

# What Drives an Actuary to Buy a Safari Lodge in South Africa?

By Rolf Steiner

Probably there are better investment opportunities. The risk profile with bushfires and water shortage is not promising at all. A Life underwriter would maybe apply an extra-mortality for the likelihood to get eaten by a lion. Thus, the question is legitimate: What drives an actuary to buy a safari lodge in South Africa?

A good friend told me that if a man turns 40, he either has a lover, buys a motorcycle, or starts his own business. I am happily married and I have no flair for motorcycles, so the answer was clear. As I went through a quiet period at work, there was time to reflect: eighteen years of experience in reinsurance, still many years ahead of me—what's next? Suddenly, I rediscovered a passion from times when I was little boy and that had lain dormant in this hectic world: the African bush.

At the beginning, I had no idea how this passion should become part of the second half of my life. But suddenly, I knew. I typed into Google Search: "I want to buy a game lodge in South Africa." This was the start of an irresistible adventure.

Despite my desire for change I did not crash blindly into something of which I had no idea. I passed an online course about "Game Lodge Management" and became familiar with the complexity of such an operation located in the middle of the bush. I learned about the various types of employees used in a lodge, the handling of guests and travel agents, as well as safety and quality aspects of game lodge management. The course started with the sentence: "Only bad managers define profit as a goal, good managers accept profit as a side effect on the way to excellence." A refreshing start, especially if you come from the financial service industry, where we often forget this principle.

Three months later the passion had a name: "Rhulani," a small, private and unfenced five-star-lodge in the Madikwe Game Reserve. With 75,000 hectares, 66 mammals and more than 350 bird species, Madikwe is one of the biggest and most diverse ecosystems in the country, and totally malaria-free.

I remember very well the day I arrived at the lodge as the new owner, and all the staff lined up at the entrance. This day was at the end of a short negotiation process with South African

agents, lawyers and banks, that included a due diligence process. Everything went amazingly smooth and was transparent at all times and gave me an idea of South African hospitality. But this day was also the beginning of the adventure I looked for, and in which I have not found any negative surprises yet.

So, what is Rhulani all about? "Rhulani means 'relax' so we invite you to sit back and enjoy the African bush with us!" is the slogan of this unique place of untouched nature. When you arrive after a 4.5-hours drive from Johannesburg, the staff awaits you with a warm African welcome. A pleasant breeze blows through the open lounge, while you enjoy a refreshing drink, admiring stunning views to Botswana, and maybe with a thirsty elephant at the waterhole, right in front of you.

This moment of tranquility is when even actuaries admit that the beauty of wild nature is at least as fascinating as the exact calculations in a spreadsheet. But don't worry, you can take all your work with you as Rhulani has free Internet access. But, you might end up using the wifi rather to share amazing wildlife photographs with your friends than to respond to your emails.

Each time I close my laptop and open my eyes, I am amazed at how Rhulani is built perfectly to blend into its surroundings. It is only when you are here and observe the incredible wildlife that you truly appreciate how perfectly all the elements of nature interact. Rhulani wants you to feel, smell, see and hear

the bush, so great care is taken in creating the perfect balance of stimuli. It is a place to nourish the soul and lift the spirit, to celebrate life. The color palette – brown, beige and terracotta – is inspired by the changing colors of the earth, with added splashes of coral red and yellow symbolizing the African sunrise and sunset.

As a statistician, you are allowed to ask yourself what is the probability of meeting an aggressive buffalo when at night you are escorted to your room by your ranger. I can assure you, it is still safer than going to work in a big city. So, forget about statistics, just immerse yourself in this amazing world. Don't be surprised if you find yourself crying at the sight of a lion family resting in the grass, or when during dinner at the open boma fire, the ranger tells you, under the stars of the African sky, the story of Orion and Scorpio.

Mathematically, Rhulani offers a perfect balance. There is the absolute tranquility when you are in one of the nine spacious chalets, where you can spoil yourself with a massage on the private deck, or observe a passing zebra herd when out at the plunge pool. It is also possible to feel butterflies in your stomach, when you are on an extensive bushwalk, guided by experienced rangers. Maybe you will encounter one of the dangerous "Big 5" (lion, elephant, rhino, buffalo, or leopard). And you will also discover the beauty of some of the smaller bush inhabitants and take a millipede or a dung beetle in your hand.



Despite its overwhelming beauty, Rhulani also has its challenges. Surprisingly, these are very similar to challenges I have seen in my life as a reinsurer, so my technical background is not a barrier. On the contrary, I realize that a totally different background is a great advantage when you think about future innovation, as you do not fall into the traps of the usual dogmas of the industry.

One of my main challenges at the game lodge is to find the right workers, and motivate, train and reward them, and align their personal interests to Rhulani's interests. Most of my personal time is dedicated to handling guest feedback, understanding the future customer and improving Rhulani's quality every day. I have learned

through experience that "word of mouth" is the least expensive and most powerful marketing instrument. And this is really true. Our returning guests are our biggest asset. To gain new customers, one needs a solid social media strategy and an understanding that online channels are key for future sales.

The project "Rhulani" ([www.rhulani.com](http://www.rhulani.com)) is now over two years old. It has shown me that not everything in life can be explained by a mathematical formula, and that this is not necessary either. If it is the challenge of smoothing a mortality table or chasing an elephant out of the camp, what really matters is "passion." ■

Rolf was born in Männedorf/ Switzerland and graduated in

1995 with a diploma in mathematics, specializing in life insurance, at The SFIT in Zurich/Switzerland. He started in the reinsurance industry as a marketing pricing actuary with Union Re, and in 1997, joined Swiss Re to grow life reinsurance business in Latin America. In almost 17 years with Swiss Re, Rolf occupied several management positions and lived in Buenos Aires, Zurich, Rome, New York and since 2010 in São Paulo with the mission to set up a local reinsurance company in Brazil. From 2013 to May 2015, Rolf was dedicated to defining innovative value propositions for Swiss Re in the space of life primary value chain and primary medical insurance. Since June 2015, Rolf is back in Switzerland and has accepted a position as Head of

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