



WILL WHITFORD



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TONGOLE WILDERNESS RETREAT (4)

DEEP IMPACT

Some parks resonate because of something deeper than the safari experience itself. Often these are smaller parks that are being revived or are particularly important to local communities, and where visitors know their stay has far-reaching benefits.

BY **SUE WATT**

There's something very soothing about returning to a special place whose stories draw you back time and time again. For me, that is Nkhotakota.

In 2012, a new lodge, Tongole Wilderness Retreat, first lured me to Malawi's oldest and largest wildlife reserve, long before conservation organisation African Parks took on its restoration. Few visitors ventured here and wildlife was sparse, decimated by poaching.

Despite this, Tongole was built beside the Bua River in memory of local teenager Vitu Kalanga, who had died tragically in a car accident in England. His father Bentry and British philanthropist David Cole set out to create a lasting legacy for him with Vitu's community at its heart. Born of love and hope, the soul of Tongole

emanates from the reason for its existence.

Over 100 local people were employed during Tongole's construction; many still work there today. The Tongole Foundation built a new primary school, Chilimani (now the best in the district) and renovated other schools, providing solar power, desks, teaching materials and computers. It runs wildlife clubs too and funds underprivileged pupils into secondary school.

"The Tongole Foundation started small," Emmanuel Kandiero (*inset, below*) told me recently. "I've seen it grow from helping a few families to helping thousands of people through education, sanitation and livelihoods, and now working hand in hand with African Parks, achieving what we all thought might be impossible."

When I first met Emmanuel in 2012 he was an armed scout accompanying our hike up Mount Kasukusuku, which offers spectacular views across this hilly reserve. By my next visit in 2016, he was head guide. Today, he's Tongole's general manager.

"Tongole has changed my heart," Emmanuel said. His new role is his "dream come true," and he still guides guests, whether hiking, fishing, canoeing or on game drives. "When I first came, we struggled with poachers," he added. "But no gunshots are heard now. African Parks built an electric fence around the reserve, employed more scouts, brought in more animals, and we've seen amazing improvements."

Those animals also draw me back. Along with zebra, warthogs and myriad

antelopes, African Parks ambitiously translocated 500 elephants from Liwonde in 2016 and Majete in 2017. On that first day on Liwonde's floodplains, I monitored a darted elephant with wonky tusks. With my hand cupping her trunk, I nervously counted her every breath for 20 minutes, determined she would come to no harm. Overnight, her herd was transported to Nkhotakota and the following day, with huge relief, we watched all nine elephants sauntering from their boma, ready to explore their new home.

Two years later, I returned to Tongole to find 'my' elephant again. It should have been straightforward since most translocated matriarchs had collars. But my herd's matriarch had died: with no collar, we had no means of tracking them. Instead, we drove for hours, searching. In vast wooded terrain, our chances seemed slim.

Suddenly, near Wozi Gate, we found eight elephants, none of them collared. As we approached, we realised one had wonky tusks. Shivers ran down my spine: could this really be her? Comparing our translocation photographs, we felt almost certain this was 'my' elephant. We'll never know for sure: it would be an uncanny coincidence. But then, special things happen at Nkhotakota...



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