

South Africa – where business meets the wild

by Amanda Hemingway

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For the average executive on a business trip to Southern Africa, the call of the wild can seem well out of earshot. You go from svelte modern hotel room to svelte modern office, and the men you meet, whatever their race, creed or colour, all wear the same suit and talk not only the same language but the same jargon. It seems a far cry from the Wilbur Smith you bought at the airport, where Africa is a world of big skies and big game, the men have more testosterone than Mohammed Ali and the women's bosoms still heave without the help of silicon. But the wilder Africa is nearer than you think.

Perhaps you can manage three or four days at the end of your trip to shed the tailoring and go in search of adventure. The Kruger is a day from Johannesburg by car, and destinations in Zambia and Botswana involve one or more flights. But the Waterberg, still little known to the foreign tourist, is almost on your doorstep. A mere three-hour drive and the tarmac runs out, you're bumping over dirt roads with rocky heights nudging the sky on either hand, a wheeling eagle far up in the blue, a troop of baboon ambling across the track ahead. Suddenly, this looks the way Africa should.

The Waterberg is a UNESCO-designated sphere of biodiversity largely divided into ranches run on environmental principles and private reserves. Cattle roam through the bush on the former, giraffe and zebra on the latter. Sometimes, they overlap. Aardvark burrow under fences, hippo charge through them, antelope jump over them, leopard climb via overhanging trees. No matter how smart the lodge where you stay, shake out your shoes for scorpions before putting them on and in hot

weather check under the bed for snakes. This is where the wild gets out of the books and into the real world. However, the Waterberg is also malaria-free (thus obviating the need for expensive pills with dodgy side-effects) and, at approximately six thousand feet above sea level, you avoid the stifling humidity of the lowlands in the wet season. The landscape is mountain and plateau and plain, stream and river and reservoir, with a wide variety of flora as well as fauna, and the spoor of our oldest ancestors running through it all. Africa is where Man took his first steps on the road to civilisation, and out in the wild, there will be moments when you glimpse the shadow of the Past.

For those who want to safari in luxury, the Welgevonden reserve has spectacular scenery, the Big Five, and a range of exotic lodges. Among the best is Mhondoro, which has some half dozen chalets grouped round the main lodge, built on a crag so there are panoramic views even from the loo. Each chalet has a fourposter bed, indoor and outdoor showers, a bath the size of a plunge pool, a terrace with sun loungers, electric blankets and a gas-powered fake fire for cold winter nights. There are traditional thatched roofs and African carvings on the doors, and lantern-lit paths wind their way to bar and restaurant. The food is well up to international gourmet standards, the cocktails are lavish, and in the heat of the afternoon you can sit in the pool on the edge of the sundeck and look down to the waterhole twenty feet below, where a brace of giraffe or a posse of warthog may come to drink.

Game-viewing is by jeep, with, if you are lucky, Obert the lodge-manager at the wheel. He can spot lion-tracks invisible to the untutored eye even while driving; we followed some for ten or fifteen minutes until we saw the lion, a huge male with a heavy dark mane, pacing along a few yards to our left. The jeeps are open, which can be unnerving for the inexperienced traveller, but the animals see them as a single unit

– provided you don't break the outline by standing up or leaning out too far. (Presumably the human smell is masked by that of the internal combustion engine.) Elephant may mock-charge you and rhino block your route to browse, but you can pull up beside the veldt's deadliest hunter, and a dozing lion with paws in the air will barely lift an eyelid (though it is advisable to resist the urge to tickle his tummy).

I have been within ten metres of an alpha male marking his territory, emitting that coughing roar which is a sound like no other, not so much loud as deep – bone-deep, heart-deep – a sound to waken our most ancient fears. The top C of some opera singers can shatter glass, but the lion's roar is like the rumble of an earthquake: it carries for miles in the still air, telling every other creature that the lord of the jungle is here. Our ancestors heard it, huddled round the camp fire long ages ago, and sharpened their new-made weapons, and wondered whether coming down from the trees was such a good idea after all. Top predator though we are, when we hear that noise out in the bush we remember that our skin is thin and our limbs slow, and beyond the world of skyscrapers and mobile phones the wild still lies in waiting.

If you want to get out of the jeep and really blend with nature, then head for Horizon horseback safaris. You don't need to be a veteran rider: with over sixty horses to choose from and a maximum of twelve guests they can cater for every level of ability. And on a horse, you're not just close to the wild, you're part of it. This is one that sorts out the men from the boys – or indeed the girls, since women tend to be the more enthusiastic riders. Anyone can drive a car, it's merely a machine, but to bond with, and to control, a free-spirited animal, requires more than just testosterone. This is your chance to prove you're not simply a suit with plastic and a Blackberry, underneath there's an Indiana Jones-style adventurer with both *cojones* and heart. (By the way, bosoms really do heave on a riding safari, particularly at speed.) You

can scramble up – and down – rocky scarps, trek through the bush in search of eland and wildebeest, canter with kudu, learn to identify the scalloped trail of a puff adder, evade the vast web of a Golden Orb spider. In the evening, you tether the horses and climb up Morgan's Rocks for sundowners, high above the trees with a view of the African sunset, which is so beautiful it is almost a cliché. Then back to the lodge for all the comfort of – well, comfort: hot baths and showers, lavish quantities of gorgeous food, soft deep beds.

The lodge is located in the game reserve on the sprawling Triple B ranch, giving you the opportunity to test your cowboy skills at cattle mustering and using the lasso as well as riding in search of wildlife. The gardens slope down to a lake with waterlilies and hippo (watch out for the haha, constructed to discourage the latter from grazing on the lawn at night). In the dark, far from the light pollution of the cities, you can see the glittering network of the stars, with the Southern Cross low over the horizon, and hear jackals howling not far away or the honking of the hippo – a sound disconcertingly like the laughter of Jabba the Hut in *Star Wars*.

To rest the riding muscles you can take walks in the bush, or a drive in the nearby reserve of Entabeni, which has lion, elephant, and the 2008 Miss World contest. The landscape is among the most stunning in the Waterberg: raw red towers of rock surmount slopes of yellow-flowering acacia, and your jeep takes you on a roller-coaster plunge down a sheer ravine and out onto a wide green plain with game on every hand. Unfortunately, the wildlife of the Miss World contest is not in permanent residence.

If you feel you can handle a long ride, you can go in a small group to Lindani, another reserve affiliated to Horizon. The scenery here is gentler, with broad grasslands and valleys of rock and stream, and there is a wide variety of plains game,

from the tiny, delicate steenbok to the massive eland, the largest of the antelopes. You stay two nights in an isolated lodge with warthog at your door, while the guides barbecue steak for dinner and you drink cold beer and spirits that have never known a measure. If you are lucky someone will have a guitar (a couple of the guides play), and you can google the lyrics of your favourite songs on a Blackberry and sing them, off key, far into the night.

Next time you fly into Jo'burg with a Wilbur Smith in your briefcase and a week of business meetings ahead of you, remember, the wild is only three hours away. Somewhere out there is a sunset just waiting for you to ride into it...