

# SAFARI FOR THE SOUL

IS A SELF-IMPROVEMENT SPIRITUAL RETREAT A REAL HOLIDAY OR A WORKING HOLIDAY? **JANE BROUGHTON** SIGNED UP FOR ONE AT LONDOLOZI, LED BY RENOWNED LIFE COACH MARTHA BECK



FANTASTICAL Dinner in a fairy-tale setting at Londolozi; (opposite) spiritual adventure retreats help recapture our childlike wonder and lack of fear

I'm on my hands and knees on a dirt road in the middle of the Sabi Sand game reserve, peering intently at a rhino track perfectly deep-etched in the soft sand, unblemished by dust or moisture. Our Shangaan tracker, aptly named Like, is conveying the age-old wisdom of following an animal through the bush by teaching us how to read the signs – both obvious and subtle – of the wild.

After just a couple of hours, we are all becoming surprisingly skilled at judging the freshness of tracks and dung, and remembering to throw our gaze forward to detect mud-splattered or flattened grass and other useful clues. When a track runs cold, the only thing to do is retrace our steps back to the last sure sign and try again.

There's a line from a poem by Mary Oliver that asks: 'What is it that you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?' Those words have a habit of hitting me in the gut, which is why I leapt at the opportunity to join the African STAR (Self-transformation Adventure Retreat) hosted by Londolozi in June each year.

The retreat invites people to experience the healing power of nature during a week of intensive coaching. Each STAR is intended to help save the world, bit by bit, using First World abundance to finance the restoration of wild ecosystems and ensure that local communities can thrive economically as guardians of the wilderness.

When I first read that the retreat is designed to 'give you access to inner peace, a sense of your life's purpose, and empowerment to achieve your goals', I couldn't visualise the process or how I was going to work out what to do with my life – let alone how to help save the planet – in the space of five days. My rational left-brain thinking was already tripping me up. It was time to invite my right brain to take over and stray into the wild. ▶



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ABOVE Martha Beck (standing) with her team of fellow master life coaches, Boyd and Bronwyn Varty and Koelle Simpson  
LEFT Magnificent sunsets (top) and animal sightings are the context in which the course is set

**OPPOSITE** The Sabi Sand reserve, where Londolozi is situated, is especially famous for its leopards. It's not uncommon to witness the fascinating mating ritual of the cats, or to see a female with cubs

## Through silence, a powerful, focused energy has developed on the Land Rover so that it feels as if the animals are walking out of the bush towards us

The retreat is led by US life coach and best-selling author Martha Beck and members of her team, including Boyd Varty from Londolozi, renowned horse whisperer Koelle Simpson and weight-loss expert Bridgette Boudreau, all of whom are Martha Beck-certified master life coaches in their own right. Beck, who holds two Harvard PhDs, is probably best known for her monthly column in *O*, the Oprah magazine, guest appearances on Winfrey's TV talk show, and her best-selling books, including *Expecting Adam* and *Steering by Starlight*.

The Vartys, owners of Londolozi, have been investigating the emotional and spiritual side of the wilderness for a long time. 'We've found that guests have a deep yearning to be reconnected with nature. Emotionally we are dying in our own wilderness of spirit and need to find our way back,' says Dave Varty, Boyd's father.

The family's history on this land goes back four generations, to 1926 when their grandfather first set up camp on the banks of the Sand River. Hunting was replaced by photographic safaris, providing income to sustain Londolozi's conservation efforts and employment for the local Shangaan people. The younger generation, embodied by supercharged siblings Boyd and Bronwyn Varty, has taken the conservation challenge a giant leap further by launching a global social-networking movement called Restoring Eden (also the working title of a book written by Boyd that will be published later this year). Martha Beck has coached and mentored them every step of the way in the belief that to save the planet, we first have to save ourselves.

The dozen or so people that make up this STAR group range in age from 26 to 60-something. Some are single parents, others have adopted. There are three couples, the balance are women on their own personal quest. They are all from the US, have connected in advance on Facebook and completed a detailed questionnaire and pre-coaching session. They are all already Martha Beck devotees.

At our first meal together, Martha quips: 'Okay, team, this is going to be the first of many working lunches.' What this means is fluid, ongoing, in-the-moment coaching, allaying any concerns about getting enough face-time with the coaches. Working with the group as a whole at all

times, Martha coaches each person to release specific anxiety-producing habits and thought patterns.

From the dawn game drive through to dinner in the boma, Martha is animated, self-deprecating, completely irreverent, very funny and unnervingly focused, with a razor-sharp mind. I can almost hear her brain whirring, zinging and joining the dots as she listens to someone describing their feelings. She often talks so fast she literally trips over her tongue.

I don't know much about coaching, but this feels like 'speed coaching'. It usually begins with Martha asking a person to focus on one of the areas of least satisfaction in their life. Then she hits home with a key question that is guaranteed to root one to the spot, unless they've done this before: 'Can you really know that what you are saying is true?'

In Martha's simple but direct questions, there are echoes of The Work, a self-awareness programme pioneered by fellow American Byron Katie to help people achieve inner peace. Through a technique she calls the turnaround, Byron coaxes the person to look inside rather than outside for the solution to their problem.

In her coaching process, Martha keeps digging for the core issue or anxiety, which is usually masked by deep-seated beliefs or 'untruths'. 'You will never find your way through fear. A happy life seeks the truth; an unhappy life seeks safety first. The state of being fearful is associated with grasping, holding on and chasing after. In this state, happiness generally eludes you. But when you head off-road without expectation or an attachment to the outcome, the possibilities are infinite.'

It becomes apparent that our struggles and issues have a universal thread, so that each person's story resonates with everyone in the group on some level. There's value in hearing the other stories around the table, and Martha's take on how to peel away all the thoughts and beliefs, like layers on an onion, in order to expose your core self.

As the days pass, the group therapy, of which I was so fearful, creates an incredible groundswell of energy between relative strangers all linked by a common desire to see the ripple effect of healing take place. I'm a pencil-and-paper sort of person, journaling feverishly and taking ►



### OTHER RETREATS IN SA

**FOR HORSE LOVERS** American Koelle Simpson is a Martha Beck-certified master coach and horse whisperer who trained with Monty Roberts. Using horses, she runs workshops throughout the year in various countries, including South Africa. koelleinc.com

**FOR MARTHA BECK FANS** Judy Klipin (the first Martha Beck-accredited master life coach in SA and author of *Life Lessons for the Adult Child*) joins with fellow Martha Beck life coach and energy healer Daniel Posniak for a five-day retreat from 19 to 23 November 2011 in the Western Cape. The cost of R20 000 includes luxury accommodation, group and individual coaching, healing energy work, meditation, massage and walking. To book, call 083-292-2535. judyklipin.com

**FOR WOMEN ONLY** A four-day Nurturing Your Body & Spirit Retreat at Prana Lodge

Private Beach Estate & Spa, near East London, from 20 to 23 October 2011, incorporates coaching sessions, yoga, beach walks and more. It will be hosted by lodge owner Gail Davidson with Dr Jackie Black (a US-based life coach specialising in relationships) and Norma Lederle (yoga teacher and energy healer). It costs R3 750 per person, including three nights' luxury accommodation, meals and more. This is limited to 14 guests. Call 043-704-5100. pranalodge.co.za

**FOR MOUNTAIN LOVERS** South African spiritual teacher, transformational coach and metaphysician Vernon Frost hosts a retreat at Didima Camp in the Drakensberg from 19 to 27 November 2011. It costs R12 300 fully inclusive (each person has a single en-suite room). There is also a weekend retreat near Joburg from 4 to 6 November, and Frost offers non-residential personal-growth

workshops of one to three days. Call 083-627-7417. vernonfrost.co.za

#### OTHER OPTIONS

- Harnessing the Healing Power of Trees to Heal Yourself, a workshop by Melissa Krige, is conducted at Platbos Forest, between Stanford and Gansbaai. She also does open-air reiki sessions in the forest. platbos.co.za
- Walk the Camino, the ancient pilgrimage route in southern Europe, with like-minded South Africans. amawalkerscamino.weebly.com
- Transformational Game one-day workshops are held year-round at Boondocks Mountain Lodge, near Nelspruit – a weekend workshop is planned for 11-11-11. www.boondocks.co.za
- Jonathan Quail's Lifeshops workshops are held at Clearview Lodge in Broederstroom (Magaliesberg), Assagay Lodge just outside of Durban, and Phambuka dive camp in Ponta d'Ouro, Mozambique. lifesync.co.za



LEFT Daily sessions on the yoga deck revitalise body, mind and soul  
OPPOSITE (left) The calming, sanctuary-like bathroom in a Tree Camp suite; (right) Martha Beck



PHOTOGRAPHS SALLY CHANCE; SUPPLIED

notes conscientiously. I'm reprimanded gently to put my notebook down from time to time, so that it doesn't interfere with my direct experience.

Step number one for all of us to connect with our inner peace is to learn to become silent, or to 'drop into a state of wordlessness' as Martha puts it. 'For most of us, there are only two states of being: talking and waiting to talk,' she jokes.

Martha says that Asian and Native American cultures have a long tradition of upholding sacred silences, while Western culture is verbal in the extreme. 'Meditating does not mean sitting still and having to endure Enya for an hour,' she says. In the safari context we embark on a silent game drive, where moving through nature becomes a form of meditation.

Compared to the cocktail party-style banter that usually distracts and amuses me on a drive, this is a profound experience of really enjoying the moment for what it is. If tempted to speak, we are advised to breathe deeply in, then slowly out. Being conscious of the breath immediately puts one in the 'now'. Time flies. We find dozens of elephants, track a lioness and her four cubs, chance upon four male lions feeding on a fresh carcass and see a magnificent male leopard sitting on a termite mound.

I've been on countless game drives in my life, but this is uncanny. Through silence, a powerful,

focused energy has developed on the Land Rover so that it feels as if the animals are walking out of the bush towards us. It's so successful that everyone opts to remain silent on subsequent game drives.

To understand and appreciate how animals survive in the wild, we try a mindfulness meditation around the dinner table one evening. The trick is to become quiet and completely focused on a single point, such as a flame, before gradually expanding our visual attention to include everything around us while keeping that animal-like soft focus.

'We must pay close attention to the physical body, which responds with tangible tension, aversion and resistance when we take a wrong turn,' says Martha. 'As simple as it sounds, the childhood game of "you're getting warmer, you're getting colder" is very useful. Your body, and how it feels, will tell you everything you need to know. The body recoils from what is bad for you and leans into what is good.'

When I get home, I have to wean myself off caffeine. Mainlining coffee like an American is not the only thing I miss. A fire has been reignited within me, but I have a bad case of separation anxiety. At last I now have a valid reason to log onto Facebook, where informal coaching and cathartic posts continue. Over-sharing has never been this much fun. ●

TRAVEL NOTES LONDOLZI RETREATS

**✦ WHEN TO GO** The Martha Beck STAR safari takes place in June each year; the next one runs from 4 to 8 June 2012. Winter is also the best time to see wildlife.

**✦ SLEEP & EAT HERE** The STAR has exclusive use of Londolzi's Tree Camp (londolzi.com), which has six suites - each with its own private deck and plunge pool. Included are three delicious meals a day, emphasising fresh, wholesome food, and drinks/refreshments. Depending on the number of requests for single occupancy, there is space for six to 10 people. Couples and singles are both welcome. It costs \$9 999/about R67 250 per person sharing or \$14 999/about R100 880 single, all inclusive, for four nights. Given the intimacy that quickly develops between people, thanks to the intensive group coaching, sharing a room with a 'stranger' is definitely worth the saving (minimal time is spent in the room). The usual rate at Tree Camp is R9 500 pps per night (less if staying four or more nights).

**DO THIS** Expect stimulating, adventure-packed days filled with ongoing personal coaching in a group setting by Martha Beck and her team, game drives, wilderness walks, tracking and yoga. Londolzi Private Game Reserve is in the Sabi Sand Reserve, adjacent to Kruger National Park.

**📌 NEED TO KNOW** Preparation for the STAR includes pre-coaching prior to arrival (this is included in the price). Guests provide detailed answers to an extensive questionnaire and have an intensive tele-coaching session with Martha Beck or one of her certified master coaches. This speeds up the process, making Martha's cut-to-the-chase style of coaching more effective. To sign up for the interest list to be notified when registration opens for 2012, go to marthabeck.com/african-star-2011628.php. Profits from the STARs are split between reclaiming more wilderness areas and funding education for local people through Londolzi's Good Works Foundation.

**📍 GO THERE** British Airways flies to Kruger Mpumalanga International Airport in Nelspruit - Londolzi is about 150km by road from here. Federal Air (fedair.com) has twice-daily one-hour flights from Joburg straight into the reserve. (For help with these reservations, email didi@londolzi.co.za). British Airways flies to Joburg from Cape Town, Durban and PE. **ba.com**

