

Wondering where the lions are

From South African luxury lodge to Botswana tented camp, Africa is seductively beastly
Story by Karen Goa

I'm rugged up in the back of an open top-jeep, riding into the chilly blaze of a South African sunrise so primordially pink it could be earth's first dawn. With Zulu ranger Dumi at the wheel, our group of Kiwis and South Africans is the first out of the gate at Phinda Mountain Lodge. It's a canny plan. In the road ahead three cheetahs loll about like carefree kittens, and there's nobody here but us.

All long legs and pretty face, cheetahs are the fashion models of the cat world. The mother and her two teenage daughters flaunt their spots and cheetah-bark to each other. Two jeeps join ours, making up the quota of three jeeps only at any sighting.

Next on the wish-list: lions.

Lion, leopard, black and white rhino, elephant and buffalo are Africa's 'must-see' Big Five. Lions thrive at Phinda Private Game Reserve, a Conservation Corporation (CC) Africa sustainable wildlife operation in northern KwaZulu-Natal province. With 23 000 acres to roam the big cats could be anywhere.

The rising sun stirs the savanna's browsers and grazers into action. A harem of plump-rumped zebras is near-invisible in the long grass, proving that nature knew what she was doing when she gave zebras those zany stripes.

[Later I discover their patterns so dazzled Governor George Grey he imported South African zebras to Kawau Island north of Auckland in the mid-1800s and hitched them to his dignitaries' carriage.]

Warthogs with faces like a runover sack of rocks skitter away, their pastry brush tails flying high. Wildebeest are cave paintings sprung to life. A shy white rhino family hides deep in the trees. Despite the no-show lions, it's a goose-bump moment spotting beasts I've only seen in zoos or on the small screen.

As the day heats up the four-legged cast disappears to 'take five' in their secret shady places. So do I. On this part of my African safari trip I've opted for lashings of luxury in one of Phinda Mountain Lodge's 25 air-conditioned suites. The whitewashed villa my travel writer friend and I share has a private bar, a roomy sitting area, a deep bath overlooking the bush, an *al fresco* shower and complete privacy – almost. After a quick dip in the suite's plunge pool I warm up on a deck chair, spied on by a couple of twisty-horned nyala.

CC Africa's itineraries include two game drives a day plus enough dining opportunities to bloat an elephant. On my wander up the footpath to lunch, a vervet monkey in a marula tree takes gleeful aim. I barely escape a widdling-on. There's a good reason the buffet lunch of South Africa's top notch meats, cheeses and veg is laid out in a glassed-in, monkey-proof restaurant.

The lodge's shaded terrace is a relaxing place for postprandial ruminating. In the distance, the Lebombo Mountains sketch a charcoal outline against a cloudless sky.

On the evening drive Dumi stops beside a pile of hairy droppings. "Lion," confirms our tracker, bending over for a closer look. "Fresh this morning." Hordes of oblivious hoofed critters – kudu, cappuccino-and-cream impala, and a giraffe with two gangly-necked babies – munch their dinner nearby.

Round the next bend one of the morning's teenage cheetahs is sitting all alone. She's one unhappy cat. Tail swishing, she hunkers near the roadside squeaking like a stepped-on bird.

"She's lost her mum and sister," says Dumi, scanning the bushveld. "She's not safe from lions by herself."

Horrid thought. Lions chowing down on Bambi-eyed ungulates in front of my eyes is a grisly enough prospect. Lion-on-cheetah is too much nature for me.

Moments later Dumi spots three young lionesses running through the trees.

We bush-bash full throttle after them. Heart in my throat, I've got fingers crossed for the cheetah. The jeep crashes over man-sized bushes. The tracker calls, "Mind right! Mind left!" I duck under an acacia tree's scalp-ripping thorns. High above, vultures watch from the broken tips of dead trees.

The jeep bounces to a halt a stone's throw from a solitary lioness. "She's about 18 months old," whispers Dumi, cautioning us not to make loud noises or stand up in the jeep.

The cheetah, to my relief, is nowhere in sight. This lioness is no mere moggy. Tawny and muscular, she's larger than a pony. She calls to her sisters in a deep, breathy 'huh huh,' like wind blowing across a glass bottle.

When the lioness races off so do we. Much bush-bashing later we jounce onto a dirt road. Incredibly, the three lioness sisters are padding towards us. Dumi knows exactly where the animals will appear before they know it themselves.

The lionesses amble along in silent single file, as perfect a piece of animal symmetry as ever prowled on 12 paws. I don't need binoculars to see the gold in their eyes and their whiskery chins.

A few lion-lengths away from the jeep they realise it's not budging from their path. The lionesses step into the bush, and vanish.

Facing down lions from the safety of a jeep, which the animals see as an unthreatening, unappetising lump, is one thing. Strolling around on our own is another. At night we two-legged snacks require a security escort from our suite to dinner, lest a lion snatch us from the path. It seems a bit silly - three of the beasts nearly walked over us earlier in the day - but nighttime rules are strict in these unfenced lodge gardens.

Dinner is served in the open-air boma, a uniquely South African corral-like affair of stone walls surrounding a packed dirt floor. We dine on meltingly good can can chicken, kudu stew and other Pan-African delicacies. Afterwards some of the staff, including our own ranger, kicks up their heels in an ululating Zulu song and dance finale.

At evening's end I ask Dumi if the young cheetah got away. Yes, he assures me. The family trio was reunited. It's one 'happily ever after' tale I'm keen to believe.

Across the border in Botswana, CC Africa's Savute Under Canvas is the heat-seared Africa of delirious dreams. To get here we've flown onto a warthog-infested landing strip in Chobe National Park, on the Kalahari Desert's northern fringe.

Beyond our canvas tent the fine dust laps the tops of my ankle boots. The tent is spacious and comfortable, the plushy beds made up with dust-defying snow-white linen. There's even an en-suite with separate (flushable!) loo (no smelly long drops) indoors and a cunning hot water bucket shower.

I have one small worry about this canvas tent business. What, I ask, about the lions, elephants, hyenas - anything fanged, clawed or larger than tent-sized?

“That’s what the lovely whistlee is for!” laughs Mr Lovely, the camp manager. “If you hear a noise in the night, blow the whistlee and turn on your light. We’ll come on the run.”

Mr Lovely (whose true name is Robson) thinks everything is lovely. In this intimate, six-tent camp, it is.

Elephants, known to be notoriously cranky, are Savute’s star attraction. Our ranger Peace stops our jeep (we’re sharing with Italians and Swiss this time) within spitting range of a herd gathered round a watering hole. Two old bulls lock tusks in a thundering territorial war. The earth shakes. The grumpy loser towers over our jeep by half a pachyderm’s height.

Peace shows us the small goods, too. Here’s a giant eagle owl, asleep in a tree, there’s a steenbok, the chihuahua of the antelope world, and everywhere, the yellow-billed hornbill or ‘flying banana’.

One of the flying bananas gulps down a hapless bug. “We have seen a kill!” chortles Peace.

When Peace gets a radio call about a lion sighting we’re off – along with fifteen other jeeps. The pride of three lionesses, one hairy male and two cute-as-can-be-cubs, lounge half-hidden in the shade, fat bellies skywards.

“They’ve eaten recently,” says Peace, putting my mind to rest about stumbling onto a messy, shrieking kill.

There is no limit to the number of jeeps at sightings in the park, hence the traffic jam. Mobile camps like ours, though, must be moved every four to six days: our entire camp will be dismantled and everything from tablespoons to tent pegs to toilets shifted in a single day.

Park rules also don’t allow bush-bashing or night drives. As daylight wanes Peace spots leopard tracks and, then the leopard itself. For a split-second I glimpse one of the world’s most elusive cats slipping through the dusk.

At night our little camp is a twinkly, magical thing; a lantern-lit oasis for dusty nomads. We pull up chairs around the mopane-fuelled fire, swapping animal-spotting stories with other guests until Senior the cook sings us to the dinner table - outdoors of course - with a falsetto “If you’re ready for your dinner, follow me” ditty.

Dinner of lamb stew, fried rice and fruit salad is simple, delicious and the freshly baked bread a small miracle in these basic cooking conditions.

Before jumping into bed with a camp hot water bottle I place the ‘whistlee’ within grabbing distance. Zipped up in a canvas tent in the middle of an arid, black-as-death nowhere, I feel as insignificant as a speck of Kalahari sand.

In the night, I hear lions roar.

Karen Goa visited South Africa and Botswana courtesy of South African Tourism www.southafrica.net and CC Africa www.ccafrica.com, which operates luxury safari tours in 16 African destinations under a sustainable conservation ethic. South African Airways provided flight assistance. SAA flies direct from Sydney* and Perth to Johannesburg and beyond with convenient connections from New Zealand. www.flysaa.com

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