

GET Into the bush

Eco-visionary



Part-owner of EcoTraining, Africa's most accredited and largest safari-guide training company, Mbombela's Anton Lategan is a big-picture, high-energy guy with a simple message.

The conversation kicks off with a long discussion on his boerboel/ Great Dane cross. If slobbery kisses (and attempts to get on your lap) from an 80kg hunk of hound are not exactly your thing, stay away. And in case you're wondering, it costs R1 800 a month to feed the beast. And that's with a discount from the vet.

Doggie talk out of the way, we move onto conservation about childhood influences - like his dad, and a deeply exciting time growing up. "Camping at Chobe, trips out into the bush - real stuff," he says. George Nda, a Venda mentor, was another. "He taught me the small things, about berries, traps and bugs. He was a trusted figure in my life. I had an adventurous childhood, unusually so."

Following the path of the least resistance, Anton matriculated at Pretoria Boys High and signed up for a law degree. He lasted three years. "I've always been driven by a strong spiritual influence," he says. "I followed my heart to Sabi Sabi. You didn't have to pay me to do guiding, I would have done it for nothing."

In 1997 he joined EcoTraining as an instructor. Started in 1993 by a group of bush guides from Londolozi and Sabi Sabi, EcoTraining was visionary in its thinking. Realising that the end of apartheid would open up the country to international visitors, and that wildlife and safaris would be a huge part of the attraction, it began to run the first structured field-guide training course in South Africa.

About the same time, the Field Guides Association of South Africa was set up to,

Text: Ciska Kay

among other things, standardise field-guide qualifications.

Anton agreed with the company's philosophy and was proud to be associated with it, but was frustrated by the lack of implementation of plans. He saw greater potential. "I had found my niche and was loving life. I was motivated and inspired - I knew I wanted to be in the bush, but not as hunter or guide, and I couldn't drive the business being a trainer."

By the end of his first year at EcoTraining, he teamed up with veteran field guide Lex Hes, to buy the company.

At the time they operated from a corner in the north of Sabi Sands with one Land Rover, a bucket shower, a pit toilet and a few tents - a far cry from the company now operating camps in Botswana, Kenya, Zimbabwe and Australia.

He admits that he's single-minded about reaching people. The endless horror of man's destruction of his habitat (farm concessions in national parks in Nigeria, deforestation in Gabon and Africa's prolific bush-meat trade) angers him as much as it spurs him on. And there's always more to do, another plan to make. "I think I exhaust my staff," he laughs. One senses this is a man with a long bucket list.

When you cut to the chase, Anton peddles a simple message. "The guiding principles of ecology are universal," he says. "We're an arrogant species - we've fooled ourselves by thinking we're somehow separate from nature. I'm not a socialist, but capitalism needs to be checked with a strong environmental consciousness."

EcoTraining's courses, whether for professional use or merely as in interest, bridge the gap of the disconnection between man and nature. "We give guides the tools and understanding of interrelated systems, of how to interpret the environment. In turn, they inspire people to become environmentally conscious and proactively involved in conservation. It's the coolest thing - think about how much exposure guides have to tourists from around the world."



MORE ABOUT ECOTRAINING

Passionate and environmentally conscious, EcoTraining specialises in the training of guides and nature lovers and aims to opening participants' minds to the fragility of our planet. Courses are hands-on and run in simple, unfenced bush camps in the middle of nowhere.

The company's mission is to educate people on the importance of wilderness and especially the processes which drive the natural ecosystems of the world. After completing a course, participants are armed with knowledge which enables them to make a difference in the way they look after the planet in their day-to-day lives.



Get in touch

To get an idea of what the company offers, go to www.ecotraining.co.za or contact 013-752-2532.



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