

We're on Safari to stay

Getting to experience the wildlife, habitat and food of Makanyane Luxury Safari in South Africa

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animal documentaries, many of which were made by David Attenborough. Watching on television as lions stalk gazelles, watching a baby elephant walk for the first time and even the march of ants as they carried food back to their nest.

In 2014, the romantic comedy movie, Blended, starring Drew Barrymore and Adam Sandler, was partially filmed in South Africa and the movie is the inspiration for South Africa being on the travel bucket list of my daughter Matilda.

So when I visited South Africa with Matilda, you'll understand how excited we both were. This was about more than writing travel stories. This is about ticking off a travel bucket list item for both of us. This is about that rare opportunity for an iconic and luxurious adventure that we all must do when we get the chance. This is about everything you've ever imagined about Africa. This is about Africa.

About an hour out of Johannesburg our little aeroplane touches down not far away from the South African border with Botswana. The small dirt airstrip is in the middle of the Madikwe Game Reserve and is about the fifth largest game reserve in South Africa and one of the least known.

The next ten minutes are as imprinted on my mind as the birth thirteen years ago of the girl sitting beside me in our open-top safari vehicle. As we drove away from the airstrip I can recall every second with clarity. Each moment as vivid, exhilarating and heart-thumping as life can throw at you.

We are both still beaming with the excitement of meeting our ever-smiling guide, Kaiser, and stepping aboard our vehicle when a tiny gazelle lightly leaps across the track and our gasps are so loud that Kaiser quickly turns his head around to check if we are ok.

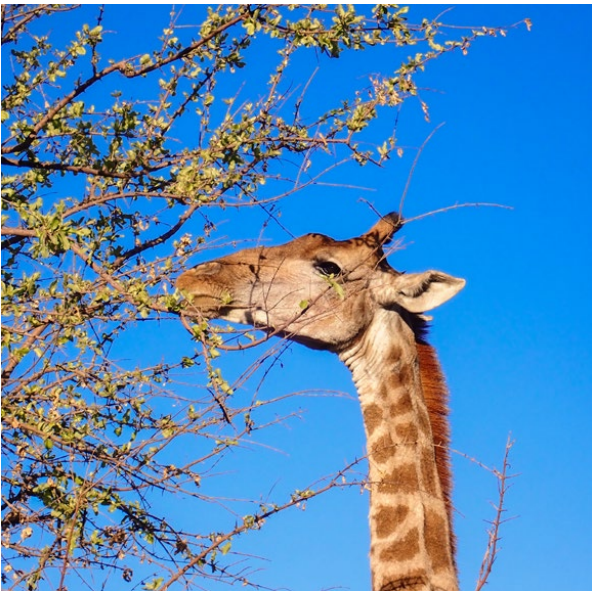
Imagine our reaction less than ten seconds later when there is a bull elephant standing alongside the track. A real elephant in the real wild. This is Africa. We haven't even reached our accommodation! We're still in complete awe of our first two animals



WHAT'S ON YOUR TRAVEL BUCKET list? How did those places get to be on your bucket list? Perhaps you were taught in school about the history of somewhere in the world or read about amazing far away destinations. Perhaps your travel dreams are influenced by the locations used for movies. As well as inspiring our travel dreams it is also so exciting to see places you have been to appear on the big screen. I recently saw a preview of the new James Bond movie due to be released in 2021 and I leaped up with excitement as I saw that some of his adventures take place in the remarkable city of Matera in southern Italy – maybe I'll tell you about my adventures in Matera another day.

I love the excitement of travelling to somewhere I've always wanted to travel to.

When I was a child I used to watch a television cartoon show called Kimba the White Lion. It was the story of an orphan lion cub and his adventures in Africa. As well as the weekly episodes of Kimba I was always amazed by the





For meals at the lodge, there is always plenty of choice and Matilda and I are quick converts to South African cuisine. We love the gamey flavour of ostrich skewers and tang and spice of chakalaka and love saying it almost as much as saying bobotie. Chakalaka is a vegetable relish that can be used alongside anything while bobotie is a spicy mince dish that is baked with an egg topping.

Matilda and I are warmly included in forming a larger group of guests at mealtimes despite her being the only child at the lodge and all of the other guests being honeymooners. She probably hears a few stories that aren't quite age-appropriate, but having heard some of her exclamations upon getting close to roaring lions and charging elephants, perhaps I need to reassess her ability to understand the world around her.

There are game drives each morning before dawn, mid-afternoon and evening and each one is designed to seek out wildlife in the environment of that wildlife. This isn't a zoo. There are no feeding times, no special experiences to hold or sit next to an animal and have your photo taken. This really is Africa.

Our guide Kaiser is in radio contact with the other guides and they communicate in code to let each other know where they have seen particular animals that we are trying to find. The reason they speak in code is because they know that poachers may be listening in to their radio frequencies.

Over the next few days we spent very little time relaxing by the pool. We wanted to make use of every minute that we have to be on every safari possible. We're up early for the predawn briefing and head out at every opportunity during the day and long into the evening.



when we cross a river and it's as if we have crossed into the world of The Lion King. To the left there are zebras and waterbucks, to our right there is an impala, waterhog and a monitor lizard. I was looking for Elton John as I was sure I heard the Circle of Life playing from somewhere.

As we approach the Makanyane Safari Lodge I notice a gathering of people at the entrance and I'm wondering if we're arriving at a busy time for the resort with people checking in and checking out. That usual experience of the hustle and bustle of arrivals and departures.

Remarkably, the gathering was the resort team of Makanyane Safari Lodge. They've come to welcome us and while I'm normally thrilled just to get an iced tea upon arrival somewhere, this welcome is taking things to the next level. It's also an indication of what to expect at this resort. It's a bit unusual to have children stay here as it's really designed for the honeymooners, with just eight ultra-luxurious thatch and stone villas for a total of sixteen guests at any time that is set by the Limpopo River and spaced apart so that you have real seclusion. In fact, you are so secluded that if you want to leave your accommodation and walk to the main dining area, pool and library you have to call reception and wait for an escort. This really is Africa.

This is a resort where there is more than excellent customer service, this is about friendship. There is an interest in where you are from, what you like to do, and what you want to get from your safari experience.





While we saw so much I know that we both were so emotional about just how visceral the experiences could be. Being chased by an elephant was exciting, but we weren't scared because we felt safe, but sitting quietly alongside lions who had minutes earlier killed a wildebeest had a level of emotional intensity I felt in my whole being. For the loss of life I was respectful, for the sight of the lions with bloodied heads I was mesmerised but what I hadn't expected was the sound of the experience. Where normally I'd hear David Attenborough on my television describe in a hushed voice what was happening, this was so different. There was silence within my group of travellers and no commentary required by Kaiser as the sounds of real nature enveloped us. Bones snapping and being crushed by massive jaws, the sound of soft tissue being ripped and the chewing and swallowing sounds from animals content to have found a meal that enabled them to survive.

Madikwe Reserve is a spectacular game reserve spread over 75,000 hectares and sits in a bowl-like environment,

surrounded and protected by ridges and hills. No day visitors or tours are allowed. Only if you are staying in the luxury accommodation available, are you able to participate in safari drives. All the animals on your wishlist live here. Giant elephants, elegant giraffes, lumbering buffalos, trotting zebras, trampling rhinos, rare painted dogs and of course the lions and leopards. Right on the border with Botswana we even spotted some hippos lolling around in a river.

I thought before going on safari it would be about ticking off the sight of lions stalking or feeding, herds of zebra ambling across grasslands, or herds of elephants slowly walking in single file to some far-flung destination that I wanted to make sure I saw.

The moments, however, that will come back in a heartbeat whenever I hear the song Africa by Toto are the ones I didn't expect. Driving through a summer rainstorm in our open vehicle and just laughing as we were all drenched. The time we were searching for a big male lion in the dying of the days light and, with everyone looking forward to seeing



where it was, I heard it coming up behind our vehicle and then we watched as it just walked alongside us, then stopped, facing us, and fully opened its jaws in complete silence. On a sunrise safari, we stopped and watched as a patrol of hyena returned to their woodland lair after a night of hunting. They were tired and some were injured and despite their reputation as an ugly scavenger, they are effective hunters and looked brutally beautiful in the early light of the day.

There were two giraffes with their necks entwined in an embrace of love or perhaps fighting for fresh leaves on a tree. There was our group's competitive spotting of zebras, kudu and wildebeest.

We depart Makanyane Safari Lodge in much the same way as we arrived, in the company of the staff who embrace us. Around our vehicle are the friends we have made and as we take a final look at the faces who have pampered us, fed us, protected us and taught us, I hope they truly understand the impact they have had on our life.

I hope you envy my experience of being in South Africa. I hope you envy me, but also know that I envy you. You have all of this to look forward to. To gasp, to laugh and to be immersed in.

THE DETAILS

The Makanyane Luxury Safari Lodge is located within the lost world of the Madikwe Reserve and is one of the few Malaria-free safari locations in South Africa.

Madikwe Reserve is in South Africa's North West Province, close to the border of Botswana and just a short flight by light aircraft from Johannesburg. It is surrounded by a ridge of hills and well protected by anti-poaching patrols.

At the time of writing, South African Airways has postponed operating due to the collapse of international travel related to the Covid-19 pandemic. South African Airways is the flag carrier airline for South Africa and when flights resume, flies regularly to Johannesburg's O.R Tambo International Airport. From the airport, it's a one hour flight with Federal Airlines to the Madikwe Reserve or a three hour drive, renting a car from the airport.

For more information about Sanctuary Retreats visit:
www.sanctuaryretreats.com

IMPORTANT INFORMATION

South Africa has very strict anti-child slavery rules. It is important to ensure that if you're travelling as a single parent with a child to South Africa that prior to your travel you complete the immigration form and have it correctly signed by a valid certifying agent and, if possible, correspondence from the other parent of the child that certifies permission to travel to South Africa.

Be conscious of the timing and detail provided in social media posting of your safari experience as poaching is a serious issue throughout Africa and any notification of where an animal is located may be of use to poachers. **🚫**