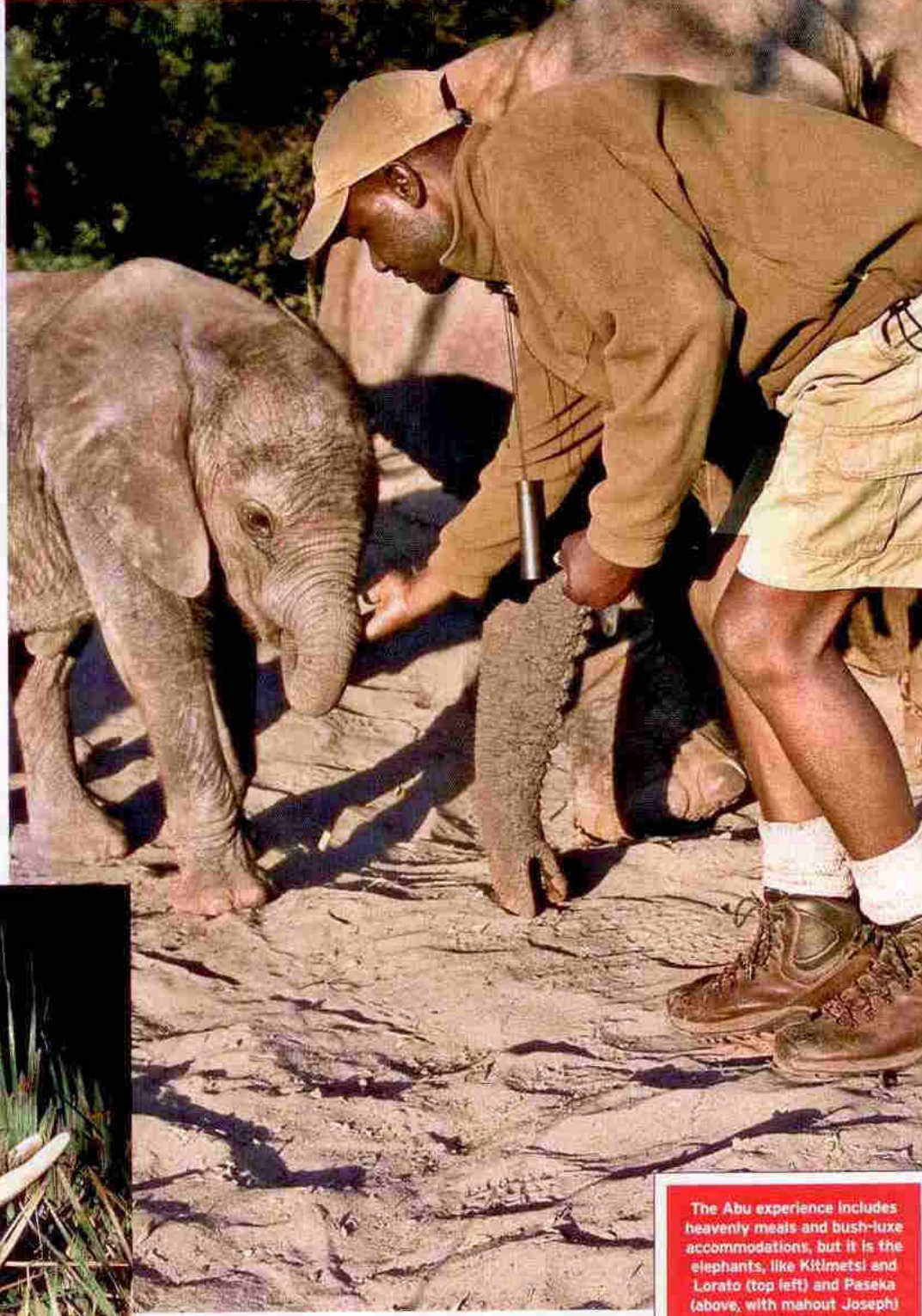
"Abu is a complete immersion into a single species, which happens to be one of the most charismatic of all land mammals," Lorentz says. "The African elephant has always inspired a vast range of responses in us—awe, excitement, happiness, fear, wonder, laughter, respect, and humility. They possess a deep level of emotional intelligence, and being privileged enough to spend time with them in their natural environment is, quite simply, one of those things you have to do before you die."

LAST SEPTEMBER PHOTOGRAPHER ALEXANDRA PENNEY and I did just that, traveling 40-something hours, first on British Airways to Johannesburg, then to Maun, Botswana, where we flew on a 14-year-old single-engine Cessna 206 to a dusty little private airstrip for a 20-minute drive to Abu, a 500,000-acre game camp founded 20 years ago by American environmentalist and entrepreneur Randall Moore and now owned, in part, by Microsoft's Paul Allen. Abu was meant first as a refuge for orphaned and endangered elephants, and second as a safari camp. In 1987 Moore was approached by a South African film producer looking for several trained elephants for a movie he was making in the Knysna Forest of South Africa. Moore, surprisingly, found his elephant, Abu, in a wildlife park in Grand Prairie, Texas, and another, Benny, in a zoo in Fort Worth. Both elephants were believed to be orphans from South Africa's Kruger National Park; Abu was being tragically mistreated in the mistaken belief that he was in a hormonally heightened condition called musth, during which bull elephants can become highly aggressive. After much attention and TLC from Moore, Abu, Benny, and a cow called Cathy were put on a boat to South Africa for their starring roles in the movie *Circles in a Forest*—and, unwittingly, as the founding elephants at the camp Moore would name Abu. Moore was a pioneer at the time, proving to the world that indeed the African elephant could be "trained," in his words, "but never, ever tamed." In 1991 he was joined by a young fellow named Michael Lorentz, now managing director of Elephant Back Safaris, whose most prominent property is Abu.

The main camp at Abu is peacefully situated on the edge of a lagoon amid a voluptuous overgrowth of marshes and hardwood trees. While there are grander camps—Grumeti and Singita are two I have personally experienced and written about in these pages—few possess more authenticity or greater sense of real place. Abu is, in fact, rather modest by the standards of those above—there is, for example, no infinity pool or WiFi service, and the main lodge is a simply appointed open-air salon set over a large and expansive wooden deck for drinking, dining, and socializing. There are five individual canvas tents, impeccably appointed in a sort of Afro-Bedouin style. (A renovation is currently under way and should be completed by next March.) At night one falls asleep—or do I mean is kept wide awake?—with the slobbering crunch of hippos night-grazing in the waters just outside your tent.

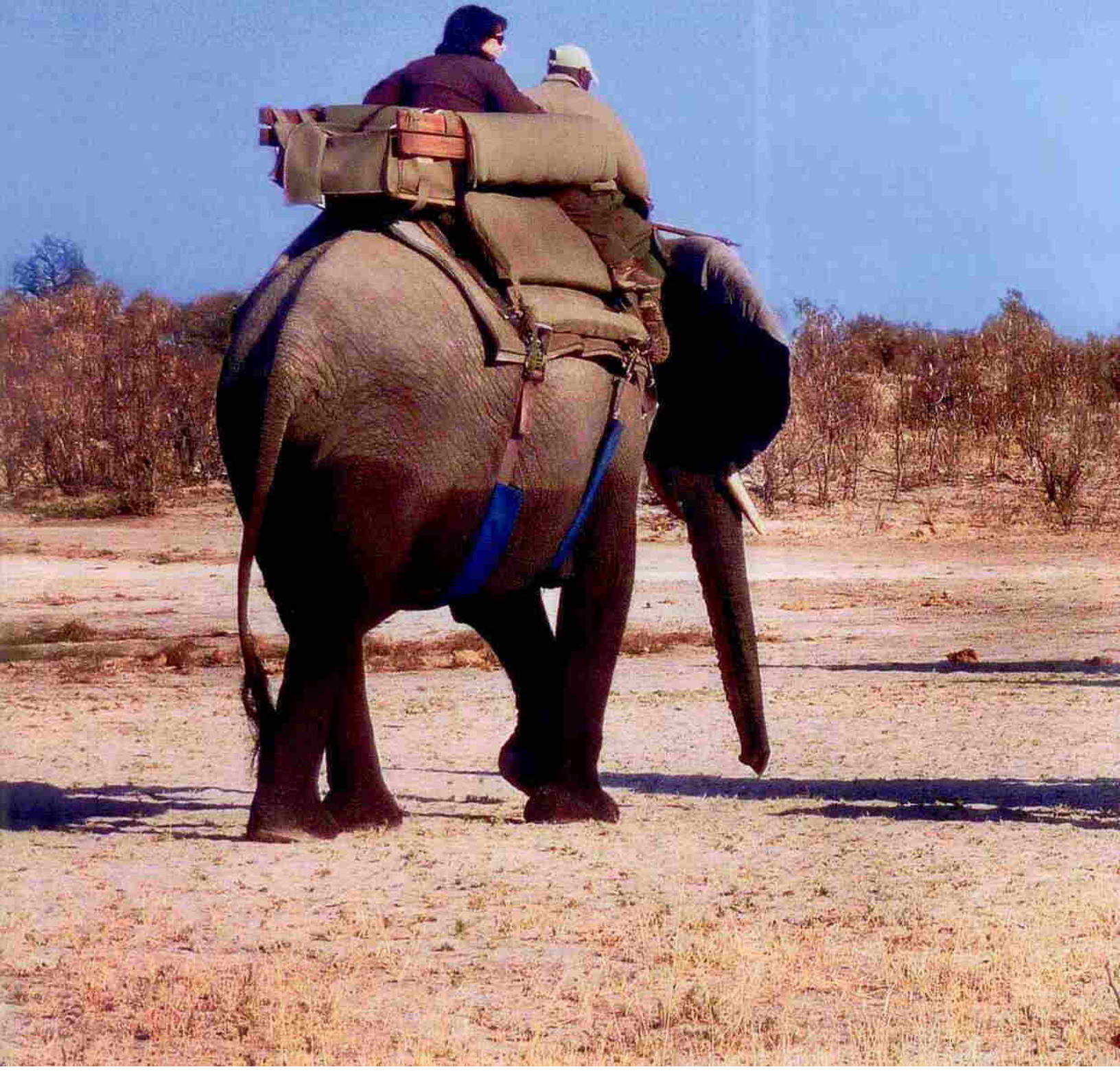
Abu is obviously devoted to the pursuit of bush luxury, great style, service, comfort, and food. And while it embraces as many up-to-date eco/green initiatives as possible, all this is merely a backdrop to the real reason for coming: sharing a few days of your life with some of the most wonderful creatures on





The Abu experience includes heavenly meals and bush-luxe accommodations, but it is the elephants, like Kitlmeti and Lorato (top left) and Paseka (above, with mahout Joseph) that are the centerpiece.

“SOME MIGHT SEE THIS
I SEE IT AS ECOLOGICALLY

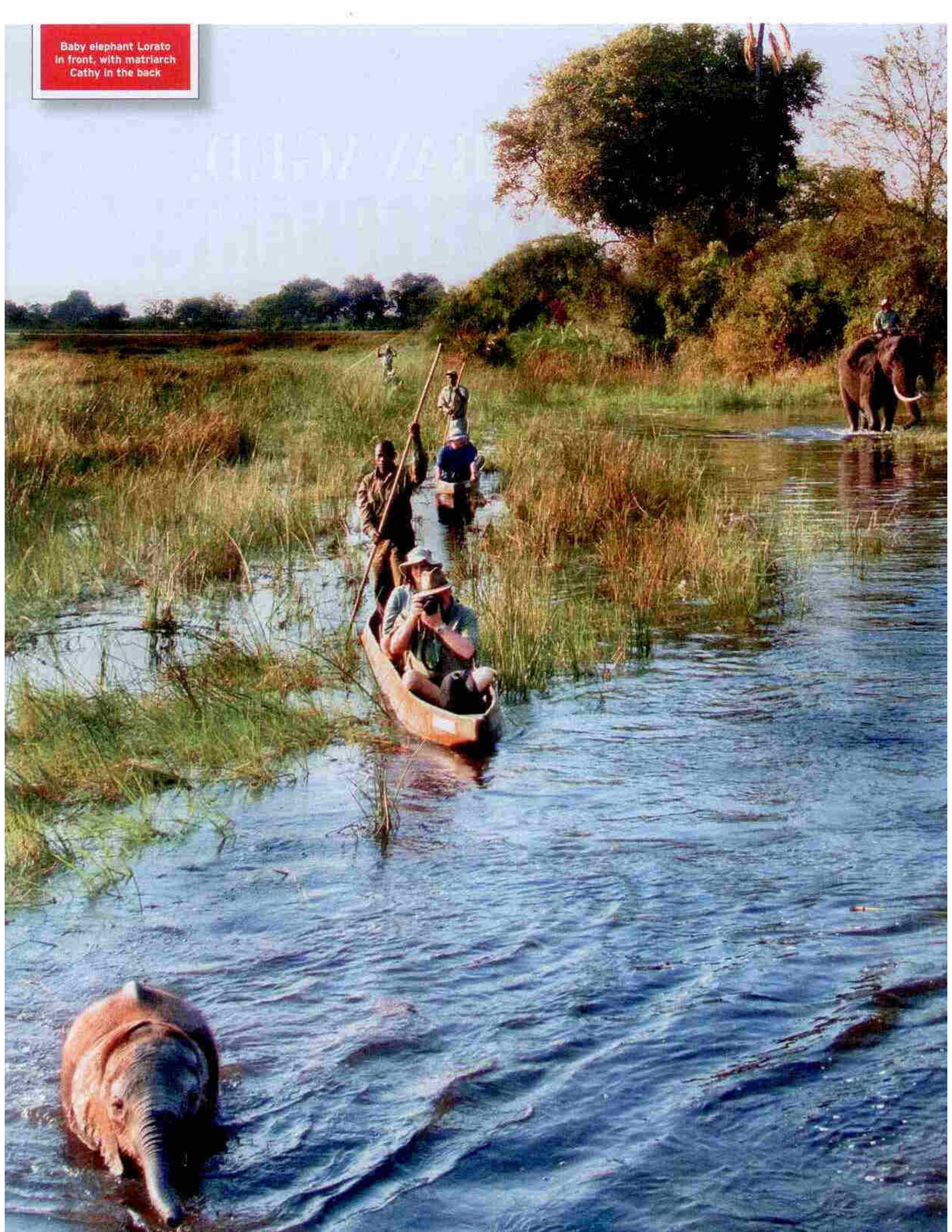


LANDSCAPE AS RAVAGED. **ENGINEERED BY ELEPHANTS."**

—MICHAEL LORENTZ



Baby elephant Lorato
in front, with matriarch
Cathy in the back



earth. As Moore once remarked, "I have been let down time and time again by humans, but very rarely by an elephant." That means more than just riding the elephants. It means living among them 24/7 while they are walking, feeding, mud-bathing, swimming, even sleeping. A platform bed has been built in the elephants' boma—or quarters—that lets you literally sleep among them.

Currently the herd is at 11, including year-old Paseka, whose name means "Easter" in Setswana, as she was found around Easter, abandoned by her herd after being attacked by hyenas. Miraculously she somehow freed herself from the attack and in the middle of the night found her way to camp. In a happy ending that not even Disney or Spielberg could have dreamed up, she was adopted by Sirheni (the name means "where the old cows meet"), who was just weaning her own three-year-old offspring, Baby Abu.

But if the elephants are the heart of Abu, the mahouts are its soul. These 15 magnificent men not only care for and help train and drive the elephants on safari; they also hoist you and your saddle, or howdah, onto the elephants several times a day. They become companions, soul mates, buddies, guides, and, yes, protectors. "Frank, I think I'm sliding," I would suggest nervously, perhaps 20 times a day. Frank would simply turn, look back at me, smile, laugh, and console me with "Don't worry. All is okay." He was always right; it just occasionally took a big suspension of belief as riding atop an elephant feels sometimes like...well, exactly what you'd think riding atop an elephant would feel like.

During my three days at Abu, Lorentz, who guides only on special request (but has access to first-rate guides), immersed us in his world—and theirs—constantly reminding that "the richness of the elephant's life needs to be understood." He would suggest that we walk beside the elephants as well as ride them—being on the ground is a way to hear, feel, touch, and experience their enormity in a very different way.

Lorentz studied to be a lawyer but wanted to be a wildlife vet. "I didn't have the grades or the discipline," he says. Nevertheless, he has a lawyer's precision, a vet's love and knowledge of animals, and, I would add, the soul of a poet. Conversation is often interspersed with literary and historical references, like how Hannibal and his men rode a massive herd of elephants in the second Punic War from Carthage to the Iberian Peninsula and across the Alps. Of the 39 elephants that survived, 37, Lorentz proudly points out, were African, and "only two were Indian." The discovery of ivory, he explains, put an end to African elephants being used for transportation: Unfortunately, they became more valuable dead than alive. And who knew that the trunk of one elephant has 50,000 muscles, making possible everything from uprooting an entire tree from its roots to delicately picking a dime off a marble floor?

"NOW SOME MIGHT SEE THIS LANDSCAPE AS RAVAGED, but actually," says Lorentz, gesturing out and across the desolate terrain of acacia and gnarled strangler fig trees, mopani bushes, and the occasional primal grandeur of a lone baobab. "I prefer to see it as ecologically engineered by elephants." Right now six of us are an hour into the first drive of the day, bumping and swaying in our howdahs. On this particular day, which begins with a breakfast buffet at six in the morning and will wind down as we drift in the canoe-like vessels called *mokoros* poled by mahouts through wetlands on our way back to camp, we will have sightings of impalas, zebras, and giraffes in abundance. Lions still elude us. But being on elephant-back, we come close to being eyeball-to-eyeball with Cape buffalo. Along the way there will be fantastic birdlife, including fish eagles, lilac-breasted rollers, and saddle-billed storks.

On our last night, an elaborate barbecue was set up in a bush clearing some 20 minutes from camp. Under the stars and a full moon, the table was set with dried wood sculptures and rocks, white china, linen napkins, and cut crystal. Antelope steaks sizzled on the grill as we were plied with wild mushroom risotto, cauliflower gratin, tiramisu, Veuve Clicquot... You get the point. As we sat drinking and talking, an enormous hyena appeared out of nowhere, stealthily circling the open fire—and us. It lurked at the grill, licking the meaty drippings. The thought of meandering my way along what had earlier seemed a lovely little candlelit path to our makeshift loo was now no longer part of the program. Later, hyena sated and gone, the moon bursting with light, we headed back to camp. Joseph, the driver, searched around the road for nightlife, flashing beams into the tall trees that lined it. There, atop an ilala palm, we watched rapturously, for what seemed hours, a family of 15, maybe 20 baboons asleep in various poses. The im-

age lingers: It was totally surreal. Baboons, outlined by floodlights? Suspended from branches? Nestled in hollows and swinging by their tails? In skyscraper-high trees in the middle of the African night? But by now I would have believed anything was possible. After all, it was just another day—and night—at Abu. ■

**THE 15
MAHOUTS
ACT AS YOUR
COMPANION,
SOUL MATE,
BUDDY,
GUIDE, AND
PROTECTOR.**

*"Perhaps the best way to do Abu is in combination with two or three other camps," suggests Will Jones of **Journeys by Design** (212-568-7639; journeysbydesign.com), who organized my own brilliantly arranged trip to Botswana and tailored private safaris to the region. I stayed at Abu Camp, Elephant Back Safaris, which offers three- and five-night packages. For a 12-night safari, combining three nights at Abu with, say, Zarafa Camp, Vumbura Plains Camp, and Tongabezi Lodge, near Victoria Falls, rates start at \$18,500 per person, excluding international flights. The elephant experience affords excellent wildlife sightings year-round.*