

South Africa In Style

This once-in-a-lifetime destination offers five-star hotels, fabulous food and more

By Jennifer Juergens

Close to dusk we set off for a game drive. Tired though I was and starting to drift off in the Jeep, the word “elephants” snapped me out of my fog. Turning toward the bush, there they were, coming toward us, padding out of the trees, slowly ambling. The closer they got, the more I started backing up into the Jeep, digging my heels into the floor to position myself farther away. Too close for comfort for me. Will you look at those tusks?

Frankie, our guide at Tinga Private Game Reserve, cut the motor. “Sure you want to do that?” I said, thinking, “What if we need to make a quick getaway?” Frankie was nonchalant, “They won’t bother with us.”

“Oh really?” The pachyderms paraded across our path in front of our Jeep, then turned up the road as they followed their leader— one, two, six, eight elephants. Then we saw the lone baby come out of the bush,

trying to keep up with mama, and then trying to nurse. A collective “awwww” from inside the Jeep.

Mama brushed him aside and pushed him along. We watched and snapped pictures as they moved away. Then, the baby knelt down, exhausted, and rolled over onto the road ready for a nap. But mama nudged the baby up, and they all continued their slow gait into the bush. And then they were gone. How did those massive gray bodies go so swiftly, and so completely disappear into the bush?

“Magical” said Michael Stevenson, director, sales development, midwest meetings and

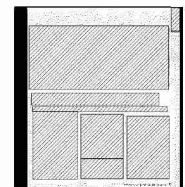
incentives USA for South African Airways.

And he’s been game trekking before. But it was a first for our host and for this group of incentive planners (and me) to spot one of the “Big Five” group of big game animals. And seeing the elephants—and particularly the baby—at Tinga was the capper to this

extraordinary adventure and the trip of a lifetime. But let’s start at the beginning.

FIRST IN FLIGHT

No need to beat around the bush, so to speak: the flight from New York to Johannesburg is long—about 16 hours with a stop midway to refuel. South African Airways, the country’s national air carrier, has a business class that makes the trip quite comfortable, though, especially when you’re sipping wines from South Africa’s famed Stellenbosch region and supping on roasted lamb. Seats that turn into actual beds, replete with comforters, make this the softest ride I’ve ever had on a plane. And the great time filler? Movies, and lots of them, on your own private monitor. Put up the small screen in between the seats for more privacy. There’s also daily nonstop service from Washington Dulles International Airport. Economy class





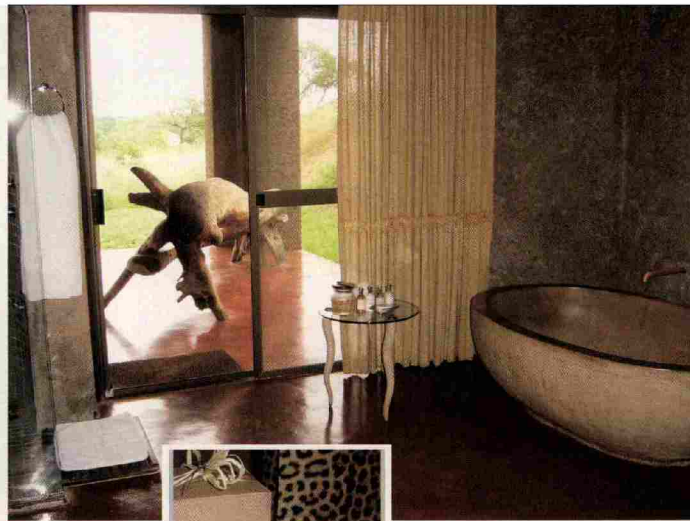
Look closely and see baby next to mom on our first day out on safari...magical



The great rooms at Londolzi are elegant and soothing—a terrific place to unwind after game trekking



No worse for the wear, the group heads back from a trek ready for lunch at the Lion Sands River Lodge



A room at Sabi-Sabi's all-natural Earth Lodge



Items from Local artisans, like this African mask, make excellent pillow gifts

is nicer than most and they serve delicious meals paired with South African wines.

Scott McKibben of incentive company McKibben & Associates in Carmel, Calif., recently brought over 300 attendees to South Africa for a four-night global sales incentive. "South Africa is as distant a travel destination as there exists, and most were skeptical of the travel but intrigued by the prospect of the 'Animal Kingdom,'" McKibben says. "Little did they know how rich and diverse South Africa is culturally and from a culinary standpoint. The Palace at Sun City, north of Johannesburg, was our base camp. Morning and night game drives were the core of the program (something that is quite addictive), with world-class golf, spa and casino action interspersed. We provided a number of very compelling pre- and post-tour options. Over 75 percent extended their trip to experience the true (and decadent) bush game lodges in the Kruger National Park area, or north in Botswana or Zambia. Others chose to visit Cape Town with its rich history, beautiful wine country and Cape Point. This particular company has taken their top salespeople to all corners of the world and rates this as a trip of a lifetime. How nice to exceed expectations!"

CAPE TOWN

Our group started in Cape Town, meaning we had a connecting flight from Johannesburg. The flight was about two hours, and when we arrived, the managing director of Tusker Tours, Joanne Wadsworth, met us. Not only did she “bus” us around all week and get us into every great restaurant and hotel, there was a pillow gift for us every night when we returned to our rooms (see the mask we received one night, at right), but I digress.

Okay, back to Cape Town. This city of about 3 million has nightlife, culture and great ethnic restaurants, as well as lots of outdoor activities. From our breakfast table at the Westin Grand Cape Town Arabella Quays hotel, adjacent to the convention center, the view of Table Mountain in front of us was spectacular, as was the Atlantic Ocean in the distance. This four-year-old hotel boasts a new spa with a lap pool surrounded by glass with 180-degree views. Most visitors take the spectacular ride on a cable car to the top of the 3,563-foot Table Mountain, named for its flat top. But we had a different agenda. After breakfast we

motored past the University of Technology and Groote Schuur Hospital where Dr. Christiaan Barnard performed the first human heart transplant. Then we paid a visit to Groote Schuur, a former presidential estate. Catered, tented outdoor events for incentive groups can be held in the spectacular gardens.

Later, we visited the Buitenverwachting winery in the Constantia Valley. This estate is known for its beautiful grounds and its outdoor restaurant.

We left this award-winning winery to go to the restaurant Constantia Uitsig, also in a spectacular setting. Later, we checked into my favorite hotel in Cape Town, the Mount Nelson. Set at the foot of Table Mountain and in the heart of Cape Town, this hotel, built in 1899, is set on nine acres of tranquil gardens. It can't be missed with its pink color, intended to perk up the gray atmosphere during WWI. While the Mount Nelson is known for its colorful history, the hip new lobby bar is now the place to be seen. Winston Churchill, one of its most famous visitors, would be proud.

Dinner that night was at the African Café. While the server ceremoniously washes each one of our hands, he tells us what they'll be

servings. Then, the dishes start coming. The restaurant is known for its communal feasts with such delicacies as Ethiopian sik sik (ostrich fillet in a traditional berbere paprika sauce) and East Africa mchicha wa nazi pies (pastry filled with spinach, peanuts and coconut cream) and Soweto chakalaka (spicy mixed vegetables). No one leaves hungry here, and for the shoppers, there is a shop that sells colorful ceramics and jewelry.

CAPE OF GOOD HOPE

There is no reason to travel to this part of the world without a visit to the Cape Peninsula—the most southwestern point of the African Continent. Bring a few bottles of champagne for the group to make a celebratory toast and take pictures. We also took the scenic drive over Chapman’s Peak, the Cape Point Nature Reserve and Boulders Beach Penguin Colony, where hundreds of penguins reside.

Lunch was at the Black Marlin Seafood restaurant, which was once a whaling station. It is nestled on one of the most scenic coastlines in the Cape, just outside of Simon’s Town. The signature dish is bacon-wrapped kingklip, cooked on a spit and served on an individual wrought-iron holder. During whale season, it’s a great place to watch whales sidling along the coastline.

We made our way to the Table Bay Hotel, on the vibrant Victoria and Alfred Waterfront to check in. This five-star, 329-room show-place has panoramic views of the mountain range and the harbor. The grand lounge has a cathedral ceiling and twin fireplaces. I went in to the Kraal Gallery at the Victoria and Alfred Waterfront where I watched women weaving wall hangings so spectacular, I had to buy one. The indoor shopping area boasts some of the usual mall shops we’re used to, but also houses some fine restaurants, including Baia, overlooking the harbor. Line fish, of course, was on the menu.

The next day, it was back on a flight to Johannesburg where we were to pick up a charter flight (which sounds expensive, but is actually quite reasonable) to the Sabi Sands Nature Reserve. Here, we stopped for lunch at Londolozi, meaning “protector of all things,” a private game reserve that has been run by the Varty family since 1926. While there is a hint of history around the hotel in the form of old pictures and furniture, the rooms are completely up to date and simply gorgeous. All

dark wood, sisal rugs, white, fluffed-up upholstery on the furniture, as well as hand-made bowls, carvings and other ornaments as decoration. At Londolozi there’s Tree Camps, with six private suites; the Granite Suites, with each of the six having their own private swimming pool; the Varty Camp, with décor from the family’s own home; Pioneer Camp, themed with historic memorabilia, with six



After a grueling day game tracking, it’s time to wind down



A pair of one of the Big Five

private cottages; and the Founders Camp, with five chalets. There’s no roughing it here. Londolozi also has a gym and massage treatment room.

After lunch, we were off on our first game drive. We’d already spotted a few monkeys on the Londolozi property. In fact, one group had pounced on incentive planner Rich Wise’s bags and grabbed anything that wasn’t zipped up. That meant malaria medicine (we all took it as a precaution) and various other enticing-looking items. Some were retrieved from the rooftop of one of the huts.

The best game spotting happens to be at dawn and dusk, so we set off at about 4:30 p.m. and just when it was getting dark, saw a pride of lions. Again, we got a bit too close for

my taste, and as everyone was snapping away, I thought of the flashes on the cameras and wondered if this bothered the lions at all. Ranger Joseph didn't seem to think so. And, well, it was another one of the Big Five we could check off our list. That night we all had giant rooms in Sabi Sabi's Earth Lodge. And yes, the buildings are all made of natural materials, including earth. The magnificent wine cellar, which naturally stays cool, was our venue for dinner. The next morning one guest spotted an elephant drinking out of his apparently not-so-private pool. Can you say photo op?

On St. Patrick's Day some of us enjoyed a Shandy overlooking the Sabi River on the new deck at Lion Sands River Lodge, the five-star resort that is just a tad less expensive than the others. It's a homey place with Rhodesian teak floors, and inlaid furniture.

After a morning drive, most of the guides serve coffee in the bush, or in the afternoon, cocktails and snacks. But on our last night, Tinga Private Game Reserve, along with Tusker Tours, dropped us off after our last nighttime drive right in the middle of the bush where tables of food awaited and the head chef stood at the grill cooking all types of game and other meat. Lest you forget you're in the wild, there were a few men with guns surrounding the camp—just in case. After dinner, it was off to our rooms in the Narina Lodge at Tinga. Each room has its own private plunge pool, of course, and mine had its own hammock. That night, in my room, I heard loud sneezing. It was a hippo that walked straight past my window. Rooms are stocked with giant flashlights for game viewing from inside— and just in case there's an electricity surge.

After our flight back to Johannesburg, we had an elegant lunch at the Westcliff, the sister property of the Mount Nelson (and just as glorious), which is set high on a hill on Jan Smuts Avenue.

Throughout all of our game drives --there were five in total --we saw a gorgeous leopard lounging on a sturdy branch, a lone giraffe feasting on the top of a tree, lots of hippos, rhinos and those funny looking hyenas, as well as what seemed to be thousands of antelope.

But nothing can compare with the drive we took at Tinga where we saw the baby elephant with mom. That, for me, made the trip. ■

Send comments to jennifer.juergens@incentivemag.com