



SAFI SUPPORTED COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT PROJECTS

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Justicia's pride and joy

By Sharon van Wyk

The Singita Group's social responsibility and community development programmes are carried out quietly and without any fuss. In a similar fashion, when the private game reserve and its collection of award-winning luxury lodges applied for Fair Trade in Tourism South Africa certification, there was no trumpet-blowing.

In contrast, the commitment Singita has made to the village communities on the borders of its 18 000ha property in the Sabi Sands has been highly visible and 100% effective. At least that's the word on the dusty streets of Justicia. About 15 000 people live in Justicia. Almost 50% of these are Mozambican refugees who poured into the area during that country's bitter civil war.

For the people of Justicia, along with those in the neighbouring villages of Lilydale and Huntingdon, tourism represents the only real hope of upliftment and empowerment in an otherwise forgotten corner of Mpumalanga. And tourism in this area means private game lodges. There are a good many of them in the Sabi Sands and most operate in the top end of the tourism market, catering almost primarily for well-heeled international guests.

Singita is in the top bracket of this niche market, with lodges on 18 000ha of prime Big Five game viewing land in the Sabi Sands, and also on a 15 000ha concession in the adjoining Kruger National Park. But while the price tags at this end of the tourism market may be prohibitive for all but a few South Africans and international clients, the work being done to improve the lives of people such as those in Justicia is the stuff that national pride is made of.

Singita has every right to feel proud of what it is achieving. The group's social responsibility programmes are delivering tangible results: school buildings, vegetable gardens, computers, libraries and numerous other resources have been donated and developed by the group. One of the most successful community-based initiatives is a community tour, operated by Zamani Mathebula, who instituted it while he was a waiter at Singita. Mathebula developed the tour in response to guests who asked him about his background and everyday life in his village. This tour now enables guests to share in the culture and history of the Shangaan people in Justicia, while also visiting some of the community projects supported by Singita.

Tracker Sipho Khoza and community tour guide Grayton Mashele are both products of the projects. Thirty-year-old Khoza has been a tracker at Singita for six years and Mashele (27) has worked there for three years, taking guests to Justicia to show them the work being done and introducing them to some of the village's brightest hopes in the form of the Justicia Best Boys choir.



Khoza and Mashele were both 'best boys' ; singing to entertain guests during their visits to Justicia: before being given the opportunity to work at Singita's lodges. "It was an excellent start for me," says Mashele, looking fondly at the smiling faces of the current choir as they sing for guests. "We both started here, singing and sharing our culture with Singita's guests. Now we are bringing our own guests to visit our village. This makes us very proud," he adds. Khoza nods vigorously, a broad smile of agreement across his face. "Look at this village," he says, pointing to the neat brick homes in orderly, tidy, swept yards. "We are working with Singita to improve our lives. Everything we have today is because we are partners in tourism with Singita. We help each other. This is part of our culture, to work together for the common good. Singita recognises this and helps us to develop and improve our community."

But it's not just about staff. Saina Mdluli and Margaret Shabangu work for themselves. Singita pays them to educate guests in the traditions of Shangaan culture during the community tours. The ladies show how maize is pounded into flour and make tasty traditional dishes for guests to sample, and have a roaring business selling their home-made peanut butter to their rapt audience. "I love Singita," says Shabangu. "They have helped me to help my family, now they are part of my family."

Part of Singita's strength in its community development programme is its access to donor funding through its often high-profile guests. Indeed, in many respects the programme is guest-driven, as the group's general manager Mark Whitney explains: "After our guests began to show a growing awareness about responsible tourism, we realised that our daily business practices, community projects and local Shangaan culture are of great interest to the consumer. That is why we decided to apply for Fair Trade in Tourism certification."

Funding is vital, and while the group ploughs a significant amount of its own resources into community projects, outside donors help to fill crucial gaps.

Collaboration with other lodges is vital too. "We are currently working on building a centre for disabled children with the help of funding from the Dell computer group and representatives from our neighbouring lodges at Nyati, Londolozi and Ulusaba," says Singita's community development fundi Carin Engelbrecht.

The Tshemba Hosi Disabled Centre, when completed, will help to care for disabled children from Justicia and its neighbouring communities, providing a wide range of services such as physiotherapy, speech and occupational therapy and educational development. "Dell has come forward with 80% of the funding for the centre," says Engelbrecht. "We have formed a committee of representatives from the other lodges and the local villages and once the centre has been completed and is running satisfactorily it will be formally handed over to the community," she says.

While Tshemba Hosi represents Singita's most ambitious project to date, smaller projects are just as important to the residents of Justicia. Pupils at Mdlala High School think 'Singita' every time they flush, thanks to the six new toilets the lodges have installed at the school. "Lots of projects like this were funded with donations from our guests," explains Engelbrecht. "If they leave a few hundred rands here and there for the community, we save it all up and invest it in things that the people of Justicia really need."

The guests are happy too. "Isn't this just the most fantastic place? The people are amazing," enthuses Carole Derdiger. She and husband Stan hail from Chicago in the United States. They have been staying at Singita for three nights and decided to take in a community tour before leaving for home. They were not sorry they did so. "This has been a highlight for us," says Derdiger. "Learning about the culture and traditions of the people who are waiting on you hand and foot is, for me, a mark of respect for the excellent job that they are doing. These people are truly the best ambassadors any country could wish for." The Derdigers decided there and then to make Singita a regular holiday destination and with it, the future of Justicia just got even brighter.

SAFI is a Riviera based, South African international association for everyone (all nationalities) who enjoy South Africa, its people, culture, nature and heritage. The objective is to help raise funds and increase awareness to South African wildlife, community and conservation projects and to have fun by way of socializing and organizing fund-raising events and functions, usually hosted at private villas along the Riviera. Donations go to South African community and conservation projects, managed by Singita. For membership form, events and annual fixture list call +33 (0)6 75 93 90 93 or +33 (0)4 93 86 04 77 or email safiriviera@wanadoo.fr or write to SAFI - 219 Promenade des Anglais, 06200 Nice, France. See www.angloinfo.com/online/safi/ and www.singita.com and click on local community.