

See the animals up close at the Sabi Sabi game reserve.

# UNDER THE AFRICAN SKY

FROM BEING PAMPERED IN ULTIMATE LUXURY, TO ROUGHING IT OUT IN A DO-IT-YOURSELF EXPEDITION, WE SUSS OUT GAME PARK OPTIONS IN THE SOUTH AFRICAN WILDERNESS. BY ELLE BAN

**I**magine discovering a simpler world stripped of modern technology, a world where time does not race, but strolls along – with majestic creatures that roam wild and free as they did centuries ago. If those images thrill you, pack your bags for a safari experience in South Africa. The best part: There is a game park adventure to suit every purse size. And with more than 20 national parks to choose from, you will be spoilt for choice.

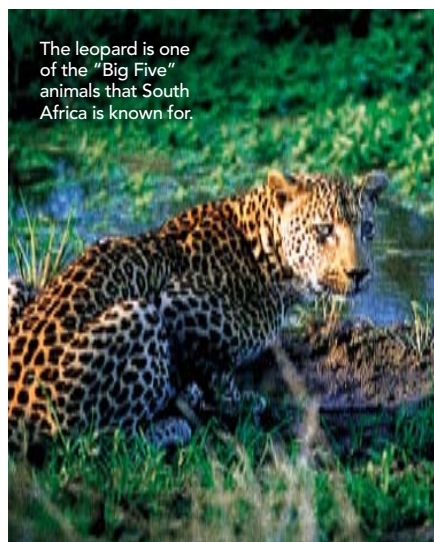
**1 ON A SHOESTRING BUDGET** Located in the eastern region of Mpumalanga, Kruger National Park is the emblem of South African tourism. Spread over more than two million hectares (about the size of Wales), the largest national park in the country supports some 150 species of mammals, 500 types of birds and 330 varieties of trees.

**DRIVE AROUND** If travelling at your own pace, independent of other tourists, is your cup of tea, consider a self-drive. Choose from a variety of vehicles to suit any terrain, from cars, four-wheel

drives and camper vans to motorbikes. Renting a car for three days costs about R165 (\$30), while a fully equipped camper van will cost R1,300 (\$210).

Keep to the well-tarred roads in Kruger National Park and don't stray off course as that is prohibited – not that you need to do that to catch South Africa's "Big Five": the elephant, rhinoceros, lion, leopard and buffalo. However, there is a limit on the number of cars allowed to enter Kruger daily, ranging from 350 to 750. Once the number is met, only those with overnight accommodation will be allowed to enter. Fortunately, such instances don't happen very often, except during the peak tourist season from mid-November to mid-February.

Another option is to sign up for a game drive and leave the driving to someone else. The Kruger National Park operates drives at various times of the day (starting at 4.30am and ending at 5pm), and each drive costs about R210 (\$34) per person. Tickets can be bought at the entrance gates for those who



The leopard is one of the "Big Five" animals that South Africa is known for.

are not staying inside Kruger, or at rest camps for those who intend to spend the night.

### REST AND RELAX

Conveniently located around Kruger, rest camps not only offer clean and adequate facilities, but are also ideal places for you to plan your trip as you venture along. You can choose to stretch your legs by going on an early morning or afternoon game walk, or experience the magic of having breakfast in the African bush while watching giraffes nibble from treetops in the distance.

There are other accommodation options besides rest camps, such as communal huts, exotic safari tents (permanent canvas tents built on fixed platforms) as well as family-friendly cottages with multiple bedrooms and a kitchen. Prices vary from R250 (\$40) for a hut to R850 (\$137) for a cottage. Luxury lodges situated in Kruger can cost about R9,950 (\$1,608) a night. Bookings can be made via the South African National Parks website at [www.sanparks.org](http://www.sanparks.org).

## 2 FOR THE ROMANTIC

If you are planning a honeymoon or don't mind splurging on a well-deserved break, book yourself a stay at one of the luxury resorts. The very best are located in private reserves around Kruger National Park.

Sabi Sabi ([www.sabisabi.com](http://www.sabisabi.com)) is one such top-notch private game reserve. The jewel in the Sabi Sabi crown has to be the new Earth

“Go on a spectacular journey through veiled mist, silent lakes and majestic trees.”



The luxurious Earth Lodge offers the perfect blend of indoor comfort and outdoor adventure.

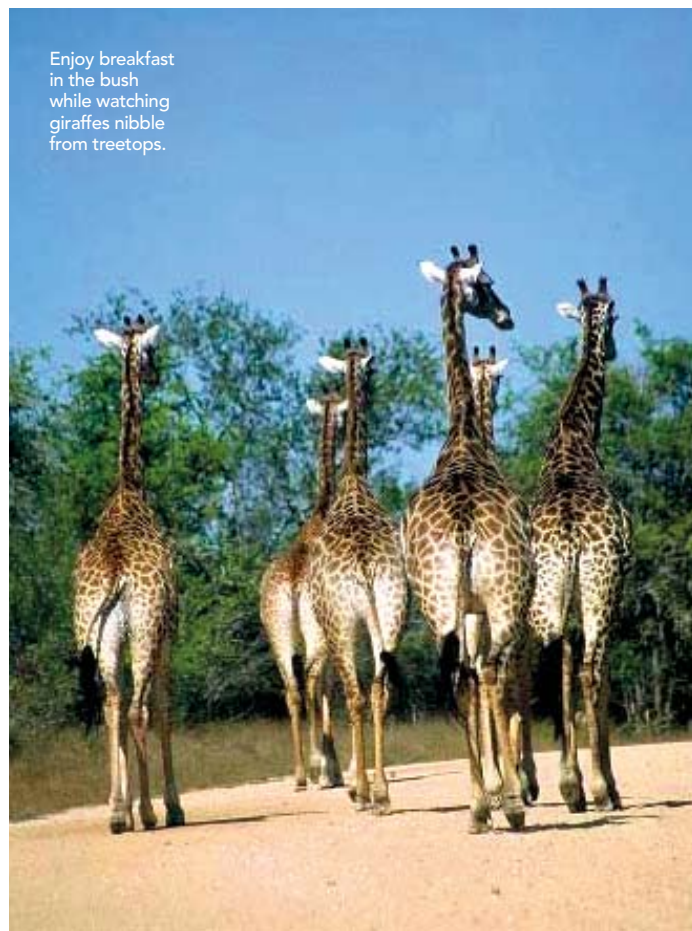
Lodge. Prices are steep, from R6,500 (\$1,051) for a night's stay in a villa, but it is worth the money as every need is catered to, including twice-a-day game drives, optional wilderness walks and four sumptuous meals a day. A three-night stay should fill a suitcase full of memories.

Unlike in Kruger, where going off-road is not permitted, private reserves allow you to go off the beaten track in pursuit of the animals, so be prepared to get up close. And because guest numbers are limited, you will actually see more game than humans!

### NATURE AT YOUR DOORSTEP

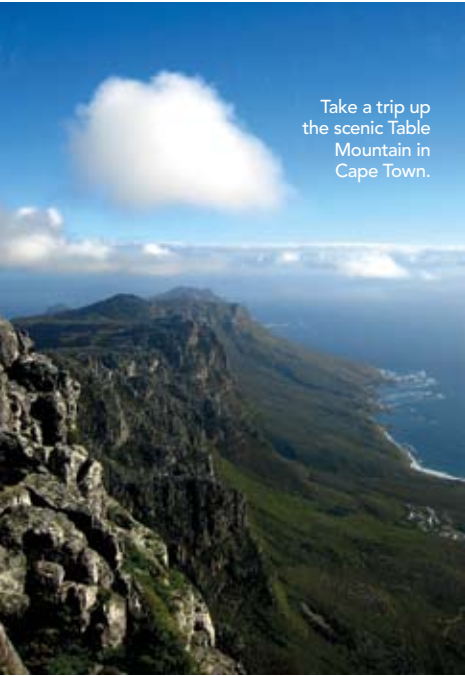
The villas in Earth Lodge are palatial, yet designed to blend into the natural surroundings. And with no electrical fences separating you from the African outback, it is not uncommon to be greeted by the humbling sight of a family of gargantuan elephants drinking from a nearby lake, or waterbucks and zebras grazing by your private pool.

The resort conducts two off-road safaris a day. The first starts before sunrise and takes you on a spectacular journey through veiled mist, silent lakes and majestic trees under the glory of a rising sun. Your second foray into the wild kicks off in the late afternoon, and champagne is served midway through the drive as the sun begins its retreat behind the horizon. As day turns into night, you may be lucky enough to spot and track a nocturnal leopard and, if there is a clear night sky, embrace the silent serenity under a blanket of stars.



Enjoy breakfast in the bush while watching giraffes nibble from treetops.

## VENTURE OUT



Take a trip up the scenic Table Mountain in Cape Town.

### 3 A LITTLE BIT OF EVERYTHING

Those who prefer to have a little bit of everything will do well to head to Sun City resort ([www.suninternational.com](http://www.suninternational.com)) in South Africa's northwest – a modern-day playground emerging like a mirage in the heart of Pilanesberg National Park. How long you decide to stay here really depends on how much you want to do before the tourist-mania gets to you.

For those who love the nightlife, good food, world-class wines, golf courses, water-theme parks and the roll of

the dice in a world-renowned casino, Sun City is a dream come true. The resort also conducts game park drives to Pilanesberg, and prices range from R330 (\$54) per person for a two-and-a-half hour session to R1,300 (\$211) per person for a five-hour safari, inclusive of food and beverages. If you hit the jackpot at the casino, celebrate by doing a safari with a difference: Take to the skies in a hot-air balloon.

#### BEYOND THE SAFARI

As exciting as a safari experience may be, there is so much more to South Africa than observing the wonders of the animal kingdom. There is no better way to relax than to pamper yourself with a soothing spa session, for instance.

For another perspective, take a trip up the exceptionally scenic Table Mountain in Cape Town, which stands at 1,036m above sea level. A tour of the winelands is also a great way to indulge in the aesthetic beauty of the Cape's landscape while living the high life.

### BEFORE YOU GO

» **PLAN** To help you shortlist the activities you're interested in, log on to websites such as [www.southafrica.net](http://www.southafrica.net) and [www.savenues.com](http://www.savenues.com). They provide exhaustive information as well as useful links to service providers.

» **FIND OUT MORE** South Africa has such a rich history and is such a patchwork of diversity, you'd be doing yourself a disservice by going in blind. Take some time to find out more – the knowledge will help you make better sense of the country.

» **TRAVEL SAFE** South Africans are generally very welcoming of tourists, but don't go against the advice of the locals and venture into places where even they wouldn't go. It's a good idea to check with your hotel staff on the safety of your destination. When in doubt, it's always best to travel with a good guide.

## PLANNING YOUR SAFARI GETAWAY

» **GETTING THERE** Singapore Airlines has daily direct flights to Johannesburg. Other carriers such as Thai Airways and Qatar Airways also operate one-stop flights from Singapore. From Johannesburg International Airport, fly the cheap and efficient Mango Airlines ([www.flymango.com](http://www.flymango.com)) to Nelspruit Airport. You can drive then from Nelspruit Airport to Kruger National Park in less than two hours.

Alternatively, you can drive six hours from Johannesburg to Kruger. Pilanesberg National Park, on the other hand, is a two-hour drive from Johannesburg. If you're up for it, cars, four-wheel drives and even motorbikes are available for rent. Maps and current information on road conditions can be obtained from the Automobile Association of South Africa ([www.aa.co.za](http://www.aa.co.za)).

» **PLAN YOUR HOLIDAY** Hook up with a tour operator and leave the logistics to someone else. A good tour operator to check out is Thompsons Africa ([www.thompsonsafrika.com](http://www.thompsonsafrika.com)), especially if you are planning to extend your trip beyond Kruger or Pilanesberg. Its drivers double as guides and have an impressively vast local knowledge. Chatting with them is an experience in itself.

#### » A STOMACH FOR ADVENTURE

South African food is dominantly meat-based, and carnivores will salivate at the endless gastronomic excitement of exotic game dishes – anything from springbok antelope to rabbit and crocodile meat grilled to savoury perfection. Fortunately for those with more conventional tastes, international fare is also readily available.

» **WHEN TO GO** Weather-wise, South Africa is a great place to visit all-year round. The northern areas are generally warmer than the south, with a good amount of sunshine coupled with gentle breezes. The weather gets colder as you head south, with strong winds and the occasional rainfall giving an added chill.

» **WHAT TO PACK** It's summer at this time of the year in South Africa. Pack light, but make sure you bring along a few thin sweaters for the 19 deg C nights. Sunblock and moisturisers are also handy. If you intend to rough it out, don't forget to pack insect repellent, torchlights and a pair of binoculars.

» **TRAVEL MED** South Africa is listed as a malaria-prone country, so it's advisable to get some anti-malaria medication, especially if you are heading towards the Kruger region.