

THE roaring of wild white lions — only 11 are found free in Africa and only inside the Timbavati Game Reserve and Kruger National Park — and their golden relatives reverberated through my bones as I lay in a hammock, gazing at the stars.

The sacred white lions are believed to have descended from the stars in Timbavati, whose name, from the ancient Shangaan, means “the place where the angelic or star lions came down”. Camp Unicorn, where we stayed, is a mystical place in their heartland.

Linda Tucker, founder of the Global White Lion Protection Trust, and her partner, lion ecologist Jason Turner, established the camp in the Tsau! Conservancy as a haven for white lions rescued from captivity.

When they first released white lions into their endemic habitat in 2004, they were extinct in the bush.

The science behind their ghostly appearance is a recessive gene, found only in the Greater Timbavati/Kruger region. Turner points out they are not albino lions. Some tawny lions in the region carry the gene and can give birth to white-lion cubs.

The first re-wilded white-lion pride had cubs in 2006. In 2014, a cub was born in the Kruger again.

Turner says there are currently 11 white lions in Timbavati and one in the Kruger.

Leopards, honey badgers, caracal and African wild cat are among the other species that have given birth in the conservancy, a safer place for young than the nearby hunting reserves in greater Timbavati.

In the night, hyena cries mingle with the lion roars. To hear them better, I left my door open.

At dawn we were privileged once again to get close to the white lions, which have radio collars that allow Turner to track them for research.

At least once a day, he observes the pride and has already made significant discoveries, including evidence that these apex predators hunt as effectively as tawny lions.

During our visit, the white males were mating with tawny females and we could clearly observe their rituals at dusk and dawn.

On our first encounter, we saw a male known as Zukhara open his jaws wide, using scent to check if Tswalu was still in oestrus.

Satisfied, he stayed close to her, alternately pacing and lying like a sphinx, alert to movement.

When she was ready, she rose from a sleeping position, walked a few paces and presented her haunches to him. It was all over in less than a



Where the stars shine white

Claire Keeton visits a haven for the few white lions living free in the wild

minute and she rolled onto her side again, resting until the next time.

This pattern repeats roughly every 25 minutes over three to five days. Feline reproduction, evidently, takes effort but it's worth it.

In the conservancy there are now three prides, with six white lions among them, thriving in the bush — unlike the thousands of white lions

confined to cages.

Tucker inherited the mantle of defending the white lions from her mentor, a lion shaman called Maria Khosa, she says. Khosa trained the university graduate in spiritual traditions around the lions. The Sepedi and Tsonga people honour them as their ancestors.

This is why Camp Unicorn, a

SAY AAAH: Zukhara (the white male) and Tswalu in a post-coital moment in the Tsau! Conservancy, where six of the 11 remaining wild white lions roam. Below is Camp Unicorn KEVIN SUTHERLAND

peaceful clearing in the bush, is a retreat and not a safari destination. Usually groups that visit have a spiritual, scientific or development purpose and the trust reserves the right to deny access. For special occasions, a couple can sleep in a treehouse away from the camp.

The conservancy on the white lions' ancestral land aligns with the Nile meridian running north-south through the globe, which Tucker believes has spiritual energy.

You won't see unicorns drifting through camp but, if you immerse yourself in its energy you are sure to feel recharged — and you will experience the exhilaration of being close to magnificent white lions in their element. — Keeton was a guest of Tsau! Conservancy



Go, Go, Go

WHY GO THERE: Tsau! Conservancy is good for the soul. Camp Unicorn will appeal to people who want to escape a society dominated by 24/7 connectivity and consumerism, or those yearning for a more spiritual world. The magnificence of the lions puts everything into perspective.

WHAT IT HAS: Three chalets with en-suite bathrooms and four with shared ablutions, sleeping 14 people. An open-plan lounge and dining room overlook the fireplace in the centre of the camp, near a plunge pool and a hammock. The food is fresh and delicious but there is no alcohol and the meals are not elaborate. The camp lifestyle is about saving, not depleting the planet.

RATES: R2 800 per person per night and R3 800 pp for the treehouse (sleeps two). The facilitator gets a 50% discount for a group of five or more and is fully sponsored for 10.

CONTACT: Phone 015 793 0657, e-mail info@whitelions.org or visit whitelions.org.

GETTING THERE: The Tsau! Conservancy is about six hours by road from Johannesburg and two hours from Nelspruit.

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