

WORDS JODI PICOULT
 PICTURES THE MALAMALA GAME RESERVE

MONKEYS

Never Lie

Monkeys never lie. I learned this while I was perched in a Range Rover, listening to a remarkably accomplished ranger who had stopped the vehicle in order to pay attention to the agitated cries of a monkey in the upper branches of a tree. A baboon, he said, will make a distress call even if a predator isn't present. A monkey, though, well, if they're upset, it's with good reason. And just like that, we were in gear again, lurching over brush and branches in search of the leopard that this simian lookout had flagged for us.

Welcome to the wonder that is Mala Mala, a safari lodge that I recently had the pleasure of visiting. I travel internationally to promote my books, but my South African publisher has one advantage no other country does when it comes to enticing me to make the trip: safari. This time I brought along my fourteen-year-old son. "Jake," I had told him, "you'll never experience anything like this," and Mala Mala did not disappoint.

From the moment you arrive, and are taken under the wing of your ranger, you realise that every need of yours will be met before you even realise you're wanting. Jake and I were shown to our room, a spacious, thatch-roofed building with a bird's-eye view of the African bush. Two luxuriously appointed bathrooms, a vaulted ceiling, rattan chairs positioned in front of the wide windows, not much would have made me

Mala Mala is one of the older, well-established private game reserves in South Africa, sharing a common border with the Kruger National Park.



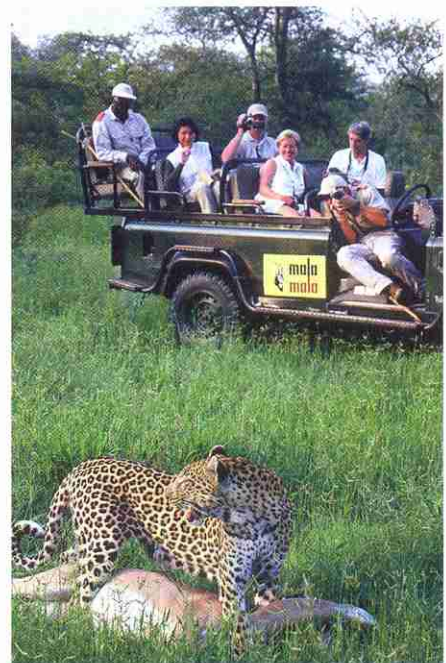
willingly leave that space, except for the promise of the afternoon game drive.

And Mala Mala's got game, their reputation for getting their guests to see the Big Five is widespread. In fact, we saw the Big Five on our very first drive, not to mention a host of other birds and animals. Our tracker and ranger were an endless source of information about the flora and fauna we were seeing.

The highlights? Following three lionesses and a trailing, languorous lion across a riverbed, only to see a tumble of cubs running out of the grass to greet their mothers; watching the Wilt Chamberlain of mongooses mating on the airstrip, for the sixth night in a row; mingling with an endless stream of water buffalo as they found their way to water; and the biggest coup of all: tracking a hungry leopard as she hunted a herd of impala, and hunkered less than a foot away from me, using the Range Rover as a shield.

The beauty of Mala Mala is the juxtaposition of this wild nature with the epitome of catered comfort. On each afternoon game drive, there would be a stop for a sundowner; at breakfast, your ranger takes your order for hot food and personally serves it to you. Dinner in the boma is a singular experience, tables are tucked around a roaring bonfire, and

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GAME DRIVE

Activities at Mala Mala include photographic safaris, stargazing and day and night game drives. Game viewing drives are conducted in open four-wheel drive vehicles allowing for better game viewing. Night drives provide the opportunity to view nocturnally active creatures, and walking safaris with an armed ranger can be arranged on request.

guests sample an array of traditional dishes while the waitresses sing and dance, an amazingly talented group that had me wondering if a vocal audition was part of the hiring process.

You no sooner stand up to explore the buffet than your napkin is folded again, your blanket draped over your chair. And yet, at no point is the wild far from this luxury. One night, as the ladies sang for us, a genet perched on top of the thatched roof that bordered the boma, watching us as if we were the curiosity.

Shortly before our stay was over, Jake and I were eating lunch on the terrace when a group of elephants meandered past. One had a back leg that was twisted, a birth defect, and had

been nicknamed Elvis by the rangers for his awkward hip gait.

Our ranger told us that this particular herd was attentive to Elvis, and would slow down or change course to make sure he could follow along.

I looked at my son, putting down his glass of lemonade so that he could take another photo. I glanced down at my empty plate, scraped clean of that day's delicacies. I breathed in the scent of potato bushes and dry earth and the coming of winter; marveled at that clear, endless African sky. *Thank you, I thought, channeling that other Elvis. Thank you very much.*

Jodi Picoult is the internationally bestselling author of fourteen novels. 