

VOL 11 NO 3 FALL 2013 / WINTER 2014

www.cruiseandtravellifestyles.com

CRUISE & TRAVEL LIFESTYLES

ARCTIC
FEVER

SOUTH AFRICA
SAFARI

INDIA'S
HIDDEN
HEART

MYSTERIOUS
MAGICAL
MYANMAR

Explore
THE WORLD

CRUISING TWO MIGHTY RIVERS: THE MEKONG AND THE DANUBE



WONDER WHERE THE LIONS ARE

The lions are bullet-fast. “Hang on!” yells our safari guide, Pierre Mouton. Veering off-road, we crash after them through the bush. Just moments before, the pride had been sauntering slowly across a grassy plain – out for a stroll, we thought. But no, they were hunting. Now, as we screech to a halt in front of them, we see that, in an instant, they have already taken down their kill. Fanned out like spokes in a wheel – their furry faces smeared with blood – they tear at the impala. One lion rips off the antelope’s head, complete with lyre-shaped horns, and wanders off to savor its prize alone.

It’s a macabre scene, a spectacle of nature at its wildest. That the lions are unfazed by our presence – and we can safely witness it from ten feet away, seated in an open Land Cruiser without high sides or roof – makes it even more surreal.

“But if you got out of the vehicle, things would end very badly for you,” warns Pierre.

No doubt.

>>



Get up close (real close) to the Big Five – leopards, elephants, buffalos, rhinos and majestic lions – on a South African safari in Sabi Sand Game Reserve.

JANICE AND GEORGE MUCALOV



PIERRE NOUTON



Then we were off, bouncing along on seriously bumpy dirt tracks criss-crossing the dry bushveld. It always amazed us how the tracker – perched precariously over the front grille without a seatbelt – never fell off. His was also the worst seat when we encountered the horny white rhino (pun intended!)

Driving slowly, we'd been watching red-billed oxpeckers pick insects off the rhino's back as he snuffled about the low grasses with his flat snout. But when he started spraying urine on the dirt road in front of us, stomping and snorting as he got closer, we backed up. He charged forward – and thrust his horn almost onto our poor tracker's lap. "He smells a female's scent on the ground," explained Pierre. "Unfortunately, we're right on it." Pierre cupped his hands around his mouth and blew – rhino-talk for "Go away!" Fortunately it worked – the rhino grunted his way around us, then ambled on.

Not all our game drives were so adrenalin-fueled. Once we just sat quietly gazing at a grazing herd of Cape buffalo. Another time, we watched a leopard drag an impala carcass higher up a tree, while her cub slept on a branch, feet dangling.

We always stopped for sundowners on afternoon drives and believe that whoever invented this safari sunset ritual was a genius. Our guide and tracker would whip out limes, liquor and ice cubes from a cooler, along with traditional South African snacks like biltong – a spiced dried meat. As we sipped gin-and-tonics atop a knoll, we'd stretch our legs, watch the sky turn pink then inky violet and wonder how the next day could possibly be any better.

THE SABI SAND GAME RESERVE, which dates back to the late 1920s, pioneered wildlife viewing game drives in South Africa. The animals are habituated to the engine sounds and people seated (but not standing up) in these vehicles and go about their business undisturbed. The 153,000-acre sanctuary, which shares a 50 km. unfenced border with Kruger National Park, is famous for its up-close game viewing of the Big Five – lion, leopard, elephant, buffalo and rhino. Leopards, in particular, are a big draw (Sabi Sand has the highest concentration of leopards in the world).

During our three-night safari at Simbambili Game Lodge in Sabi Sand, we saw all members of the Big Five, as well as giraffes, zebras, wildebeest, cheetahs and thousands of graceful, leaping impala. No hyenas. Those we spotted in Thornybush Game Reserve, another private reserve adjoining Kruger. And after oohing and aahing over hyena pups suckling on their mother, we think hyenas are kinda cute – well, at least the babies.

Days began at 5:30 a.m. with a knock on our door. After scarfing down a quick coffee and muffin, we'd climb into our assigned Land Cruiser. We were visiting during South Africa's cooler winter months (May to September) – best for game viewing – so we were grateful for the hot water bottles and blankets provided to ward off the morning chill.

Clockwise from above:

Spotting a leopard during a game drive in South Africa's Sabi Sand Game Reserve.

Stopping for sundowners on a Thornybush game drive.

Deck with a view at Simbambili Game Lodge.

Facing page: Guides and guests capture the sights of Sabi Sand.



PIERRE MOUTON



PIERRE MOUTON



GEORGE MICALOV



PIERRE MOUTON



GEORGE MICALOV

There was also an hour of night driving on the return to the lodge. Everything feels different in the dark, as the bush seems to close in on the vehicle. The tracker would shine a bright spotlight back and forth, looking for the reflecting eyes of smaller nocturnal critters such as cat-like civets and fierce honey badgers. We saw lions again too and learned they usually hunt at night.

Back at camp, warm vanilla-scented facecloths and a glass of creamy Amarula eased the transition from wilderness to civilization. Our lodges had electricity, air-conditioning and even in-room phones and free Wi-Fi, but as the grounds were unfenced and animals wandered about, we had to be escorted to dinner from our bungalow or room. A guide had a rifle handy when we dined in the bush or outdoor boma (gathering place) where, warmed by a blazing fire, we tasted African specialties like barbecued impala and pap, a cornmeal staple flavored with fresh tomato sauce.

Our safari quickly took on its own rhythm – game drive, breakfast, bush walk (with an armed ranger-guide) to learn about animal tracks and towering termite mounds, lunch, siesta, sometimes afternoon tea, game drive, dinner. Each night, in the heart of the wild, we'd fall asleep, to the occasional, heart-thumping roars of nearby lions. ♦

IF YOU GO We flew from North America direct to Johannesburg. For safety reasons, you should pre-book airport-hotel transfers in Johannesburg with a reputable local company like JMT Tours. Flying time from Johannesburg to Hoedspruit airstrip (for both Thornybush and Sabi Sand game reserves) is about 60 minutes. Anti-malarial tablets should be taken.