

Into the Wild

The Kruger National Park is South Africa's most amazing game reserve, with tremendous density and variety of wildlife.

With Micato Safaris, considered one of the world's best luxury safari specialists, you can explore the relatively unknown parts of this reserve, stay in a lavish lodge, and learn about the country's culture from highly erudite guides.

BY BECCA HENSLEY

Like a stone skipping across water, our tiny bush plane lands with a series of artful thuds and clatters on an isolated airstrip in Thornybush Game Reserve, near the western edge of South Africa's Kruger National Park. As the dust clears and we bump to a halt, we find ourselves enveloped by the scrubby mixed plants of the woodland savannah. Thick with chill, the air smells of dew, grass, musty earth — and promise. When a three-tiered safari vehicle emerges suddenly from the bushes, we get our first glimpse of renowned ranger Juan Pinto and his partner, master tracker Wilson Masiya. The legendary duo is known throughout Africa, both for their adroitness in the bush and their uncanny ability to communicate

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The African giraffe

with each other via telepathic acuity. They load us into the open air 4x4, and whisk us deep into the sensory overload that is South Africa's bush. En route to our rural villa, we see our first animals — giraffe, a hippo, some zebra and a crocodile. All this excitement and we have not even changed into the de rigueur garb of the game drive: khaki clothing. We can't begin to imagine what awaits us during the following days.



Guide Alan Petersen of Micato Safaris is extremely knowledgeable

local dignitaries, professors, archeologists and artists. They invite us to dine at one friend's cliff-top home, where we converse with other guests as if we were intimates. As Micato's hands-on style whisks us into this authentic South Africa, we learn about its culture during conversations, which makes us feel less like tourists and more like family. We ask questions about this diverse country, and gain tips about its historic coastland, its best vineyards, and what lens works

A few days earlier

We begin our customised Micato Safaris odyssey in glorious Cape Town, a bustling seaside city. Here, Micato's Kenya-based founders, the Pinto family, open their little black book to introduce us to family friends —

best on a dusty road. On our first full day, accompanied by our award-winning Micato guide, South African Alan Petersen, we've explored the city's waterfront, and tipped some vintages in the nearby Wine Lands — located just



Kruger is home to the world's largest protected population of cheetahs and wild cats

Family safari

While some might fear bringing children to Africa, a variety of outfitters will put those anxieties to rest with well-laid plans, bespoke services and 24/7 attentiveness. Micato Safaris, a family-owned and operated outfitter, based in Kenya, has tested their family safaris on their own grandchildren. Instituting an all-encompassing adventure called Family-to-Family Safari, Micato personalises itineraries, delivering families only to locales and lodges approved and tested by their own kin. While there's no age requirement for a safari, children who wish to go on game drives should be old enough to sit still and stay quiet (if animals are spotted) on the 2-4 hour ventures. "That depends from child to child," says South African Micato guide Alan Peterson. "Generally, we feel 7 is a great age to begin." Kids uninterested in the sometimes arduous and occasionally unfruitful car outings can remain back at the lodges rooting into their surroundings. Micato's family safaris encompass pastimes



such as junior guide training, African crafts, storytelling, local music lessons, and stargazing. Some of the lodges on Micato's family-sanctioned list even offer elephant and camel riding safaris — the ultimate way to spy lions, cheetahs, leopards and other wildlife. But when the sun sets, it is sundowner time, and the whole family convenes to share stories and salute their well-spent day in Africa.

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an hour from downtown. Peterson's keen observations, stories and personal relationships enhance every moment along the way. His affable personality, commitment to detail, and contagious excitement set the standard for our vacation of a lifetime. And as if that weren't enough: we discovery today's grand finale when we return to the room. There, on the pillow, a handwritten welcome note from the Pinto family, a poem about Africa and a neatly wrapped African handicraft greet us. As delighted as children on Christmas, we appreciate this endnote to a perfect day.

Back in the bush

Our lodge appears unexpectedly among thorny Acacia trees as an enchanted haven. With no other development in sight, we might be checking into a luxurious treehouse.

As our jeep grinds to a halt, the staff gathers in welcome, some offering a hot cloth, others a cold drink. We indulge in a sit-down lunch, and rest in the library before donning our khakis, then climbing back into the cars for the first bona fide drive of the day. With binoculars poised and cameras aloft, it doesn't take long to fall into the rhythms of safari life. That means two, long, and unpredictable game drives each day — one at dawn, the other at dusk. Here, in the bush, we let nature take the helm. Even our guide and tracker can't guarantee what we will glimpse on these forays. Some outings, we view only birds nesting; other days, we spy a leopard sleeping in a tree or wildebeests in rumination — and sometimes we victoriously sight the Big Five. The hours-long drives pass quickly, and we sigh like disappointed children as each one ends. Our ranger awakens us individually with a phone call each

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morning at dawn, while a butler serves us coffee, tea and scones for safari fuel. After two or three hours bumping amongst the grime, ensconced in the shadows of trees, and peering to the horizon to consume the experience as if it were a life-giving sustenance, we return to rest. Just as the animals take repose around the Bushveld's water holes, we congregate around the pool or in the spa. And we eat well. Dining tradition here borrows from the safari heyday when gourmet chefs turned camping-style meals into epicurean events. Here, no bit of crystal, silver or pressed napkins go unused. Local ingredients reflect the surrounding culture — African spices, plants, meats, and preparations, all concocted with European flair, are the order of the day.

Like nature's opus, the African terrain marches to its own drummer. Hyenas screech, baboons bark, hippos snort, cheetahs chirp (odd, but true) — and, of course, lions roar. Birds join the harmony with trills, carols, and whistles. Add in the soft whirr of the jeep, the velvety purr of the breeze and the sound of our jackets

brushing against leather seats, and we've entered our own symphonic sanctuary. In this less travelled part of the Kruger National Park, animals roam in abundance. Elephants seem particularly profuse — and it's easy to get close to them. Several times, we come upon a hungry herd of pachyderms chomping on tree leaves. When they surround our car, getting so close we can nearly feel their fluttering eyelashes, we ditch our big lenses for the simple click of iPhone cameras. Sometimes getting near to the animals can be daunting. On one afternoon drive, we chance upon a parade of elephants — an immense mother leading her children, including a baby so diminutive he looks like a toy. Our presence, however, annoys the protective mama who stomps, snorts and flaps her ears. With haste, we flee the area.

During our game drives in Kruger we obsess on birds, too. We see a tawny eagle take flight, ponder how much the rather ubiquitous yellow-billed hornbill resembles the Lion King's Zazu, mutter over egrets and squint our collective eyes in search for the lilac-breasted roller. At



last, we find her. A panoply of reds, blues, and violets, she's the rainbow goddess of the bush. One early morning trek becomes a flight of passion when our tracker senses the presence of a mother cheetah. We bounce across dusty roads, at last discovering the mommy and three babies atop a hill, beneath a tree. In the haze of early day, we watch the spotted cubs wrestle and tussle just like human kids. The mother just looks resigned. We feel a bit like voyeurs. But it's a relief to linger in one place, to watch the animals for an extended time, and to root into the terrain and its creatures. Somehow, animals seem movingly like humans. Our empathy for wildlife expands.

To cap each afternoon outing, we participate in a sundowner — a ritual that dates back to the grand days of the safari, when writers and adventurers such as Ernest Hemingway, Karen Blixen and Beryl Markham roamed the land. The first safarigoers brought with them

the accoutrements of Western civility, often hiking for days into the wild, a caravan behind them carrying trunks stuffed with splendid (and sometimes cavalier) niceties of western life — such as oriental rugs, china tea sets, bottles of fine champagne, delicately embroidered pillows and crisp linens. In a more makeshift version, today's luxury safaris cherish this ceremony. In the bush, humans have tweaked and retrofitted nature since time's beginning, making their mark as bold as a lion's footprint. So, we relish the sacrament to a day well spent. Just as the sky bursts with the hues of a dozen gems, framed by the golden mountains beyond, we take refuge in a clearing. There, our ranger spreads out a pressed tablecloth and bedecks it with elegantly prepared snacks. While our tracker watches for animals, the ranger mixes cocktails and pours wine. As the sun disappears and the moon rises, we toast the exploits of the day, debriefing



Elephants are a common sight in Kruger

GETTY IMAGES

and sharing stories. Laughter and awe accompany us, and moments of thoughtful silence manifest our respect for nature's gifts.

One night after the afternoon game drive, we bump through the bush in darkness. Stars jam the sky with eerie luminosity. Our ranger, points out constellations we have never seen before. Suddenly, we come upon a seeming mirage: a Bedouin tent festooned with Moroccan lanterns. The staff has prepared a boma — a South African cookout beneath the stars. Feeling like characters from *Out of Africa*, we eat grilled meats, a bevy of salads and elaborate desserts. Nearby, a black rhino battles a hippo, their cries a song none of us has

heard before. Our final night, we do the unthinkable: we sleep outside. Not in a tent, we snuggle in a mosquito-net-covered bed on our deck beneath the stars. Not afraid, we're electrified with heady anticipation. The staff leaves us prepared, handing out an emergency cell phone, an assembly required blow horn and some reading material. "Has anything ever gone wrong?" we ponder in trepidation. "Knock on wood, you'll be fine," says our ranger. We doze off to the croaking of frogs, and awaken with the sunrise. Euphoric, we survive the night, understanding just what Karen Blixen meant when she wrote in *Out of Africa*: "You know you are truly alive when you are living among the lions." •