

Ode to the earth mother

JAMES SIDDALL is astounded to find that the reality of Sabi Sabi's Earth Lodge almost exceeds its lofty reputation

THE world is full of clever things I wish I had said, just one being, "Game drives are the most boring way ever devised for rich people to waste their money."

Unfortunately, I can't recall who said or wrote it — if I could I'd gladly attribute it — but it does take me to my second point, namely that game drives really can be breathtakingly enervating affairs.

Rattling around a dusty plain in an open Land Rover — and I'm convinced lodges almost invariably use Land Rovers partly for their Out of Africa connotations, which a similar Toyota just wouldn't offer — pausing every now and then to caw politely at the sight of some indeterminable creature in the middle distance, truly is a taste of eternity of the worst kind.

The lodges themselves are often not much better, frequently being formulaic concoctions of a variety of clichés including, in no particular order, thatch, mosquito nets, pieces of old wood, large bomas, and prices that, to me at least, are frankly usurious.

By now you're probably expecting me to say that Earth Lodge at Sabi Sabi, bordering the Kruger Park, is an exception, and that I found it utterly incomparable and quite unlike any other lodge — or, indeed, place — I've ever stayed at. And you'd be right.

It is also one of the very few places I've visited with a website description which includes the usual words such as "unique" and "unforgettable" and, rather more ambitiously, "sensory revelations" and "restoring spirit", that was at least worthy of the reality.

Boring, perhaps, and I know it's always more interesting to learn about the recalcitrant plumbing and the sullen service than it is to

hear undiluted paeans, but Earth Lodge really is almost beyond censure, as you might expect of the most exclusive of Sabi's four, separate lodges.

When we first arrived in convoy after the five-hour trip from Joburg, I thought that we'd mistakenly pulled up at the wrong entrance. After a jaunt down some tolerably navigable dirt roads, all that greets you is a nondescript, ochre-hued entrance to a roofless tunnel. The sort of thing you might expect at the entrance to your better class of bunker.

But wend your way down the winding passage, and you slowly realise that the lodge is carved into a hillside, and overlooks rolling bushveld. There's not a whiff of thatch to be had — unless you count the bits of grass deliberately left in the rough-hewn walls — and the architecture is striking, geometric, minimalist, masculine and strangely soothing all at once, if that makes any sense.

Of course, all the prerequisites of a top-end lodge abound, from cold face towels on arrival to art gallery to library and spa, while natural wooden sculptures by South African artist Geoffrey Armstrong really do "add a powerful magic" — as the website claims. It's easy to believe the lodge was built not to a stern and soulless blueprint, but that it just evolved, with its creators innovating as they went along.

Equally unique — and I loathe that horribly overused, misused, lazy word, but in this case there really is no substitute — are the 13 suites. I was so enraptured with mine I was the first to leave dinner so as to go and revel in its hugeness, which stretched from a vast bathroom with equally vast tub to a king-sized bed.

I was also up very early, with light pouring through the suite's



DOWN TO EARTH: Above, the cavernous 'Standard Suite' at Sabi Sabi's Earth Lodge; below, the view from one of the private verandahs. Pictures: EARTH LODGE



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skylights, and in my private plunge pool, naked, with the bushveld stretching out around me.

I remember thinking that if I, as a South African, largely inured to game lodges, was so taken with the experience, then a foreigner, let's say someone just off a plane from cold and sleety Chicago or gloomy Dusseldorf, must truly go into sensory overload.

Speaking of which, a good portion of Earth Lodge's clientele are from abroad, which is understandable given the high-season price of R6 500 a night sharing — or R13 000 for the superlative Amber Suite.

While one would reason that

the staff might prefer foretipping foreigners, they didn't show it. On the contrary, service was sublime, striking that magical note where you felt that everyone, from management to the rangers, couldn't conceive of anything more Arcadian than having you as a guest.

The only slightest, merest hint of a slip was when I asked for the decanter of complimentary Sherry in my suite to be replaced with something nonalcoholic — which it wasn't, despite smiling assurances.

The food, too, befits the price. Before setting off on a game drive we availed ourselves of a high tea

of the sort befitting one of the world's better hotels, with only the cucumber sandwiches lacking.

The drive itself destroyed any chance of my using that quote about them in earnestness. While we saw the obligatory buffalo, rhino and even a lion who indolently looked up at us then contemptuously went back to sleep, it was the hyena who sniffed around the vehicle that I find the most remarkable, with its distinctly dog-like mannerisms and primeval, powerful jaws.

Dinner in the boma, as expected, was a cut above the traditional lodge buffet, with three plated and flawless courses. Each table was hosted by a ranger, who admitted they stay up until the last guest goes to bed, then rise for the dawn game drive, which makes them far superior individuals to myself as I could never dispatch their dinner duties with the same chatty graciousness.

Early bedtime notwithstanding, I skipped the morning game drive, lingering instead in my private plunge pool, before a long breakfast — my favourite meal in a good hostelry, although of course I didn't get my customary newspaper. And while compact, comprising a small cold buffet and hot plated meals, in my case smoked salmon and the fluffiest scrambled eggs, it was one of the finer I've had outside Istanbul or America — where you get pancakes, obviously.

If you were expecting your R6 500 to provide you with at least a few snapshot memories of the type normally termed "indelible", you won't feel short-changed.

■ The writer was a guest of Mercedes-Benz SA.
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