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Fly in to the heart of South Africa by Michelle Balmer

Southern Africa has a reputation for its diverse natural wonders - big skies, bold sunsets, as well as national parks and private reserves bursting with wildlife. But this natural beauty, combined with luxurious safari camps, often comes with a hefty price tag, making pre-trip research very important indeed. And, while there may be much debate about what makes the dream safari, one option to consider is a fly-in safari.



On arrival in Johannesburg we travelled by car to Lanseria Airport in Pretoria. There we met with pilot/owner of Cross Country Air Safaris, Brigitte Cross, who took a few minutes to go over our specially created ten-day itinerary, which would take us to South Africa, Zambia and Botswana. Most of Southern Africa is accessible by light aircraft and, as Cross pointed out, this meant we were not limited to visiting safari camps in only one particular area or country. But perhaps even more appealing was learning that we would be free to depart each safari camp at our leisure. While initially this seemed incredibly decadent, we were quick to adapt to the perks of private air travel. We boarded the six seater

twin-engine Piper Seneca. The aircraft was comfortable and we each had our own window to search for game on landing and on take-off. After the final checks and safety brief were complete, we ventured into the heart of the bush.

Our first stop was Mala Mala Game Reserve, located in the South African province of Mpumalanga. The reserve shares an unfenced 19 kilometre border with Kruger National Park, which allows animals to roam freely between the two conservation areas. After being welcomed by camp manager and zoologist Nils Kure, we succumbed to an inviting camp atmosphere reminiscent of a visit to a property owned by friends. The rooms at Mala Mala are individually thatched

rondavels, a traditional round-shaped African style house, with views to the lawn and surrounding reserve.

Mala Mala prides itself on offering some of the best game viewing on the continent, and it certainly did not disappoint. Moments into our first game drive we spotted a leopard known to the rangers as the Bicycle Crossing Male (at Mala Mala the resident big game are given names usually representational of where they are found). We tracked the sleek cat, stopping only as the sun sank closer to the horizon, to watch some lazy lions rouse from their slumber and a herd of elephants who seemed determined that our presence would not interrupt their feeding. Under the darkening sky we sipped sundowners while our vehicle was being surrounded by a herd of quietly grazing buffalo. After hearing the deafening roars of several lions within close proximity to our vehicle, a feeling of serenity was instantly replaced by a pounding heartbeat and a surge of adrenalin, which peaked when we saw lionesses sink their claws into a buffalo in an attempt to bring it down.

And the big game sightings did not stop there. The following morning our ranger, Peter, provided us with more wild entertainment, introducing us to a male cheetah, wildebeest, and the antics of elephants taking a mud bath.

Switching to a slower pace, we made the short trip to Gwala Gwala, near Hoedspruit in South Africa. Gwala Gwala offers unique walking tours, which were a chance for us to get up close and personal with the giraffes and zebras. Most importantly, we had the opportunity to learn about nature and the environment by seeing the little creatures that you would normally miss on big game drives. The camp is made up of six tents set under a canopy of trees. Each has their own open en-suite evoking the feeling of 'showering in the bush.' The attention to detail was evident, from the native floral decorations left on the bedcovers to the hot water bottle on a cold night. The evenings were enjoyed with the



owners Ann and Dorian Harcourt-Baldwin by a campfire in the boma alongside a spotted genet, one of the resident pets. Dinner was an enjoyable affair where we swapped stories and indulged in some outstanding home-style cooking.

Mashatu Game Reserve, situated in the Tuli Block region of Botswana, is the sister camp of Mala Mala and attracts some of the largest free roaming elephant populations in Southern Africa. The drive from the airport to main camp showed a rugged landscape of empty riverbeds, rocks and red dirt. Despite the drier than usual conditions, we still saw plenty of wildlife on our game drives, including lions, giraffe, impala, zebras and an abundance of elephants. During one afternoon game drive, the elephants took a back seat when our ranger spotted two leopards with exceptionally good balance mating in a tree. We found the open 4-wheel drive an ideal way to view game, but the more adventurous can try a horseback or mountain bike safari.

The bar and brunch dining areas of main camp are set beside a waterhole, which sees plenty of animals coming into drink. It is the perfect place to do some armchair game viewing, although beware of the opportunistic



Vinciane and Reinout de Gruijter, who, much to the concern of family and friend both left high-pressure jobs in architecture and banking to pursue their dream of building a Zambian lodge. Things appear to be working out well for the couple. Their staff are mostly from Monokhuni (the local village) and assist in the day-to-day running of the lodge. There are ten private chalets (some with their own private plunge pool), each of which has been individually designed to make the most of the elevated outlook over

monkeys who will grab anything off your plate. Against this inspiring backdrop we spoke with resident elephant specialist and researcher Jeanette Selier, who gave us an insight into elephant behaviour and the Mashatu research programmes. Guests can also visit the Discovery Centre or participate in an educational Ivory Drive, led by Jeanette herself.

The flight to Zambia was our most anticipated, for just prior to our landing at Livingstone Airport we saw the legendary Victoria Falls. Circling above the falls gave a true perspective of the sheer magnitude and volume of water raging from the Zambezi, which, according to Cross, was flowing at almost full capacity. Adventure companies offer a number of ways to see the falls from the air, including helicopter and microlite tours, but we did not see the need - we had just experienced our own private aerial tour. For us, all that was left was to see them up close.

Our accommodation at Stanley Safari Lodge was located a short distance from Victoria Falls, which made visiting them very convenient. We visited the falls in the morning and evening light, and spent the rest of our time relaxing at the lodge soaking up the impressive views back towards the smoke-like mist. We met the Belgian owners,

Mosi-Oa-Tunya National Park.

We took to the skies again for a short flight to Kasane, the meeting point of four countries - Botswana, Namibia, Zambia and Zimbabwe. The views en route, particularly of the merging Chobe and Zambezi rivers, were striking. After a quick stop to clear customs and immigration, we departed for Selinda Camp in the Linyanti region of Botswana. This was our first real bush strip landing and we were told that aircraft do not always have 'sole' use of the dirt clearing, and we were soon to learn why Cross had carried out a thorough check to ensure the runway was clear. Our driver, who was waiting for our arrival, told us that just thirty minutes earlier he had chased a particularly stubborn bull elephant away from the airstrip.

Selinda is a small and intimate camp of safari tents, each with its own verandah and outdoor en-suite. Each evening the dinner menu is read aloud in both English and Setswana, and most of the food is made from scratch, including the salad dressings and freshly baked bread.

In the open grasslands we found giraffe, zebra and a cheetah with cubs and, in the low lying spillways, hippopotami, crocodiles and Botswana's national bird, the lilac breasted roller. This area felt especially wild and is

indicative of the government's impressive conservation efforts, where approximately 39 percent of Botswana has been dedicated to national parks, reserves and wildlife management areas. Coffee and liqueurs by the campfire cemented our affinity for the remoteness of the region. Selinda Manageress Kea Supang, a Motswana (resident of Botswana), who spent much time with bushmen learning traditional cooking and basket-weaving techniques, agrees it is a very special place; "I love living out in the bush...!" Supang said.

The Okavango Delta was our final stop and, on arrival at Shinde Camp, we were welcomed in song by a group of women standing under a gigantic sausage tree. That was not our only surprise; we were excited to learn that wild dogs had made a den close to camp. The pack was made up of six pups and four adults and, after placing our bags in our tent, we set out to find them. Oblivious to a pride of lions nearby, the pups emerged from the den to play, but the adults were not so naïve; they each took turns to maintain a constant guard over the young, while the others assisted in hunting for the entire pack. The wild dog is an endangered species and, with the current total population estimated to be less than five thousand in the whole of Africa, we felt very lucky to have seen young pups.

The ambience at Shinde was delightful. The main dining area is set quite literally amongst the trees. Below lies a campfire and an open bar, which had been cleverly made out of an old wooden mokoro, a traditional dug-out canoe. Today mokoros are made out of fiberglass, which we were keen to test in the tea-coloured waters surrounding the camp. While gliding through the well-worn channels we fell under the spell of this unique ecosystem, which boasts a plethora of frogs, insects, birds and flora.

Not even the grunting and bellowing of hippos, and the sound of a mystery creature brushing against the side of our tent could spoil our last night. Besides, with so much



nocturnal animal action, who would want to sleep? Instead, we compared notes about the special moments of our journey and anticipated our final panoramic flight back to Pretoria. If this was not the Southern African dream safari, then it has to be close.

Fly-in safari operator:

Cross Country Air Safaris

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Email: aim@airsafaris.co.za

Website: <http://www.airsafaris.co.za>

Flights from Dubai:

Emirates Airlines has direct flights from Dubai to Johannesburg twice daily.

Photography by Kirsten Holst.

Tips for booking a fly-in safari:

- Choose an experienced fly-in safari operator and enquire about their safety record.
- Ask if the operator is restricted to booking accommodation at particular safari camps (the flexibility to visit different camps will enrich your safari experience.)
- Find an operator who is able to customise a trip according to your budget and time frame.
- Consider cost-saving options, e.g. travelling with others.
- Inform the operator if you are travelling with children, so they can select child-friendly accommodation.
- Enquire about baggage limits.
- Ask for references from previous clients.