

IN AWE OF THE ANIMAL KINGDOM

Sue Wallace is given VIP access to South Africa's extraordinary wildlife during an elegant safari experience in Madikwe Game Reserve.

I'm spying on a herd of hefty elephants having the time of their lives in the muddy waters of the shallow Marico River, spraying themselves with water one minute and rolling in the mud the next.

It's all happening just outside my suite at the Sanctuary Makanyane Safari Lodge in South Africa's Madikwe Game Reserve. After a proper dousing, one lumbers across the river and climbs the bank and just when I think he may well join me in the suite, our eyes meet and he returns to his mates.

It is one of those 'precious' moments, one you want to remember always, and many more are in store as I am

introduced to the wild animal kingdom at my back door.

Creatures both big and small, from lofty giraffes, chunky rhinos and regal lions to tiny dung beetles that never stop working, are simply fascinating to watch. The park is home to the Big Five – lion, leopard, elephant, buffalo and rhino – and it doesn't take long to spot them all, thanks to our guide Darryn Murray, who shares his knowledge with guests from all over the world. He loves the malaria-free Madikwe, which he says is different from the larger Sabi Sabi and Kruger National Parks.

"It is smaller and there are more animals in concentrated areas – it is like





seeing the best of Sabi Sabi and Kruger combined,” he explains. The 75,000-hectare Madikwe is home to more than 60 species of mammals and 350 species of birds; my favourite is the African grey woodpecker that never stops tapping on trees.

Wildlife from every angle

The eco-friendly Makanyane, named after the Tswana tribal word for the rare wild dog, is located on 1800 hectares of privately owned property. It has a main lodge and eight stand-alone suites made from local stone and indigenous timbers with a thatched roof.

My suite is an oasis from the heat and harshness of the landscape with floor-to-ceiling windows. African-style decor stars and there’s an open fireplace,

At the main lodge there is an infinity pool with great views, bar, dining area, lounge room and upstairs ‘chill out’ room perfect for reading and relaxing.

Untamed Africa

My day starts at 5am with fresh fruit, coffee and pastries before setting off on a game drive, a hot water bottle combating the morning chill. The beauty of such a small lodge is the personalised service and there are often only four in a vehicle with prime viewing assured.

Darryn amuses us with the collective nouns for the animals, and before too long we see a ‘parade’ of elephants and a ‘dazzle’ of zebras drinking at a waterhole. As for the ‘parliament’ of baboons – no such luck.

A call on a two-way radio sends us off in another direction. Darryn warns us we may witness a kill and, although not for the faint-hearted, it is wild Africa unfolding in front of you. All eyes are on a lioness circling her prey, an injured wildebeest, and before long she pounces, claiming a bloody victory. She’s joined by two inquisitive cubs and another lioness that starts tucking in.

We return to the lodge for lunch, then a swim in the infinity pool, a relaxing Soul of Africa massage and a safari walk. A night in a bush hide can be arranged.

In the late afternoon we head across the open bushveld plains to a mountain outlook where a blood-red sunset



01 Up-close with elephants
02 Suites of safari chic
03 A dazzle of zebras
04 Prime viewing on deck
05 A night under the stars
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streaks across the sky as we enjoy a sundowner and nibble on biltong.

“This sure is God’s own country,” says the honeymoon couple from the US, and we all agree – G&Ts in hand.

Heading home in darkness, Darryn finds creatures great and small with the help of a shielded spotlight. A leopard lounges high in a tree guarding his dinner and a pack of wild dogs run by, followed by elephants that leave a path of destruction behind them.

We share our adventures over drinks then enjoy a dinner of garden pea soup, kingklip fillets and sticky date pudding accompanied by South African wines.

Lantern in hand, I relate my elephant tale to the night guide as he escorts me back to my suite.

“Ah, that’s Pepper. She always makes a beeline for the lodge, but there’s a wire

fence near the suites so she wouldn’t have dropped in,” he says.

That night under a mosquito net, I dream of Pepper, the blood-red sunset, the cubs and unfortunate wildebeest, as lions roar in the not-so-far distance.

It’s true what they say – everything in Africa bites – but the safari bug is worst of all. ♦

Travel file

Safari

www.sanctuaryretreats.com

Getting there

South African Airways flies from Perth to Johannesburg, with connections to Australian capitals operated by Virgin Airways. There are daily shuttle flights between Johannesburg and Madikwe Game Reserve. www.flysaa.com

Information

www.southafrica.net