

african dream

You too can be king of the plains with one of these luxury safaris in South Africa



Well spotted: a pair of leopards—the big cat most likely to be encountered on safari—thrill guests of the Londolozi private game reserve.



The Rock Lodge at Ulusaba is perched high on a peak, affording spectacular, panoramic views of the wilderness.



Hippos are a familiar sight at all seven of Singita's private lodges, which are dotted across South Africa.

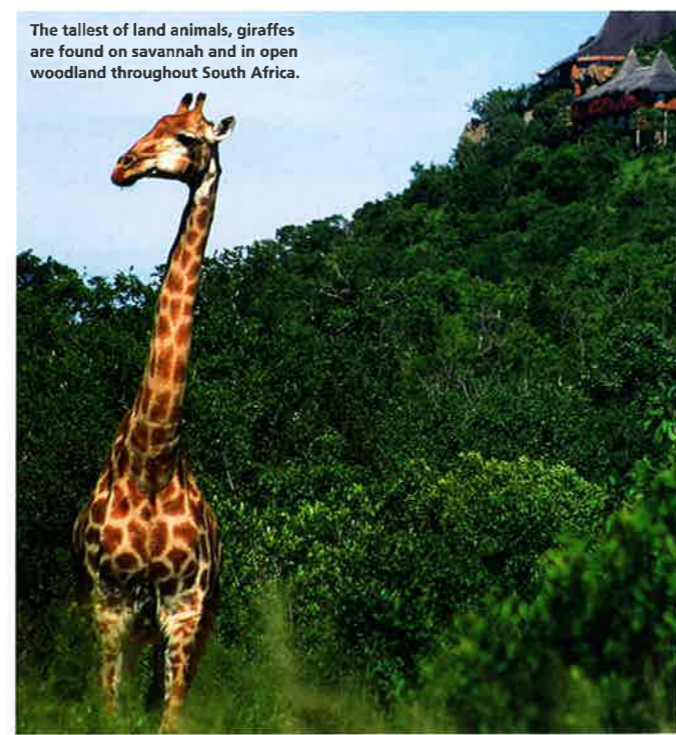
Unchanged

since the dawn of time, the African bush has a primal allure that takes your breath away. Stretched in green and gold glory beneath the dome of an impossibly blue sky, it is inhabited by the world's most incredible creatures and is a veritable feast for the senses, so rich in sights, sounds, smells and colours that it seems to be Eden rediscovered. Escaping the confines of a plane into this natural kingdom, you find yourself drinking in the fragrant air, as intoxicating and irresistible as the finest champagne. At the same time, the energy of the bush seeps into your blood, so invigorating that it is like waking from a dreamless sleep, or rather, like stepping into a waking dream. For the fortunate few who can afford to experience this magical place on safari, at one of South Africa's ultra-luxurious private game reserves, it is a dream from which most would quite happily never awake.

Renowned US writer Edward Abbey claimed that, "Wilderness is not a luxury, but a necessity of the human spirit." Necessity or not, at South Africa's peerless private game reserves the wilderness is a pristine given, and luxury is as intrinsic a part of the experience as spotting Africa's legendary Big Five. Once the most prized trophies of Ernest Hemingway, John Huston and other great white hunters, today, elephant, rhino, buffalo, leopard and lion are again masters of their own destiny. But while guns on safari are a thing of the past, the sumptuous style of colonial hunting days remains. Back then, grand entourages wound their way for miles through inhospitable terrain carrying

ball and claw baths and the finest of crystal. Then, when night fell, the hunters enjoyed every creature comfort, far from civilization, from their nightcap snifters of whiskey to the most comfortable of beds. Today, reliving this experience is possibly the most exotically luxurious experience available to man, and simply involves a short flight east from Johannesburg, South Africa's City of Gold, over the magnificent escarpment of the Drakensberg Mountains, and into the province of Mpumalanga, where some of the country's most prestigious private game reserves lie.

One such place is Royal Malewane, a private piece of paradise in the Timbavati Reserve on the western fringe of



The tallest of land animals, giraffes are found on savannah and in open woodland throughout South Africa.

Privacy is maintained not by bodyguards and walls, but by acres of untouched bushveld and the gleaming teeth of Africa's fiercest creatures

the world famous Kruger National Park. Royal Malewane caters to a maximum of 20 people and has a staff-to-guest ratio of two to one. With a private landing strip, a world-class spa and eight free-standing suites, each with private rim-flow pools – two of which offer private butlers and chefs as well as personal masseurs – it's not surprising that Royal Malewane has provided the ultimate in luxurious sanctuary to stars like Bono, Elton John and George Michael, to name but a few. Not that this fact is advertised, however. Private game lodges are the embodiment of discretion and ensure complete privacy, maintained not by bodyguards and walls, but by acres of untouched bushveld and the gleaming teeth of Africa's wild creatures.

Londolozi is another of South Africa's premier private game reserves located in Mpumalanga. The first game reserve in the world to be accorded Relais et Chateaux status, Londolozi is the epitome of elegance and perfect simplicity, a place of connoisseurship, renowned for its

leopard sightings and 85-year history. Boasting five unique camps, including the glamorous Tree Camp and the exclusive Granite Private Suites catering to no more than six guests, Londolozi was once the hunting playground of princesses and presidents, but now lives up to its name, derived from the Zulu word meaning 'to protect', as one of the pioneering reserves of South Africa's luxury ecotourism industry. In the words of Nelson Mandela, "During my long walk to freedom, I had the rare privilege to visit Londolozi, which represents a model of the dream I cherish for the future of nature preservation in our country."

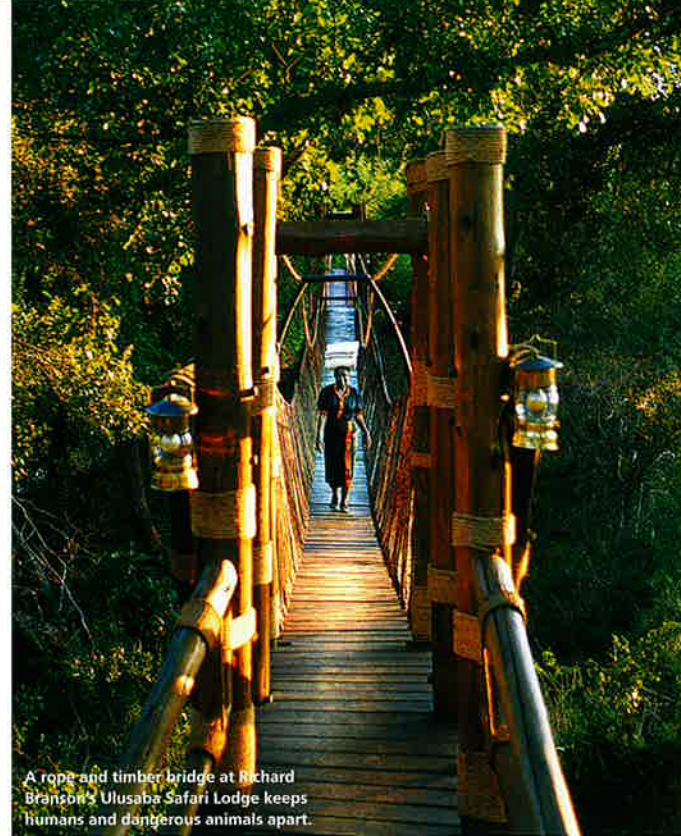
Situated on the banks of the Sand River at the very heart of the Sabi Sands Game Reserve, Londolozi is in fact part of the six million acre Greater Limpopo Transfrontier Park, along with the Timbavati, Kruger and other reserves in South Africa, Mozambique and Zimbabwe. A product of diplomacy, this vast and growing area enables game to move freely with no borders or fences, a right denied Africa's amazing beasts for too long.



Leopards are the smallest of the four 'big cats', the others being lions, tigers and jaguars.

Famous personalities are not just the guests at South Africa's foremost private game lodges. One of the world's most successful entrepreneurs, Sir Richard Branson, owns the five star Ulusaba Private Game Reserve, also located in the Sabi Sands. Ulusaba offers two uber-luxurious lodges: Rock Lodge, perched high on the summit of a *koppie* (a rocky hill) with panoramic views of the surrounding wilderness; and Safari Lodge, built 'tree house' style on the banks of the dry Mabrak river bed. As with all private game lodges, both Rock Lodge and Safari Lodge are havens for human habitation in the midst of the unspoilt bushveld, with raised wooden walkways between individual suites and communal areas such as the reception, dining and relaxation decks, to keep guests out of harm's way. Lodges are not fenced in so to find yourself relaxing on your elevated private deck with a breeding herd of 80 elephant swaying by just feet below and away from you, is the type of once-in-a-lifetime experience only these lodges can provide.

On safari, game drives usually take place twice a day, early in the morning and in the late afternoon, as these are the prime times for spotting game ambling to or from watering holes, preparing to hunt, or settling down for the night. With the help of skilled trackers, the experienced, affable and knowledgeable game rangers driving the vehicles are usually able to find even the shyest of Africa's fabulous birds and beasts. Wending your way in an open-topped Land Rover through an endless landscape, you never know what incredible creature's daily ritual you could interrupt around the very next bend: a cheetah resting after her night's exploits with her cubs gambolling around her; or a herd of buffalo bathing themselves on the banks of a river while avoiding the unwelcome attentions of a crocodile. The possibility of witnessing some-



A rope and timber bridge at Richard Branson's Ulusaba Safari Lodge keeps humans and dangerous animals apart.



Punch drinks in spring and summer, South Africa is verdant and water is plentiful, a blessed relief to the country's elephants and other animals.

thing even the Discovery Channel has yet to film is an adrenaline rush like no other.

Between game drives, the order of the day on safari is to relax and truly enjoy the splendour of your incomparable surroundings. Private game lodges are invariably the pinnacle of taste, with décor varying from colonial elegance to modern safari chic, the most lavish of textiles and matchless finishes imbuing them with the grace and charm of an opulent yet deeply comfortable home away from home. South Africa's private game lodges really do take the old French proverb, "It's impossible to overdo luxury," to heart. So stretch out by your private plunge pool, pamper yourself in the world-class spa or take a quiet moment in the library. From wherever you choose to be, you will have expansive views of the savannah before you and more often than not, peaceful vistas will slowly unfurl in a kaleidoscope of stripes, spots, horns and curious eyes: a herd of zebra and impala at a nearby watering hole; a couple of giraffe, reaching with their dextrous lips into the same Acacia tree casting its shadow thorns on the pages of your book...

Every season offers something different. Verdantly green during the hot summer months (November to March) after the spring thunderstorms, the bush is a golden plain during the dry winter (June to August) after a short balmy autumn. In spring and summer, water is abundant and the young calves and lambs offer predators plenty of opportunity for a kill. In autumn and winter, water is scarcer and the vegetation less dense, making it easier to see game. Crisp sunny days shorten into chilly nights, when the fires in your suites are warmly appreciated.

Perhaps it is all the excitement and fresh air, but whether or not you manage to get yourself into the state-of-the-art fitness centres available at private game lodges, you are guaranteed to find yourself ravenous at every meal. You will be glad too, as these lodges employ the most talented chefs the country has to offer and it would be a crying shame to find yourself without an appetite when faced with global and local cuisine rivalling that of Michelin-starred restaurants. Whether a spectacular breakfast buffet, a poolside lunch, an extravagant high tea or a candlelit dinner for two, every meal is a culinary masterpiece with the finest wines.

And stellar cuisine moments are not restricted to the lodges. Morning game drives are fuelled by pre-dawn coffee and a patisserie selection that would make Paris blush, and evening game drives are paused for a blissful sunset moment. Picture yourself at dusk, sitting atop a *koppie*, linen-covered table nearby bearing every sundowner tippie you could possibly fancy, from G 'n' Ts to the rarest brandies. Another table bears delectable hors d'oeuvres and a bountiful supply of biltong, the local South African dried meat delicacy. The sun setting in the distance is like a burning rose, shedding petals of pinks and reds into the bowl of the sky, while below you a rhino sniffs the breeze and a malachite kingfisher flits to roost. The crickets start their chorus as you climb into the Land Rover, knowing that back at the lodge a splendid dinner, served with silver and crystal under the stars, awaits.

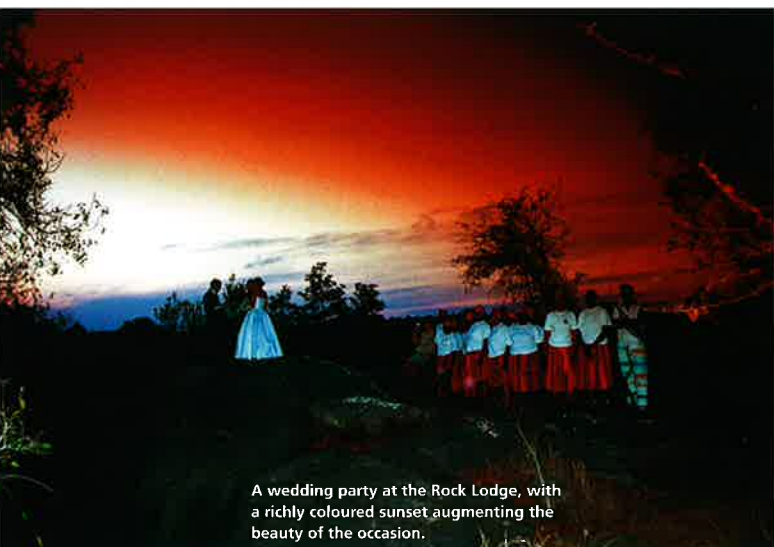
Later, as you slip between Egyptian cotton sheets in an antique four-poster bed, the distant roar of a lion lulls you to sleep the sleep of the truly contented. ▣



Singita's Lebombo lodge features a pool with a view over the world-famous Kruger National Park in South Africa.



Starry starry night: with no artificial light pollution, the wilderness offers the ideal location for a spot of astronomical observation.



A wedding party at the Rock Lodge, with a richly coloured sunset augmenting the beauty of the occasion.

Text: Laura Miller