

# A Safari in Singita

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This trip was five months ago but the very pleasant memories remain fresh at the time of writing. It was to be my first ever trip to Africa, and it would not have been complete without the requisite safari. I still remember that I was a tad stressed about packing for two different climates within the same country and not having any “safari-type” clothes, but a quick trip to Uniqlo solved that.

So after the conference in cold and drizzly Cape Town, we caught a flight to Kruger Mpumalanga airport near Nelspruit. We were recommended the Singita reserve, part of the Sabi Sands wildtuin (Afrikaans for game reserve), situated west of Kruger National Park. Singita is a Relais and Châteaux member hotel, and has won a few Condé Nast Traveller awards. Of the three lodges available, we settled on the Boulders Lodge, set on the banks of the Sands River, made of curving thatch and stone moulded into the rock. The compound is unfenced and wildlife is known to wander around the individual suites.

We arrived just in time for lunch and I scoffed a tasty toasted BLT sandwich and washed it down with a cold, refreshing homemade lemonade while nyala (*Tragelaphus angasi*) wandered just below the lunch deck. We dumped our bags in the amazing suites (with a double-sided fireplace and viewing deck with lap-pool), slapped on sunscreen and were ready for our first evening game-drive.



▲ Sunset on the last day ► A lion close-up  
► An elephant close-up



Each open-top Land Rover could accommodate six guests so the four of us were joined by a honeymoon couple from New York: he works for Google while she is a legal analyst with Bloomberg. Our guide for the duration of our stay was the knowledgeable Lazarus, along with a tracker who sat in a modified seat on the front hood of the rover. I did not have very high expectations of seeing all the exotic animals/big-five but mentally prepared myself that deer was all we might see...

Off we went into the warm and humid surroundings of the reserve; barely out of the perimeter when we were greeted by sprightly hopping impala (*Aepyceros melampus*). We came across warthogs rolling and backing in muddy water to cool down and kudu feeding on the emerging spring vegetation. Then we encountered the first of the big-five, a single-tusked elephant that had uprooted a tree and was feeding on its roots. This was a totally different experience compared to my last visit to our local Night Safari; this was an animal in its natural habitat. Amazing! Barely ten minutes later, a crash of rhinoceros and their young came sauntering across. Then, a giraffe could be seen reaching for the soft green leaves in the higher branches of the trees. Wow! Subsequently, our guide told us that a pride of lions had been seen by another rover, and this was communicated via walkie-talkies to us and we set off to find them. After a while, we found them: eight lions lying languidly in the grass; almost camouflaged. We drove up really close and I could feel my palpitations and heart thumping within as we were in an open-top vehicle with NOTHING separating us from the lions! I was reassured that as long as we remained in the vehicle, we would be safe and duly complied. We all began to snap pictures and other rovers from surrounding reserves soon joined us.

That's three of the big-five just in one drive... I was pleasantly surprised and very pleased. We headed back to Boulders Lodge and after a quick shower, we were ushered into the boma for dinner. This was a modified livestock enclosure made of long pieces of branches and wood, and was set up with tables and a BBQ. We dined on beef, lamb, traditional boerewors and cider-marinated warthog loin. This was a tasty end to an enjoyable day.

We awoke at 5am and prepared for our second game-drive. Some light snacks were served in the main lodge and the sun was just rising over the horizon. We headed to another section of the reserve and saw a troop of monkeys swing around the trees. We also saw some elephants across a stream and on instructions of our guide, dismounted the rover to get a closer view of the mother and child drinking.

Thereafter we drove on and this was the highlight of my trip: I pointed out a leopard on the tree branch! Leopards are a very rare find and I was so chuffed that I spotted it. We drove closer to view the magnificent beast, reclining and then sitting up on a horizontal branch surveying all that was around it. We positioned the rover and moved around to allow multiple photos from different angles. Soon after, an obstinacy of Cape buffalo wandered by and having had our fill of "leopard preens", we drove around to try to find them again. No luck unfortunately so we stopped for a snack in the shade. Low and behold, another herd came by and that's the big-five in just two game drives! Lazarus then promised us a special treat so we drove on to join other rovers and we wondered what the excitement was about. In a clearing was a pack of African wild dogs (*Lycacon pictus*) – something of a rarity on safari – t'was indeed a special treat. We drove back to the lodge, had breakfast and thereafter prepared for our outing to the village.

In a response to guests' desire to better understand the local Shangaan people and culture, Singita initiated community tours in 1999. We visited the village of Justicia and were treated to a performance by three to six year olds in the local pre-school, listened to the "iSquathamiya" songs of a local singing group as well as the gum-boot dancing. We also visited a home and tasted delicious homemade peanut butter, watched a Shangaan tribal dance







and clapped along to music from a youth choir and also joined in the dancing with some of it captured on video...

For our afternoon and third game-drive we came across the dung beetle, a dazzle of zebra and a herd of rhinos menacing a herd of buffalo for shade. Driving off and just narrowly avoided a swarm of bees, we drove up the edge of a watering hole and there before us was a bloat of hippopotami. They were submerged and swimming around and a sight to behold. We then saw another leopard, this time in the grass and proceeded to follow it and chanced upon a hyena too. Then, while stopping for afternoon tea on the road, we were charged at by a bull elephant in musth, which I captured on video... what a way to end the day.

On our fourth and morning game-drive, we came across another pride of lions that were observing a waterbuck (*Kobus ellipsiprymnus*). The lions left their perch and decided to walk over to the rover and started nibbling the shrubs beside the rear tyre of the rover with me watching ever so anxiously just above them. If

I stretched my hand out, it would have been one metre from its mane!

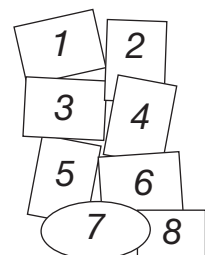
After all that excitement, we drove on and came across an injured/sick giraffe lying on its side in the bush; it was obviously in pain and discomfort. Lazarus radioed for help and we made our way back to the lodge for lunch and a lounge by the pool.

After four amazing game-drives, we were eagerly anticipating the fifth and last drive, and wondered what would be able to top what we had already experienced. We were not disappointed. At the Castleton camp watering hole, there were hundreds, yes hundreds, of Cape buffalo having pre-dinner drinks :). I shuddered to think what would happen if they were to stampede. Thereafter we drove on, got off the rover and stalked a rhino. As it was the last day, we asked to be seated on the tracker's seat and barely a kilometre later, stumbled into another pack of wild dogs. Lazarus remarked that we were the luckiest group of guests he had the pleasure to guide. We stopped for afternoon tea with a crimson sunset in the horizon and celebrated a fantastic safari with memories to last many years to come.

On the last morning, we awoke at 4am and were driven through the morning mist and drizzle to the Newington gate of the reserve, which only opened at 5am. Thereafter, we transferred to a bus heading westwards to Johannesburg for our flight home. If one ever has the opportunity to go on safari, I would wholeheartedly recommend it as an experience of a lifetime. "Still or Sparkling" will never have the same meaning ever again ... **SMA**



*Martin finds food and travel photography a pleasurable distraction.*



1. Safari Roast. 2. Another Lion Close-up. 3. Rhinoceros. 4. Leopard in Tree 5. Wild Dogs. 6. An Injured Giraffe. 7. Bacon wrapped prawns. 8. Cape Buffalo

