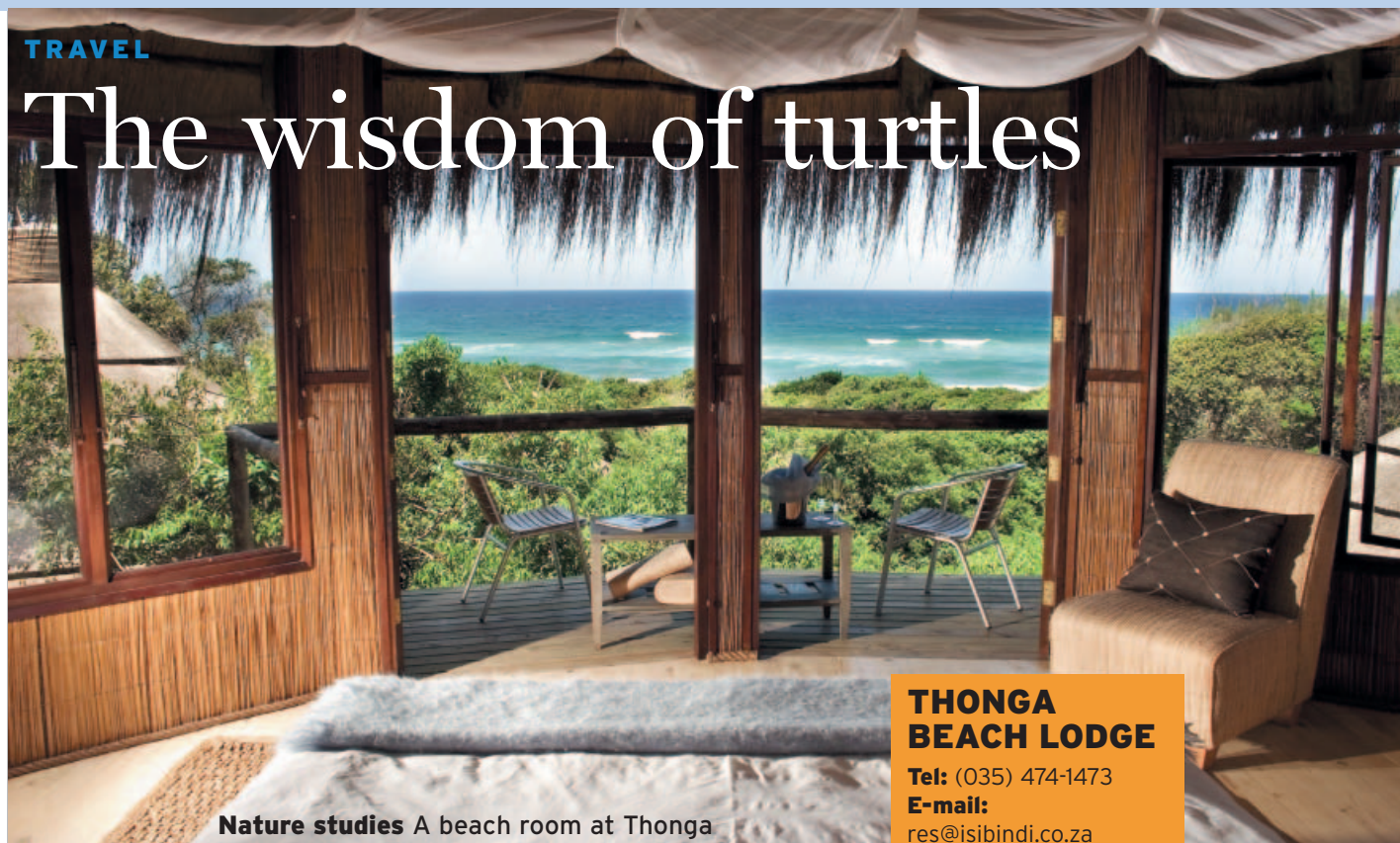


FMLIFE

TRAVEL

The wisdom of turtles



Nature studies A beach room at Thonga

THONGA BEACH LODGE

Tel: (035) 474-1473

E-mail:

res@isibindi.co.za

Kate Thompson visits two lodges in unspoilt KwaZulu Natal terrain and revels in nature

Like a shimmering ribbon of blue, white and green, Mabibi bay is spectacular in the morning. At 9 am, the temperatures are already rising and the sea is like a warm hug. Splashing around like children, we are the only two people on the beach apart from a lone fisherman on the rocks at the far curve of the bay.

It's a terrible thing to consider that in eight hours I will be driving back to the

confines of Johannesburg. With this in mind, we choose to have breakfast on the deck — a request that is met with a smile and a prompt relocation of cutlery. We eat our final breakfast quietly, preferring to watch the waves than discuss the journey ahead.

Isibindi Africa's Thonga Beach Lodge at Mabibi, in KwaZulu Natal's Maputaland, is built into the coastal forest overlooking the beach. It is a fantastic position, accessible only by 4x4 and brave drivers. If you don't own your own all-road transport, the lodge will arrange transfers for you.

The air is thick with humidity, butterflies and an unmistakable and impossible to pinpoint, honey-like scent. It's glorious.

Guests are greeted on arrival by manager Kevin Collins, who runs the lodge

with his wife, Bev. This personal introduction to the resort — and careful attention — strikes the right note, and is maintained throughout our stay. The large contingent of staff, almost all from the immediate area, know our names and room numbers and are always happy to arrange or assist.

"I see you have your own fins and masks. Are you divers?" asks an assistant manager. "Would you like to chat to our dive master about heading out to the reef?"

"You've just arrived in room 6," says the bartender. "Can I get you something refreshing?"

"It's your last night," says Bev. "We've made up a special table for you to enjoy your dinner in private." Dinner is enjoyable — onion soup, lamb and sweet potato mash — but not life-changing.