



SOUTH AFRICA SAFARI

A Journey of Giraffes

BY APPLE GIDLEY



A little-changing landscape greets us as we head east from Johannesburg airport: arid scrub interspersed with disheveled townships, and corrugated iron roofs glinting ragged in the winter sunlight. Lissataba, a private game reserve in the folds of the Drakensbergs, where friends have their home, is our destination ... but first we spend a night at Graskop in a hotel that blends an eclectic mix of old and new, with the rooms individually decorated by local artists. Graskop, once a hustling gold mining center, now offers an array of African artifacts and a fascinating silk store complete with worms and mulberry leaves.

Our drive next morning starts early to ensure time to view the spectacular scenery from God's Window, then, farther north, the natural splendor of Bourke's Luck Potholes – a natural water feature marking the beginning of the Blyde River Canyon. As the sun dips, we turn in to Lissataba and follow our host's detailed instructions to their home that we reach 40 minutes later - our journey slowed by giraffe, waterbuck, zebras and impala blending into the ocher-colored landscape.

Spread over the Eastern Transvaal Lowveld, the Olifants River borders Lissataba, offering haven to hippos that wallow in the natural pools. The 50 homes on the reserve are tucked discreetly along the river or into the surrounding bush – some lived in year around, some for a few months at a time, but all are home to residents passionate about the protection of the 6,000 acres of the bird and wildlife on their land.

Life slows, and we follow the natural rhythms of nature, rising with the dawn and falling asleep to the snorts of hippos floundering in the river. We are woken by the sharp bark of nearby baboons, and I am relieved we heeded our hostess's entreaties

to lock all the doors of their guesthouse. The bush is atwitter with luminescent sunbirds, bulbuls and sometimes the plaintive call of the go-away bird. Our days are spent walking or driving to one of the seven dams on Lissataba, each excursion a smorgasbord that delights the senses. Sunsets are viewed either on the deck listening to the bush settle – smoke from the firepit stroking our nostrils as we huddle in sweaters in the cooling air – or on a craggy rock a short drive away, watching the sun ease behind the African lowveld in a glorious display of violet and tangerine. Then, as the bush throws up nighttime shadows, the Milky

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Way shimmers above in a cloud of diffused stars. In this wild and natural place we are insignificant.

Leaving this refuge we drive to one of South Africa's premier game reserves, MalaMala, for a safari on the edge of Kruger National Park. Turning off the blacktop, east of Hazzyview, our drive is sometimes accompanied by a herd of impala – sleek and skittish – or by a journey of giraffes – gentle and stately, until 60 minutes later we come to a halt in a swirl of dust before a red-and-white striped barrier. A man hurries from a conical straw hut and, lifting the boom, salutes and grins as we enter the reserve. We have found MalaMala.

But we cannot enter. Blocking our path is a herd of pachyderms, 50 shades of grey at least; the palest in color is a young calf wandering in between its mother's legs, small trunk waving not quite in control. Enjoying our trumpet welcome to the game reserve along the Sands River, we watch as two rangers in khaki shorts and shirts, logoed caps and Oakleys, do the shoo-fly version for elephants. Shuffling

off to find a marula tree for a quick snack, a monolithic cow turns her head – eyes small and shiny and raising her trunk invites us to her home.

Once through the gate we circle a small pond being enjoyed by bronze warthogs paddling under a tree drooping with intricately designed weaver bird nests, and we stop by reception. Noldie, our ranger and host, greets us with a cool drink to dampen the dust and ease the checking-in formalities, and then walks us to our suite. Again our progress is checked, this time by a large male nyala nibbling grass on the lawn outside our door. We wait respectfully for him to move along.

MalaMala, a Big Five game reserve, is made up of three camps, Main Camp, Sable and Rattrays, named for the family who bought the camp in 1964, each offering escalating levels of luxury starting at ten. Main Camp is built on the original site of Wac Campbell's Hunting Camp erected in 1928, with dinners now eaten under the same 700-year-old tree, a Transvaal Ebony. Main Camp offers ideal family accommodation with game drives customized to suit the age of the children present. Sable, our camp, has five deluxe suites with his-and-her bathrooms, for a maximum of 14 guests. Rattrays, the flagship of the reserve, offers luxurious, colonial, safari-style *khayas* (Swahili for home), complete with heated plunge pools and secluded outdoor showers. Meals at each camp can be taken overlooking the banks of the Sand River meandering through the property, or encircled in a *boma* around a fire made from burning leadwood logs or, if inclement weather sends you indoors, in a snug dining room with gleaming crockery and crystal on starched tablecloths.

Rangers come from far and wide and wear many hats at MalaMala, from following rhino spoor to tracking cagey

Clambering into our designated Land Rover and clutching hot water bottles to ward off the morning chill, we head for the river where a pride of lions is apparently lounging.

leopards, to pouring drinks either at the bar or during a game drive. Their enthusiasm is matched only by their knowledge and love for the bush, whether pointing out a shy Coqui francolin scurrying for cover – feathers ruffled at the intrusion – or tracking a caracal through the inky night, the flashlight arcing in front of the vehicle, sometimes disturbing an animal alert to the dangers of the dark; or despairing at the ignorance that fuels rhino poaching.

With Noldie behind the wheel of the modified open Land Rover, we head to the far southeast of the reserve where cheetah tracks have been spotted by a ranger out scouting earlier in the day. Once again our passage is slowed by a herd of elephants, the same ones who had trumpeted their welcome a few hours earlier. The herd trample their way through thorny scrub, trunks searching for the tastiest bark or devouring shrubs in their quest to make their daily food quota: over 400 pounds for an adult. They meander through grazing impala for whom the reserve is named, and as they disappear, zebras with tails flicking back and forth across striped rumps take their place, a panoply of nature.

Noldie reminds us we are on a cheetah

chase, and cameras stop shooting as we resume the drive, sometimes on rutted tracks, sometimes off-road, but always bumpy. We are unlucky in the quest but find ourselves suffused in a sweet warmth and, as the African night falls like a velvet curtain at the theater, our eyes adjust and we find ourselves surrounded by a slow-moving obstinacy of buffalo. They pause in their march to the river and blandly eye our intrusion, their horns like a judge's wig sweeping across stolid faces.

Later, talk around the bar is about a kill seen by another vehicle of guests, a warthog brought down by a pride of lions and, as I sip my chilled sauvignon blanc, I can almost hear the death screams as I silently thank our ranger for taking us on a wild cheetah chase. Dinner is delicious, a mélange of flavors made more succulent by the outdoor setting and the superb service, but it's been a long day and, as the evening cool seeps in, we head to the warmth and luxury of our suite.

Morning comes quickly at MalaMala with the simultaneous jangle of the telephone, Noldie's 6:30 wakeup call, and a sharp rap at the door. A smiling, turbaned woman glides in with a tea tray that she places on

a table between armchairs strategically placed so we can watch a family of baboons leisurely crossing the Sand as daylight rises over the riverine forest.

The breakfast buffet deserves greater appreciation, but the call of the bush is stronger than the need for extra coffee. Clambering into our designated Land Rover and clutching hot water bottles to ward off the morning chill, we head for the river where a pride of lions is apparently lounging. Noldie nods into the crackling headset, spins around and, changing direction, we race along the airstrip to an area in front of Rattrays, six miles farther south. He shouts over his shoulder, "We're not stopping for elephants, giraffes or anything ... oh yes, and hold on," but he doesn't tell us why we are risking a broken axel.

Juddering to a crawl, we swerve down a scrub embankment to flat river sands and there, cavorting, is a pack of Cape Hunting dogs, a sight rarely seen. With the remnants of their kill now a few bloody scraps in the sand, the dappled dogs jostle and play, oblivious to us a few yards away. We watch their antics and then make our way back to the lions, happy still to loll on the cool sands before heat drives them into the shade.

Coming across a solitary bull rhino, we gaze at his prehistoric shape until he tires of our scrutiny and pads sedately through the acacia, camouflaged in an instant. We follow a leopard towards a kopie, and agile klipspringers bound up the craggy outcrop in front of her, unnerved by the feline's presence, but she ignores them. We lose her, but the sight of her engorged teats buoys Noldie; the rangers had been worried that a male leopard new to the area and attempting to assert his dominance had devoured her cubs. Later, as insects start



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Lissitaba interior



Rattray interior



Lissitaba exterior



Rattray exterior

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their evensong and the bush settles, Noldie casts the flashlight back and forth across our track and we come across a cow and her calf, miniature versions of the rhino seen earlier, placidly ambling along in front of us.

Nearing Sable camp at the end of the night drive, a call comes over Noldie's headset and he switches the ignition and flashlight off, gesturing for silence. The quiet is all-encompassing and, then, an ammonia-like smell sweeps over us as a pride of lions pad around the vehicle.

Too soon our safari ends. We've seen genet, a bushcat more like a bushy-tailed mongoose; white-tailed, banded and dwarf mongoose; every kind of buck on offer except sable or reedbuck; two honey-badgers, animals known for their ferocity, which cross our path but fortunately do not stop; and, as a final treat, we come across a scene not often seen: a leopard lying at the base of a tree up which is draped the gnawed remains of a bushbuck. Four feet away feigning sleep, in an animal parody of Catch 22, lies a spotted hyena, often thought only to be scavengers but who in reality kill as much as 95 percent of their food. The leopard, knowing he is safe as long as his prey remains aloft, still keeps wary watch of both kill and hyena.

We sit on our private terrace, our

eyes adjusting to the night, and hear the quiet cough of the neighborhood nyala, then a rough bark from a baboon; we think we hear a lion roar, glad it seems to be coming from the other side of the river. Sipping the local liquer, Amarula, we understand why the elephants of MalaMala are so enamored of the bark of the marula tree.

While we have had little time to revel in the luxury on offer, we have spent hours sometimes careening, sometimes crawling through the bush in search of the game that freely roams this fenceless reserve. Jousting elephants become almost commonplace as expectations are met, and surpassed. The Big Five – lion, leopard, elephant, rhino and buffalo – are all checked off, and we drive through the gate, bypassing a giraffe lurching on acacia leaves, and we wave goodbye to MalaMala.

South Africa has indeed been a journey. Heaven has, I am sure, many guises, but Lissitaba and MalaMala come close to it for me. ■

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