



South African Sojourn

A journey to the African Bush is both a mesmerising and life-changing experience, writes Irene Martel Francisco

What makes a trip so memorable, so deeply seared into one's consciousness that 10 weeks after returning home, you find your thoughts constantly drifting to those magical days and nights spent in the African Bush? I never wanted to go on a South African safari...It was so far out of my comfort zone! However, life has an uncanny way of putting you where you are meant to be, so I found myself giving in to my family's wish, notwithstanding a two-and-a-half-year delay.

I reached out to A2A Safaris, the authority on luxe safari voyages, to help me plan a trip as painless as possible. After countless e-mails and meetings with them, going over plans, and being reassured, I was finally off to South Africa. My husband Randy, our daughter Isabel, and I were joined on the trip by close family friends Chuchu Madrigal and Mandy Eduque with their daughters Alex and Michaela.

We decided to stay at two Singita properties, arguably the best lodges for that glam safari experience, whose owners' passion for the past two decades is to actively preserve the African wilderness. The Singita Boulders Lodge in the Sabi Sands reserve was warmly welcoming after almost a day

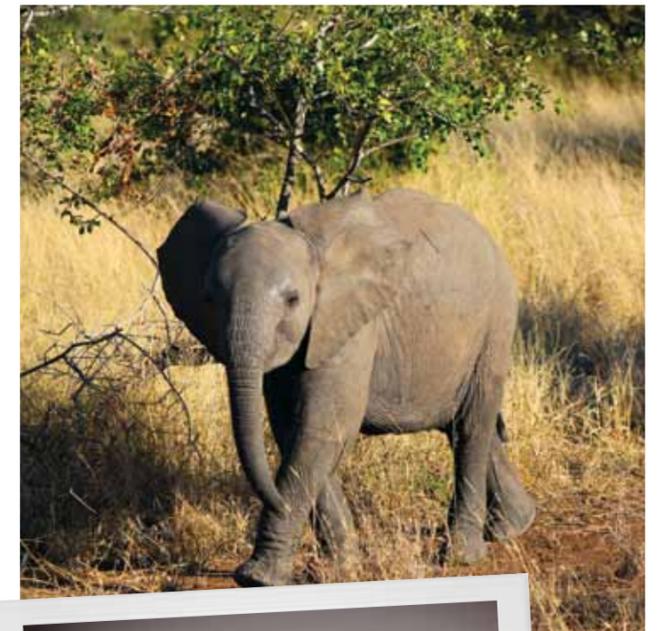
WILD AND WONDERFUL
The main lounge of Singita Boulders; (inset) Our safari travel group with Chantelle and Glass of Singita Lebombo



MAGIC MOMENTS
 (Clockwise from top) A zeal of zebras relaxing; The sundeck plunge pool at Singita Boulders; The living room of a villa at Singita Boulders; (opposite) The heart-stopping African sunset; The gentle giant; (inset) Bonfire at Singita Lebombo



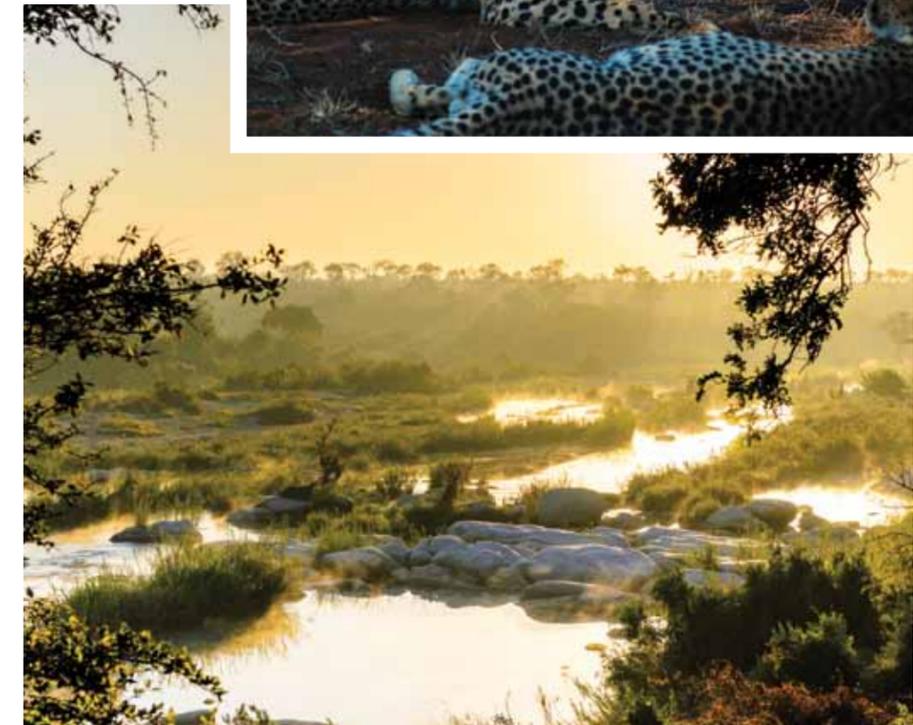
of travelling. The large semi-open central thatched lounge area is stylishly decorated with African fabrics, offering up large sofas and wide-open vistas of the Sand River. Our glass-fronted suite is ideally situated so that one can look out at the African plains and watch the game wander by in the distance from the four-poster bed, the sitting room or the sundeck with its own plunge pool. While we were settling in, a herd of at least 20 elephants made their way towards the river as if from cue, all moving at such a natural and leisurely pace.



The days on a safari start early, with a game drive leaving as the sun is about to rise. There is a brisk chill in the air as we set off in our three-tiered jeeps, all bundled up with warm blankets and hot water bags for comfort. On our first morning drive we saw a zeal of zebras, a lone graceful giraffe, two families of elephants, two leopards up on trees, and lionesses resting in the bush! It was absolutely mesmerising. You are stunned and elated at the same time, virtually speechless at all you see before you. The vastness of the land that goes on endlessly, the sound of silence, the inquisitiveness in the glance of a passing impala—these all serve to bond you to the wilderness.

Between your return from the morning game drive and your departure for the afternoon one, you are fed copious amounts of delectable food and drinks. During the evening game excursion, you stop by a scenic spot to have sundowners such as G&Ts or





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bubbly accompanied by some finger snacks. You watch the colours streak the sky as the magnificent African sunset unfolds. There is a mix of fiery red tempered with pinks of all hues, and the clouds filtering the fading light that explodes like a painting above you. There is no obstruction to all this beauty; it stretches on for miles. And as the last vestiges of light vanish, you say a prayer of gratefulness for having witnessed this at all.

The evenings on the safari are spent indulging in fine food and glorious South African wines. Singita takes dining seriously, with varying flavours and cooking techniques inspired by the setting and style of each lodge. There is a wide array of local ingredients like the most tender steaks, lamb, kudu meat, and seafood freshly flown in to tempt you. What I appreciated most was the care and exquisite service provided by the two ladies in charge of our meals: Maria at Singita Boulders and Goodness at Singita Lebombo. They went out of their way to remember what each person in our party preferred and made sure it was always waiting for you to sample, with perhaps another option. I recall their gentle laughter and touching kindness that made each dining experience even more special.

Our last three days on safari were spent at Singita Lebombo at the Kruger National Park. Singita has a private concession within the park consisting of 33,000 acres.

The two-hour drive to the lodge held surprises for us along the way. There were elephants casually crossing the road, groups of impalas contentedly grazing on plants, and zebras in the distance. None of the animals seemed afraid or threatened by our presence and it was humbling to see them in their natural habitat.

Singita Lebombo itself is a celebration of cutting-edge design in an African context, where everything defers to nature. This impressive lodge has 13 suites that offer guests a front-row seat from which to view all the wildlife below, as the suites are suspended above the N'wanetsi River.

On one of our last drives we watched as hundreds of buffalo walked towards a waterhole. They strode together with no violent movements—just a steady flow of animals drawn to one location. Our game rangers, Chantelle and Leon, were simply excellent at spotting wildlife!

Another unforgettable sighting was of a group of young cheetahs, who were slowly walking across the fields and would stop

to sit and playfully clean each other. Seeing them so relaxed, so peaceful in their own space made me feel like I had stepped back in time. You make the least noise possible as you gaze in rapt attention. This is how it was hundreds, thousands of years ago. This is how this place is meant to be.

I have grown to love the beauty and dignity of the animals, the heart stopping sunrises and sunsets, the stillness in the air, and that big, star filled, glorious African sky. Life in the bush touches your soul and changes you forever. It is with a spiritual feeling that you want to leave with nothing disturbed. You pay homage to the endless circle of life taking place right before you.

Why am I homesick for a place that I spent so little time in? The trip I dreaded taking turned out to be one of my best ever. I have already called A2A Safaris to plan another visit. Until then, I will yearn to see the vibrant colours, hear the haunting sounds, and see the stunning landscape of Africa. 🌍

PHOTOS OF LODGES BY SINGITA, SUNSET BY LIT CORTES, ANIMALS BY MICHAELA EDUQUE

NATURE'S WONDERS

(Clockwise from top) Isabel, myself, and Randy; King of the wild; The kudu of Africa; (opposite) The terrace outside our suite at Singita Lebombo; Lazing leopards; An oasis