

SOUTH AFRICA

Distinguished South Africa

With remarkable wildlife, dramatic landscapes and gourmet food and wine, experience the luxe side of Africa's most developed country.

BY LINDA WEBER

A chorus of screams, oscillating between high-pitched shrieks and low-register bellows, blasts us out of sleepiness on an early-morning game drive. Following the dirt road a little farther in our Land Rover, we spot a dozen irate baboons glaring at us from high branches. “There must be a leopard around,” the guide explains. “Baboons hate them.”

Our vehicle heads into the nearby bush, where it doesn't take long to spot the archenemy—a sleek male leopard draped across the lower bough of a tree. By the time we circle to get a closer look, he's on the ground, jaws clamped on his prize—a freshly killed impala. For the next 15 minutes, he calmly drags his kill, looking for a secluded place to have breakfast. In his wake, a submissive female leopard and two cubs follow, hoping to share in the feast or at least scavenge some leftovers.

Our South Africa journey, arranged by African Travel, Inc., a AAA Travel partner specializing in custom African vacations, began in Johannesburg. I could happily have spent a week at 54 on Bath, an exquisite jewel-box of a boutique hotel in the capital. But even luxe, contemporary rooms, an uber-chic mirrored lobby, and a gourmet restaurant couldn't keep us from our eagerly anticipated safari at MalaMala Game Reserve near Kruger National Park in the country's northeast corner.

CREATURES AND COMFORT

Our days at MalaMala—the oldest private game park in South Africa dating back to 1927—are so full of pinch-me moments it's hard to process them all. Exploring the 33,000-acre reserve by Land Rover, our senses on alert, we take extended game drives early each morning and again in the late afternoon and early evening, led by our friendly guide, who shares his knowledge of the animals and birds we encounter throughout the park, filling in details that amplify an already mesmerizing experience. He spends time with us frequently throughout the day. He delivers our personal, early morning wake-up call and greets us with steaming coffee and tea before our drive. He also joins us for meals, answering questions and recounting memorable stories about the animals, the game park and our historic lodge.

On our first outing, a herd of elephants, including a baby ducking out from between its mother's legs, lumbers by within inches of our vehicle. We hold our breath. The next day, we spot a herd of Cape buffalo just in time to see a fight break out between two young males, locking horns when they're not whacking each other with them. Later, we happen upon a pride of lions in a clearing. Sprawled over one another in the grass, looking as cuddly as stuffed animals, they don't even bother opening their eyes when our noisy Land Rover

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IMAGE COURTESY OF MALAMALA GAME RESERVE





Babylonstoren
wine cellar

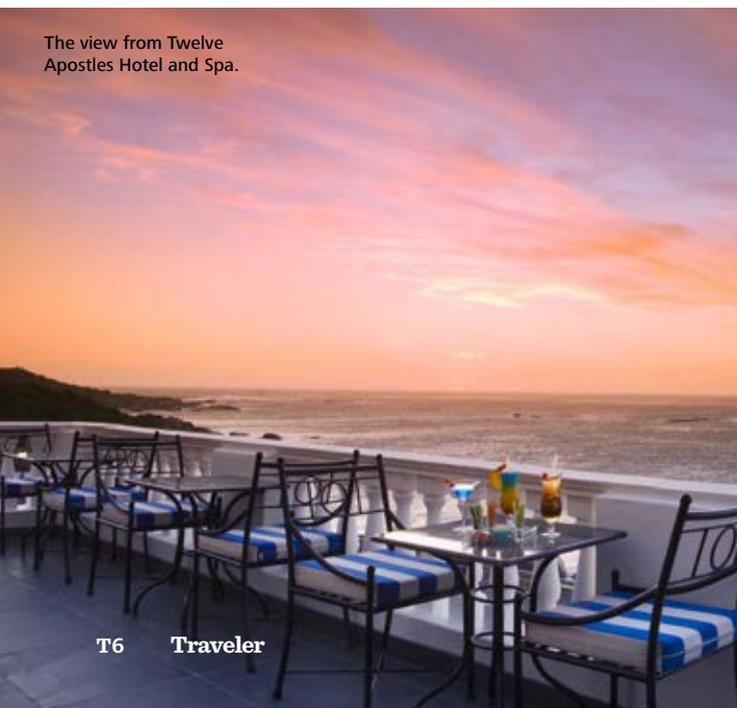


Gourmet fare at
Babel Restaurant



Guest suite
at La Residence

The view from Twelve
Apostles Hotel and Spa.



stops a mere 8 feet away. We're in animal lovers' heaven.

Long, open-air drives over bumpy terrain end back at our colonial-style lodge, where we savor copious breakfasts served on an expansive, outdoor terrace. For other meals, we help ourselves to delicious buffet-style lunches and dinners. Our luxury suites—with his and her en-suite bathrooms, a sitting room and sliding glass doors, which open onto a lawn and a riverbed where animals occasionally wander by—are the perfect place to recharge.

NEXT STOP, EDEN

It's rare not to experience cultural whiplash when traveling to another continent. But experiencing it within a single country happens less often. We leave the bushveld and by late afternoon enter La Residence, an elegant European-style, country house hotel in the Franschhoek valley, the epicenter of South Africa's winelands. But a glass of a top-notch varietal from vineyards a

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stone's throw from our villa suites eases the transition nicely. Our day ends with cocktails in front of a marble fireplace, superb cuisine by candlelight under crystal chandeliers, and regret that we're leaving a

place, once again, where I would gladly have lingered for days. Regret, though, is fleeting in South Africa.

The next day, we head south to the coast. Along the way, we visit a 21st-century Garden of Eden for gourmets in this fertile valley cradled by stone peaks. Babylonstoren, a Cape Dutch farm, with vineyards, orchards, a winery, a bakery and a celebrated garden-to-table restaurant. On our tour of the winery, we taste five vintages, both red and white, from a refreshing Viognier to a signature blend, an oaky red. Our meal at Babel can only be described as art on a plate, especially the color-coordinated salads that each contain a medley of one shade of freshly-picked vegetables. Afterward, we tour gardens that even feature a section for tropical fruit—including papayas, mangos, pineapples and guavas.

ISLANDS, VISTAS AND URBAN BLISS

By early evening, we're greeted at our oceanfront hotel, Twelve Apostles Hotel and Spa, on the outskirts of Cape Town. Situated on a lovely stretch of coast, the hotel offers beautifully appointed rooms with scenic views of Table Mountain or the ocean bathed in an atmosphere of cosseted luxury that extends to the lobby, restaurant and spa. Our meals at Azure Restaurant confirm that the hotel's fine dining is as impressive as its ocean views (sunset on the terrace is a daily miracle).

With so much to see and experience around Cape Town, the

TIP: To make your stay at the Twelve Apostles extra special, the hotel can arrange a picnic walk up Table Mountain, where you can enjoy a delicious lunch from your picnic basket, while gazing at the scenic coast.

WILD ABOUT SAFARIS?

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next few days are a whirlwind. A funicular lifts us to the top of Table Mountain, overlooking the spectacular city sunbathing on the

Atlantic. A boat tour of the harbor serves up a panoramic tableau of the Twelve Apostles, rock faces thought to resemble Jesus' acolytes. It also takes us to Duiker Island, swarming with noisy (and strong-smelling) golden-brown Cape fur seals. A tour of desolate and hauntingly deserted Robben Island, led by a former prisoner incarcerated along with Nelson Mandela, is a sobering reminder of the harsh conditions political prisoners endured during their long sentences.

Following Chapman's Peak Drive along the coast, we stop at the southern tip of the peninsula, the Cape of Good Hope, where Portuguese explorers braved the southern Atlantic to plant a cross, laying claim to the territory. We later stroll a boardwalk near a beach inhabited by a colony of 2-foot-high penguins. They busily waddle back and forth when they're not lying inert, sunning themselves, or taking a swim. We stop by the Old Biscuit Mill, a renovated factory that's a favorite weekend brunch destination for city dwellers. And we squeeze in a little retail therapy at Victoria and Alfred Waterfront mall on Cape Town's Table Bay Harbour.

By the time we depart, I've accepted that I'm doomed to regret every leave-taking in South Africa. The truth is, I can't imagine coming to this country only once. Then someone on the plane mentions this was his 14th visit. And I think to myself: That's more like it. 

Choose your trip-of-a-lifetime African safari.

A trip this big should be exactly what you've always dreamed it would be.

SOUTH AFRICA CULINARY AND WILDLIFE SAFARI

On this magical, 12-day journey, savor the nuances of South African cuisine and sip South African vintages in the winelands. Thrilling game drives at a luxurious, eco-friendly safari lodge in the Sabi Sands Game Reserve introduce you to a menagerie of iconic animals, from lions and elephants to zebras and baboons. Revel in the beauty of Cape Town and the stunning seascapes of the Cape of Good Hope.



THRILLING ADVENTURE IN SOUTHERN AFRICA

On this 11-day adrenaline-charged odyssey, experience Cape Town, Victoria Falls and Tuli Game Reserve from upside down, right-side up, sideways and under water. Hike imposing Table Mountain, then rappel down its sheer rock face with the city stretched out below. Step into a reinforced cage and descend into the Southern Atlantic for a face-to-face encounter with man-eating sharks. Feel the mist of Victoria Falls while ziplining through the nearby forest canopy. And to top off your long list of thrills, set out on wildlife-packed game drives and bush walks on a Big Five safari.

IN THE FOOTSTEPS OF MANDELA

Embark on an eight-day journey of inspiration through the "Rainbow Nation." Experience the heritage and history of Nelson Mandela's beloved South Africa through encounters with people and places he touched in his efforts to end apartheid. Set off on a host of excursions, including a visit to Robben Island, where Mandela was incarcerated for 18 of his 27 years in prison. In Johannesburg, visit the Apartheid Museum, and in Soweto, walk Vilakazi Street, former home of both Mandela and Archbishop Desmond Tutu. You'll round out your sojourn on a private game reserve, where you'll view a raft of magnificent animals in the wild.

SURF, NATURE AND COLONIAL SPLENDOR

South Africa's richly diverse cultural heritage, magnificent landscapes and commitment to preserving land for wildlife are evident on this fabulous 11-day journey. You'll discover the country's ancient past when you explore ancient bushman rock art paintings, and you'll learn about traditional cultures on a visit to a Sotho Village, where you'll meet residents. The diverse ecosystems of Mkuze Falls Private Game Reserve provide an ideal habitat for the prolific wildlife you'll view thriving within its borders. As guests of a hospitable local family, you'll spend an evening dining on delicious cuisine they've prepared especially for you.

WILDLIFE AND WHALES ENCOUNTER

Embark on an 11-day adventure that puts you in close proximity to South African wildlife. Experience up-close encounters with cheetahs, monkeys and a myriad of birds on this exciting itinerary for animal lovers and families. You'll "shake hands" with an orphaned elephant's trunk, view a colony of penguins on the Cape Peninsula, and spot spy-hopping southern right and humpback whales during an ecocruise in Plettenberg Bay. And get your camera ready for morning and evening game drives at Eastern Cape Game Reserve, where you'll set off in search of the Big Five.

