

‘He was killed right here’

Spellbinding storytelling brings to life an episode of bloody colonial history in Zululand

Story by James Parry

W

ITH A LOPING FLIGHT

and broad velvety wings, a purple-crested turaco glides into a nearby acacia as the first rays of morning sun spill across the lawn. The African bush is waking up, birds and animals busily responding to the creeping warmth and light. I am sitting in the garden of Fugitives' Drift, a lodge in the heart of South Africa's Zululand, drinking coffee and watching the birds wake up. It is a typical African scene, but this is far from being a typical African lodge. Forget any preconceptions about safari lodges being just about wildlife. Fugitives' Drift offers something quite different.

The name Zululand evokes hazy notions of a distant colonial conflict, a heroic defence and a film starring Michael Caine. This intriguing mix sits at the heart of the Fugitives' Drift experience. Here, thanks to the flair and ingenuity of the remarkable Rattray family, an intriguing chapter in the chronicle of both the British Empire and the more short-lived independent Zulu kingdom is brought alive in the most original and compelling way.

Husband and wife David and Nicky Rattray first came to Fugitives' Drift in 1989, but since boyhood Johannesburg-born David had been enthralled by the events of the brief but tumultuous Anglo-Zulu War of 1879, which played out across the dramatic landscapes around the Buffalo River, Isandlwana and Rorke's Drift. He had always longed to tell a wider audience the story of the war, which still resonated in the oral heritage of the local Zulus among whom he had grown up. Soon, the couple had built two guest rooms and were running battlefield tours. 'We lived in one room behind the makeshift



office,' recalls Nicky. 'Our friends were both our guests and sounding boards as our story took shape and we built a new life here in this remote place. Such was our isolation that people felt sorry for us, bringing food, and small luxuries like magazines and newspapers!'

A quarter of a century later and the original Rattray family home is now a luxury lodge, complete with a magnificent library and a smaller but equally atmospheric guesthouse nearby. David's tours became the stuff of legend, his encyclopedic knowledge of the war's events and personalities combining with a boyish enthusiasm for the land and its people. This irresistible cocktail attracted a steady throng of visitors that included Prince Charles and Prince Harry in 1997. It was a golden period, but one that came to a tragic end in 2007 when 48-year-old David was killed in an attempted robbery.

PREVIOUS SPREAD:
Andrew Rattray bringing alive the dramatic events of 22 January 1879 at Isandlwana.
TOP: *a campfire adds to the Fugitives' Drift magic.*
ABOVE: *Fugitives' Drift founder Nicky Rattray in her herb garden and a photo of her co-founder husband David, who was one of South Africa's leading historians before his tragic death in 2007.*
RIGHT: *giraffes survey the scene in the Fugitives' Drift private game reserve*





ABOVE: the church at Rorke's Drift was a storehouse at the time of the siege.
 LEFT: the memorial monument to the Zulus who died in battle at Isandlwana

The British hadn't even bothered to fortify their position, so confident were they about the threat posed by 'a bunch of savages with sticks'

The hugely supportive response from a deeply shocked local community was overwhelming. 'David's death plunged us all into uncertainty as to how we could possibly live somewhere else,' explains Nicky, 'until we realised that we didn't have to.' So it is that David's legacy lives on through Nicky and sons Andrew and Douglas, who are both fluent Zulu speakers and have inherited their father's passion and flair for evoking history. The formula remains unchanged: visitors are taken in small groups to the battlefields where they are transported back into the past through storytelling.

I set out one morning with five other guests to Isandlwana, which is less than half an hour away from Fugitives' Drift by 4WD. With Douglas at the wheel, we listen en route to a recording of his father setting the scene. Eager to subjugate the independent kingdom of the Zulus, the British commissioner for Southern Africa, Sir Henry Bartle Frere, issues an ultimatum to the Zulu king, Cetshwayo. The deadline passes without Zulu agreement and so, on 11 January 1879, British troops under Lord Chelmsford invade Zululand, setting up camp a few days later on the plains of Isandlwana.

The area looks much the same today as it did then, we are told, huge open vistas with scattered trees and an iconic Sphinx-shaped outcrop. 'But imagine that then there were no trees,' explains Douglas, 'and how crowded it would have been here on the morning of 22 January 1879. All those wagons, oxen and camp helpers, not to mention over 1,700 British soldiers.' He conjures up a vivid scene, describing how the British had not even bothered to fortify their position, so confident were they about the threat posed by 'a bunch of savages armed with sticks,' as Bartle Frere later disparaged the Zulus. Yet meanwhile the highly organised forces of Cetshwayo were massing over the brow of a nearby hill.

Douglas next describes the terrifying noises the Zulus then used to intimidate the British, how they rattled their spears against their cattle-hide shields and chanted a battle cry, a deep resonant 'zi-zi-zi', described by one witness as sounding like a swarm of giant bees. Over 20,000 Zulu warriors then poured down onto the plains, encircling the hapless encampment and rampaging through the British lines, slashing and stabbing with their spears. In the ensuing bloodbath, the vast majority of the British troops were slaughtered in what was the greatest defeat in the history of the British army against forces largely without firearms.

Just a handful of survivors scrambled to safety across the Buffalo River – the very 'fugitives' from which Fugitives' Drift gets its name. The intensity of Douglas's storytelling is such that it is hard to imagine how there could be greater drama to the occasion, but he then reveals that the battle took place under a total eclipse of the sun. Astonished, exhilarated and enthralled, we return to base.

'No chance of escaping, so the men at Rorke's Drift just have to stay put and do their best'



The following day, it is brother Andrew's turn. We head for nearby Rorke's Drift, in 1879 a small mission station on the Buffalo River ('drift' is the local term for a causeway or crossing). Andrew sits us down in canvas chairs in the shade and starts on the next chapter in the story. Rorke's Drift has been turned by the British into a field hospital, Andrew explains, and is defended by only 100 or so combat-ready troops. Yet it is only a few miles from the carnage of Isandlwana and news soon arrives that the Zulus are on their way. 'No chance of escaping,' exclaims Andrew, 'so the men at Rorke's just have to stay put and do their best.' What followed was one of the most extraordinary defences in military history, in which a handful of men defied overwhelming odds and withstood the Zulu attack.

Andrew shows us where the British soldiers desperately stacked up mealie bags and biscuit tins to build a defensive wall. He then draws our attention to the hospital building itself (which still stands and is now a museum); trapped inside and with the thatched roof on fire, the men – some of them bed-ridden – engaged in fierce hand-to-hand fighting with the Zulus. Andrew tells us of the heroic endeavours of the individuals concerned. People like Private John Williams who, using only his bare hands, battered holes through walls so that patients could be dragged to safety, and Private Frederick Hitch, who despite being shot through the shoulder continued helping others until he passed out from pain.

Others met a worse fate. One patient was dragged from his bed by a Zulu. 'He was killed right here,' indicates Andrew, with a downwards nod of his head. We all stare at the patch of scuffed soil, imagining how it had probably been drenched with blood then and the air acrid with smoke from the burning roof and ringing with the screams of the dying and wounded. Rarely has history been made so vivid. This was a battle that saw the awarding of 11 Victoria Crosses, the most ever received in a single action by one regiment, and was the subject – although not without considerable cinematic licence,

Andrew adds wryly – of the 1964 film *Zulu*, starring Michael Caine and Stanley Baker.

The most poignant moment comes when Andrew relates what happened to the VC recipients in later life. John Williams's hands, torn and scraped down to the bone, never recovered; Robert Jones, gallant defender of the hospital ward, was to die later of a gunshot wound, registered at the time as an act of suicide but now thought to be an accident with a faulty gun; Frederick Hitch became one of London's first black cab drivers and 1,500 cabbies lined the British capital's streets at his funeral in 1913; and poor William Jones, who had helped Robert Jones drag sick men to safety through a barrage of spears, ended up destitute and in a workhouse.

Andrew is equally eloquent on the heroism shown by the Zulus. Many of the warriors had not eaten for 36 hours, having run across the plains for 120 miles to prevent the British from occupying their homeland. Emotion fills his voice as he asks us to remember those who played a part in the momentous events of that day 136 years ago. There is hardly a dry eye among us, yet at the same time we are uplifted and thrilled by what we've heard.

This is magical storytelling and not so much a tale of military endeavour as of human courage. Many of the personalities portrayed so colourfully in the Rattray narrative stand out, but my own favourite is Lieutenant Henry Charlie Harford, a keen amateur naturalist. In the midst of a ferocious engagement with the Zulus he was seen to fall to the ground and the cry went up 'Harford is dead!' – only for his comrades to find him on his hands and knees examining a rare beetle. Such are the tales of empire, but how remarkable, too, that this story is still being told on the plains of Africa.



LEFT: revered by the Zulus, the Mangeni Falls are a popular destination for local residents and visitors alike.

FAR LEFT: excursions by 4WD enable guests at Fugitives' Drift to explore more of the area's dramatic landscapes