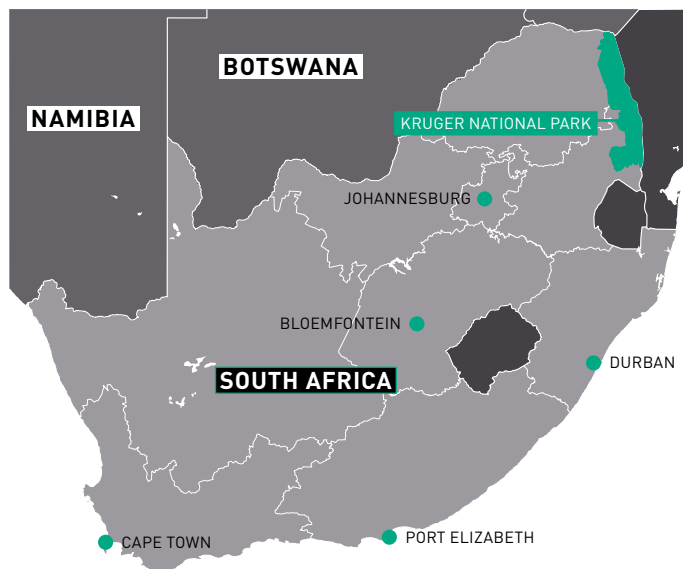


INTO THE LION'S DEN

*Eager to sample the best of South Africa's Kruger National Park without breaking the bank, **Mark Meredith** hatches a plan that should make everyone's safari dreams within reach...*





“L

isten!” Walter, our armed guide, put his fingers to his lips and we held our breath, straining to hear what it was that had caught his attention. There it was, faint but unmistakable, just below the level of the birds twittering in some nearby bushes – a roar, not that distant.

“Lion,” said Walter. We exchanged anxious grins, aware of our extreme vulnerability but relieved that we were with two experienced rangers carrying rifles they said would drop an elephant with one bullet.

Walter and fellow ranger Dingaan scanned the ground for tracks. The sun was peeping over the horizon, making it easier to pick out details. Sure enough, they found the distinctive – to them – tracks of lions, just hours old. Earlier, just a few minutes away in the predawn light, we had found a lioness and her cubs lazing on the road, enjoying the warmth the tar seal had retained from the previous day’s sunshine.

Walter gathered us in a circle. “These tracks are a different group of lions,” he said. “We’re in their territory, their environment, so we have to be careful. We will lead the way, guns at the front in case anything happens. The rest of you will follow in single file, an arm’s length apart so we look like a large animal, and you will maintain that distance, and no talking. You’ll take it in turns to bring up the rear.”

With the rules laid down, three young German tourists and I fell obediently into line, ready to do absolutely anything our protectors told us to. I was staying in South Africa’s Kruger National Park, at SANparks’ Lower Sabie Rest Camp, as part of a self-drive safari. Kruger’s rest camps offer sunset and sunrise game drives and, for the more adventurous, a four-hour dawn bush walk. The four of us were the only takers for the walk that morning. Being on foot in the dawn light, tramping through thorny thickets from behind which you feel anything might pounce, takes being on safari to a whole new level. The frisson of danger heightens the experience beyond measure.

Dingaan and Walter came to an abrupt halt on a reasonably well-defined path. “Can anyone tell us what made that?” We were standing around a very large heap of dung. “Giraffe,” I offered. “Elephant,” said another.

“No, it’s a hippo. The river is just over there,” said Walter, pointing. Dingaan, meanwhile, moved forward in that direction to scan the bush. “This is his track we are standing on. He is a night feeder and comes out of the river to graze on grass. In the daytime he shelters in the river, as he gets sunburn and



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only comes out on overcast days.” Walter looked at us carefully. “A male hippo is very territorial. This is his path and he will protect it from all comers.”

“Umm, isn’t the hippo the most dangerous animal in Africa?” I asked. “You are absolutely right. It is,” confirmed Walter, “They kill around 500 people every year, mostly poor villagers fetching water from the river who are caught on the path between the hippo and its river.”

“How do they kill people?” I wanted to know, imagining they probably ran them over. “They bite them in half,” he replied. I turned to look at Daniel, a German TV cameraman there to film a story on rhino poaching. We exchanged nervous smiles.

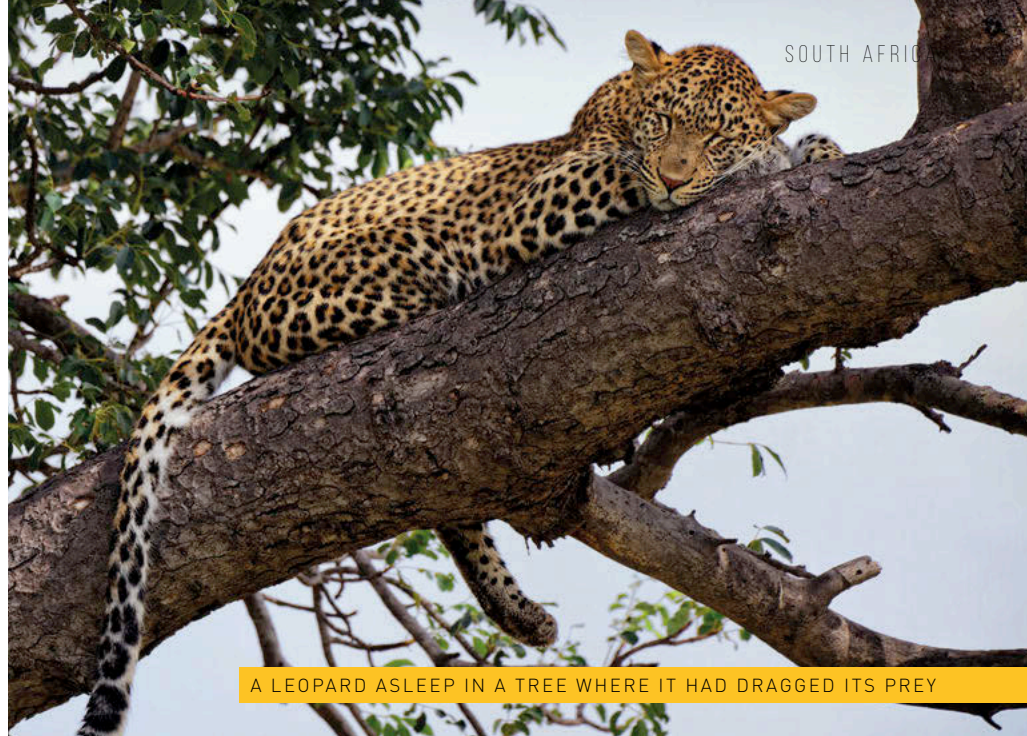
“It’s no good trying to outrun them,” warned Walter, as if he had guessed my intentions. “They can reach speeds of 28mph. You need to hide behind a rock, or a fallen tree, or climb one.” As we set off for the river, I looked around in vain for large rocks and tree trunks.

At the Sabie River we saw distant hippos foraging. Walter and Dingaan spied something further up the river with their binoculars, and suddenly we were off at a fast pace that had me struggling at the rear. It was still early, but the heat was already quite intense. I tripped over loose rocks, snagged my T-shirt on acacia thorn bushes and sweated madly.

Whatever it was we were tracking, we lost it, and stopped for a welcome break. Our guides took out snacks of biltong, cheese, biscuits and juice and we chatted about their life as

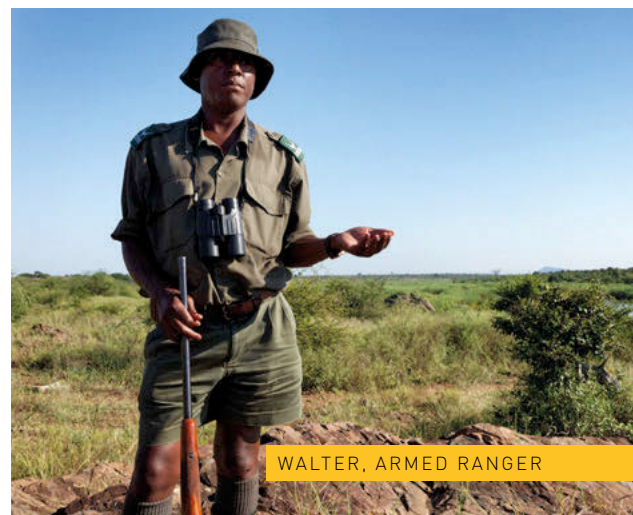


A LIONESS IN GREATER KRUGER NATIONAL PARK



SOUTH AFRICA

A LEOPARD ASLEEP IN A TREE WHERE IT HAD DRAGGED ITS PREY



WALTER, ARMED RANGER

rangers. They can recognise every animal and bird, their calls, tracks, as well as plants. It was clear both men love their jobs. Although they are out guiding tourists every morning, every day is different. They're so attached to the Kruger they sometimes come here on their days off.

Fifty metres from our rest spot, we were shown a rhino skull. The horn was hacked off. It seemed that wild animals weren't the only reason we were accompanied by men with guns. The threat from armed poachers was a part of the disclaimer form we had to sign before the walk.

Walter and Dingaan have seen this too often. Walter pointed to some hills 4km away and explained they marked the Mozambique border. It's from there that poachers cross into the Kruger to supply the crazy and heinous demand in China and Vietnam for rhino horn – as beneficial to your health or libido as chewing your fingernails. In Yemen, men use the rhino horns as ceremonial dagger handles, a status thing apparently.

In Vietnam rhino horn fetches US\$100,000 per kilo, so it's hardly surprising poachers will risk all to cross into the Kruger. Walter explained that in the poverty-stricken villages over the border, poachers are held in high esteem, young kids seeing them as role models. One successful hunt can set them up for life.

Walter said 2017 was a little better for Kruger poaching statistics, with 504 rhinos killed in the Kruger Park, down from 662 and 826 in the previous two years, but 1,028 were killed in

South Africa as a whole.

The trouble is, as of 2016 there were only between 7,000 and 8,300 rhinos left in the whole Kruger Park. You do the maths.

The end of this educational walk was approaching, not a moment too soon for me. My fitness levels were finding me out; the early morning African sun drying me out. I hadn't applied sunblock beforehand, thinking sunburn at this hour wouldn't be an issue. Big mistake. By 8.30am I was desperate for shade any bush would provide. But I couldn't stop to enjoy it – unless I wanted to be left alone with the lions.

Back at Lower Sabie rest camp we said our goodbyes to Walter and Dingaan. My new German friends were headed north to Skukuza rest camp where Daniel was to go out with a patrol looking for rhino poachers. For me, this was the first day of a seven-day safari I was embarking on with my wife – asleep in the bungalow – and it had started better than I could have imagined, but poachers were not on my itinerary.

I had agonised long and hard about how to do our bucket list safari without ending up broke. You can spend silly sums at private lodges with their four-poster beds, personal butlers and haute cuisine. On the other hand you can have the most fantastic experience doing a self-drive safari, staying in the government-run South Africa National Park (SANParks) rest camps, which are extremely good value and offer self-catering.

Feeling it was important to experience the difference between the two, I decided to do both. I booked four days' self- ▶



drive in the Kruger that also took in Satara and Olifants rest camps, followed by three days at Gomo Gomo Game Lodge in the Klaserie Private Reserve.

The Kruger National Park covers two million hectares, or 7,523 square miles, where you drive upon sealed and unsealed roads. Along its western border are a series of privately run reserves that form the Greater Kruger National Park. These large reserves, such as Klaserie, Timbavati, Balule and the expensive Sabi Sands all share unfenced borders with the Kruger and each other. This means the animals can roam over an enormous area.

For first-time safari adventurers like my wife and I, driving from camp to camp in the Kruger, trying out bone-shaking dirt-road loop tracks in search of game was the most fun we've ever had driving. We saw so much – animals at almost every turn. It was like being in an Attenborough epic offering a tremendous sense of discovery and adventure, the difference being that it can only be done from the safe distance of your vehicle, from which you are absolutely forbidden to alight.

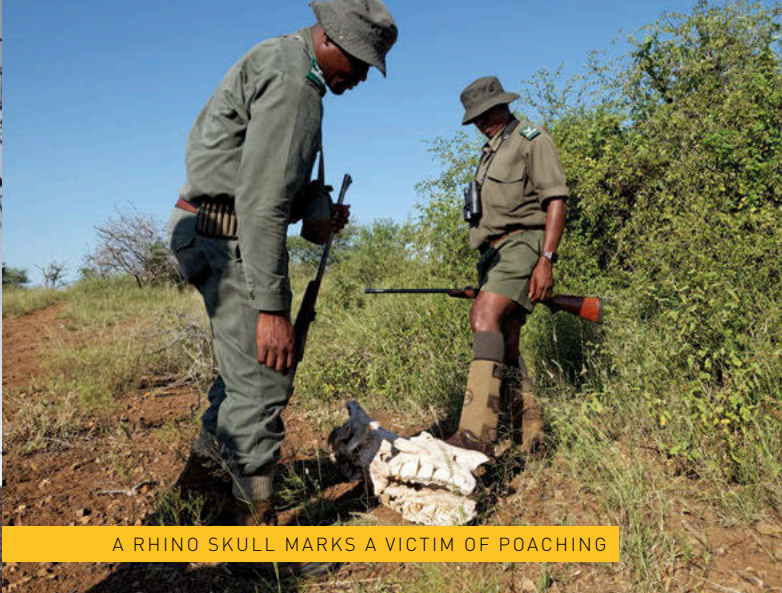
To us, no animal was more impressive and majestic than the elephant. Twice we found ourselves trapped while a large herd passed around us, breaking and chewing vegetation as they went, huge bulls lumbering past. In our tiny car we felt as vulnerable as those kids in Jurassic Park with the T-rex. Elephants are very destructive, and the area they'd passed through resembled a World War One landscape of broken, twisted tree skeletons. At the Satara rest camp pho-

tographs on the walls showed elephants tossing cars about like pieces of Lego.

We joined SANParks' morning and evening game drives at the Satara and Olifants rest camps in open-sided trucks holding up to 25 people. The advantages of these excursions are that the rangers take you along dirt roads closed to the public, providing commentary. As sunset turns to night, or before first light, I and some other passengers were tasked with holding powerful torches to scan the bush to catch reflected eyes; green for antelopes, yellow for cats. I felt especially sorry for the impalas caught in the glow of our torches, groups huddled together in the dark, frightened surely in the knowledge that they were the equivalent of an easy takeaway for countless predators roaming the night.

Back behind the fenced compound of Olifants rest camp high on its hill, the night air was scented with the aroma of grilling meat. Dozens of braais (barbecues) were on the go outside the bungalows and rondavels, the scented smoke drifting over the valley in the night breeze. Tomorrow we would leave the Kruger for the Klaserie Private Reserve and see how the other half did safaris.

As we drove into Gomo Gomo Game Lodge in the Klaserie reserve, a ranger hurried out to welcome us, a lady proffered fruit juice cocktails, and we were seated for a late lunch before being shown our luxurious chalet overlooking the camp's waterhole. Clearly, this private game lodge lark was on a whole new level.



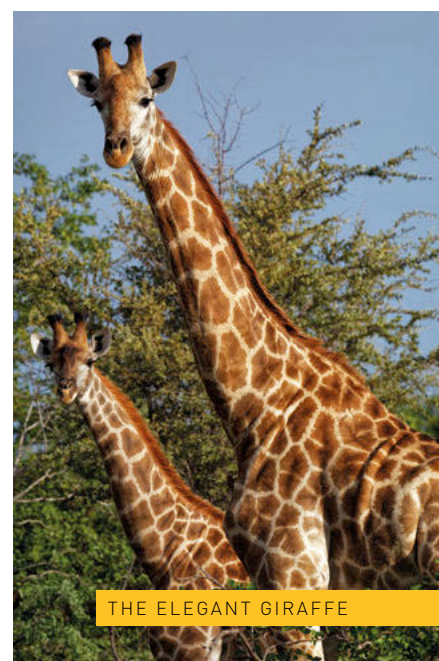
A RHINO SKULL MARKS A VICTIM OF POACHING



SURROUNDED BY ELEPHANTS



SPECTACULAR VIEWS OVER THE OLIFANTS RIVER AND BUSH



THE ELEGANT GIRAFFE

Gomo Gomo is set around a waterhole where animals come by to drink and wallow, and so do the guests, in the swimming pool. The private game lodge experience gives you time to chill, to take a break from driving, to feel a little pampered, while being fed generously three times a day.

The game drives at Gomo Gomo were fantastic, the highlight of our safari adventure. Unlike the organised drives in the main Kruger Park, these were small (just four passengers in our truck), intimate affairs in open-sided, tiered-seat Land Rovers. Our tracker, Nyeti, sat on a seat above the bonnet so he could scan the sand roads for tracks, providing hand signals to our ranger, Harry, indicating which direction he should take.

The thrill of driving down obscure, barely discernible sand tracks, through dry riverbeds and bushy thickets after leopards or rhinos, never knowing what we might find, was thrilling. And when we did find our lion, leopard, rhino, elephant and buffalo (the “big five”), we were able to get really close up. Our trucks, and others traversing the Klaserie, communicate by radio, relaying locations of particular game sightings – cooperation that works really well.

One evening, having tea at the edge of a waterhole where five semi-submerged hippos watched us suspiciously from about 20m, I remembered Walter’s talk on hippos during the walk a week earlier. At that moment, the closest hippo stuck his head out of the water and started a series of yawns, or jaw-stretching exercises. The enormous mouth opened al-

most 180 degrees, revealing hideously huge teeth: “They bite them in half...”

I was kind of relieved when we headed off to find some lions. But 30 minutes later our Land Rover’s prop shaft snapped. Sunset was upon us, the sky already laced with wispy strands of pink signifying the onset of dusk. Noises in the bush were increasing the sense of isolation and vulnerability that breaking down in the wilderness brings, while the darkness, when predators go about their work, was fast approaching.

Luckily we had Harry to mix us some drinks and put us at ease. That’s the beauty of staying in a private game lodge, having a ranger like Harry and a tracker like Nyeti to look after you in your hour of need and dish out sundowners. What made this sundowner memorable for us was awaiting rescue as Nyeti volunteered to walk into the darkness already closing around us, unarmed, to get help.

We sipped our sundowners and had a refill. By now the sun had disappeared and insects danced around us in the light of the lantern on the truck. Out there, somewhere, perhaps not too far, animals were on the prowl. Above the vast wilderness of the Kruger, the blanket of stars shone in the night sky with an intense brilliance I’d not seen before.

As we laughed and joked with Harry, a light appeared in the distance, growing brighter as it came towards us – there was Nyeti in another truck, with a broad grin on his face come to rescue us. **At**

LET'S GO

SOUTH AFRICA

WHERE TO STAY

There are 12 main government-run SANParks rest camps spread around the Kruger, as well as smaller satellite camps, bushveld camps and overnight hides. The main camps offer a variety of accommodation, including cottages and bungalows with kitchens and BBQ facilities, huts, permanent safari tents and campgrounds for your own tent. They also have communal kitchens, laundry facilities and petrol stations. Each has a well-stocked shop for self-catering, and a licensed restaurant or a cafeteria. See www.sanparks.org/parks/kruger.

Our comfortable two-bed, air-conditioned bungalow at Lower Sabie cost £82 per night. Campsites cost from £20 per night; two-bed huts from £40. Daily conservation fees for international visitors cost £19 per adult, per day.

At Gomo Gomo Game Lodge the price of an air-conditioned two-bed chalet started at £145 per person, per night. The price includes two daily game drives at sunrise and sunset, a bush walk, three meals daily, and non-alcoholic drinks. A one-off conservation levy of approximately £12 per person is applicable, and a vehicle entrance fee of roughly £8. For more info, see www.gomogomo.co.za.

WHAT TO DO

All main SANParks camps offer sunset and sunrise game drives, which you should pre-book. These last for three

hours and cost £18 each. You drive in big open-sided trucks holding up to 25 people. SANParks' morning walks (pre-book) last four hours and cost £31. You need to be reasonably fit. If you are over 65 you will need to produce a certificate of fitness from your doctor for the walk. You should wear khaki, green or neutral-coloured clothing for the walk, and ideally long pants. Wear closed shoes.

WHAT TO TAKE

Sunscreen, hat or cap, insect repellent, binoculars, camera with a decent zoom.

SELF-DRIVE KRUGER SAFARI

This is what most South Africans do: load up the car or SUV and explore the Kruger, going from one camp to another. Driving in the park is easy. Main roads are tarmacked, while the some-times-bone-shaking dirt roads offer a little more adventure and the chance of the unexpected. Just plot your route and drive. The speed limit enforced by cameras, the signs say, is 30mph on the main roads. Where there's game to see, you'll find animals by the number of cars parked haphazardly along the road.

Depending on the time of year, gates at the camps shut at 6pm or 6.30pm –

you don't want to be late. They open between 4.30am and 6am. Animal activity is at its greatest early and late in the day.

WHEN TO GO

People will tell you that the winter months, when the vegetation is dry and sparse and the waterholes are drying up, provide the best game viewing. But you should see plenty of game whenever you go. I travelled at the beginning of April, in the autumn, and the park was green and beautiful and the game plentiful. **AT**

