

DISCOVER

SOUTH AFRICA

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# The low-key pride of South Africa

Big Five viewings are virtually guaranteed in the Madikwe Game Reserve, says **Sandra MacGregor**

**N**o one in the safari vehicle has said a word for the last 10 minutes. We are staring at a family of lions less than five yards away as they engage in that most universal of activities: soaking up the sun. The pastoral scene unfolds before us as if we've paid them to perform: mother and father lie in the sun as the kids (year-old juveniles) play rough and tumble. "This is an extraordinary scene," says Christo Rachmann, Tuningi Safari Lodge's talented ranger. "We're lucky to be witnessing this."

Suddenly, one of the female juveniles – clearly the show-off of the pride – jumps into a tree and flashes her canines. Her performance is put to a rather ignominious end when her brother asserts his dominion by pushing her out of the tree with a swat of his massive paw. But before this demonstration of strength can go to the youngster's head, his father lets out a roar and begins to methodically circle the group, stopping at well-appointed trees to mark his territory.

And what a territory it is. Tuningi Lodge is located in the Madikwe Game Reserve, a 185,326-acre reserve three hours north-west of Johannesburg along the Botswana border. It was created 20 years ago through Operation Phoenix, a project that saw 8,000 animals from 28 different species relocated in the largest translocation of game ever recorded.

Yet despite being malaria-

free and offering some of the best Big Five game viewing in the country (Madikwe is only open to guests staying at one of the reserve's lodges, so there are far fewer tourists competing for prime spots at sightings), Madikwe remains little-known even among South Africans. Or at least it was until recently.

Last June the reserve made big news when the first lady of the United States, Michelle Obama, and her daughters chose to forgo South Africa's renowned Kruger National Park and instead selected the more low-key Madikwe as their game park destination of choice. From the sightings we've had so far, it appears the Obama family chose well. And lucky for us, the animals don't seem to have let the recent celebrity visit dull their enthusiasm for making appearances for us less famous folk.

Though at this moment

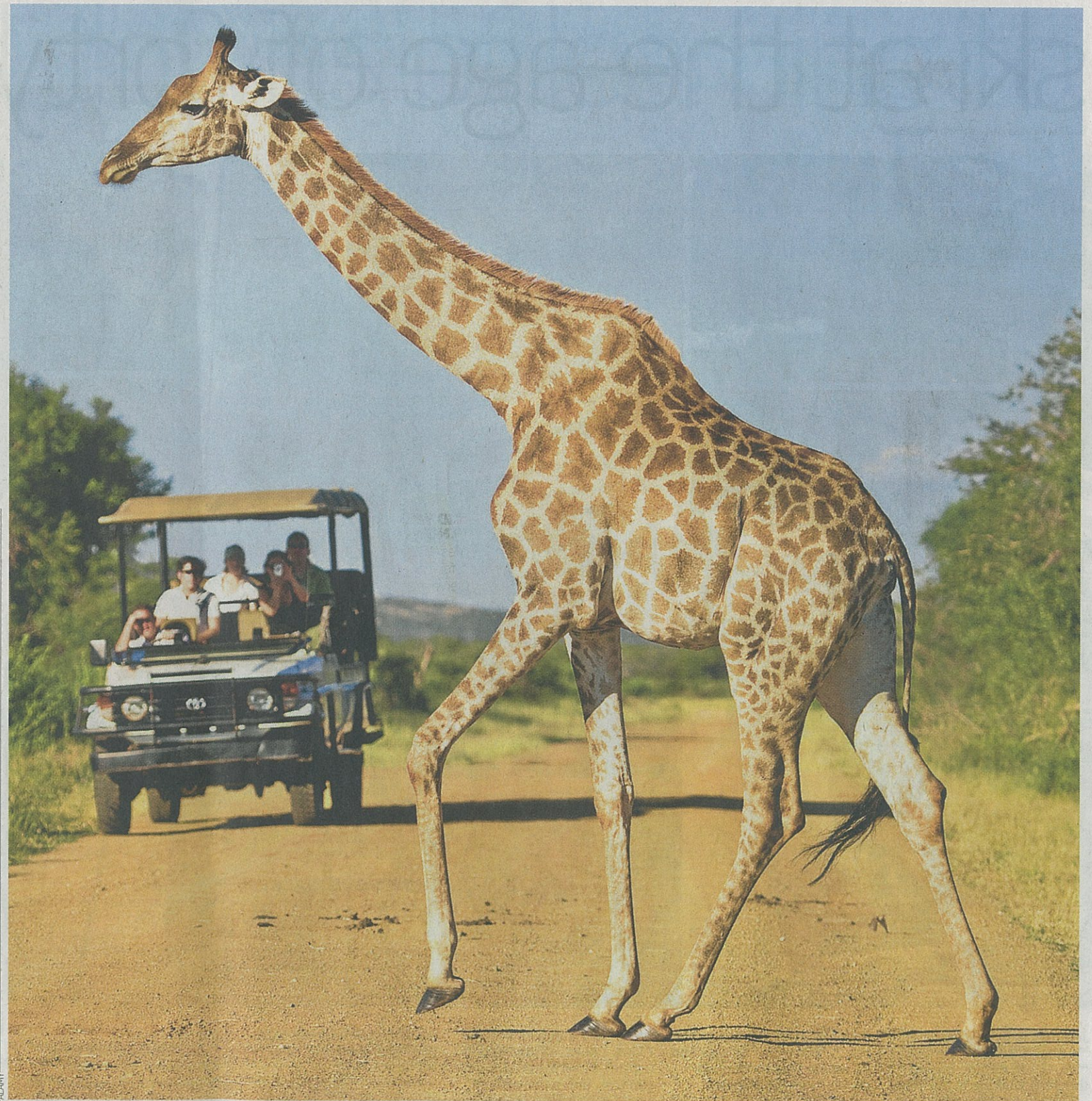


*Michelle Obama chose Madikwe as her game park destination of choice*

Christo probably wishes the wildlife was a little more stand-offish. "All right everybody, back in the safari vehicle," he says, noticing some elephants heading our way. "Quickly," he adds, unnecessarily. Christo has just set up a casual picnic in the bush where we planned to have some drinks and watch the sun go down over Madikwe – unfortunately these elephants share our ranger's pick of picnicking spots and they rightly get first dibs. Still holding our gin and tonics, we drive to a safe distance and watch the huge pachyderms make short work of some acacia trees.

But our animal encounters are not over. As we start to head back to the lodge a giraffe, clearly feeling it's not getting its fair share of attention, has taken up position in the middle of the road, seemingly refusing to budge until a substantial number of photos have been taken. We happily comply.

On return to Tuningi, guests compare photos and linger over a divine meal as a chorus of aptly named bubbling frogs provides a perfect safari-camp serenade. At the lodge, animals are as welcome as the guests. Most mornings I find myself sharing my alfresco shower with either a couple of friendly geckos or a curious hornbill that also has a habit of depositing half-eaten fruit on a neighbouring deck chair. The lodge is also frequently visited by zebras that come to drink at a nearby watering hole, and guests happily



**Strike a pose: clockwise from main picture, an attention-seeking giraffe takes up position on the road; while an elephant shares the ranger's pick of picnicking spots; a room at Tuningi Safari Lodge; and one of many lions to be seen in Madikwe**

share the pool with a handful of grey louries who come for a quick bath and a drink.

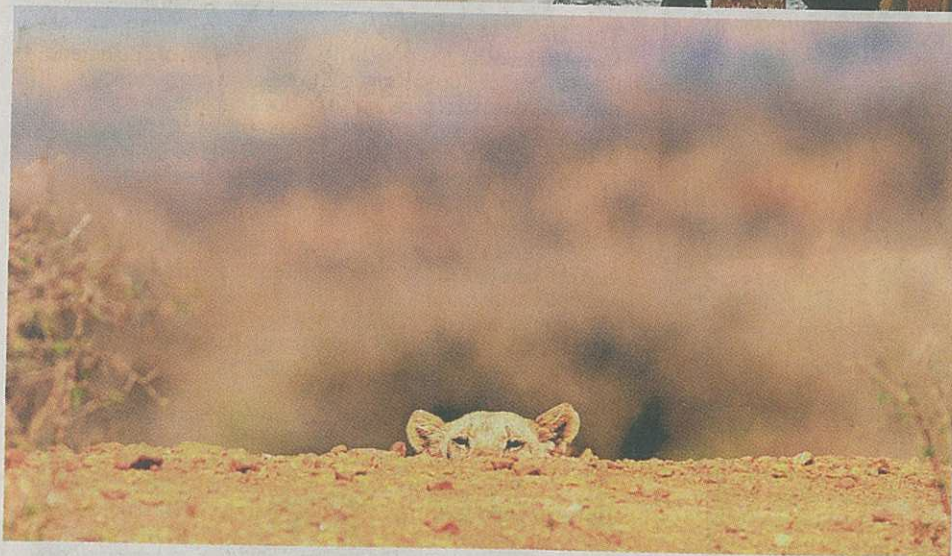
But the best wildlife sightings await us on safari. The next day on our morning drive we are astonished as two spotted hyenas, notoriously shy creatures, let our vehicle follow close behind as they set off in search of breakfast. The pair couldn't have been more

welcoming if we were invited guests and we only leave the twosome when a rhino makes an appearance with her youngster close behind. The mother and daughter barely cast us a glance before continuing to graze placidly, in no rush to leave our company. "Christo, are you secretly tying raw steak to the bottom of our vehicle to get all these animals to come and

make an appearance?" asks one guest.

But our best sighting awaits us at dusk when we come upon a massive, lone male lion lying in the brush. Christo pulls up the safari vehicle as close as possible and, his experience as a ranger telling him what is about to occur, turns off the vehicle's engine and lights and issues a





single command: "Listen." Suddenly the lion pierces the silence with an imperial roar. His cries continue; each one punctuated by a series of guttural huffs. As the minutes melt and the sun finally falls and leaves us in total darkness, the lion continues to call to his pride until an answering roar compels him to set off into the trees. "It's the best sound in the bush,"

says Christo. "It always makes me feel so small and humble." Back at Tuningi Lodge, as we sit around a bonfire about to enjoy a dinner under the stars, none of us can shake the call of the lion. Surely the staff must think us crazy as eight seemingly sane adults erupt in a cacophony of calls in a vain attempt to imitate the hauntingly powerful

cries. "In my 30 years of travel in Africa, I have never heard that sound," says a septuagenarian from Austria. "It's inimitable." But still we continue caterwauling, laughing as some of us even claw at the air like a lion, all trying in our desperately human way to keep alive just for a little longer that singular, irreplaceable moment.

## ESSENTIALS

### GETTING THERE

British Airways (0844 493 0787; britishairways.com) and South African Airways (0844 375 9680; flysaa.com) offer direct flights from London to Johannesburg, from around £632 return. From the airport you can rent a car (reserve in advance; visit southafrica.to for a list of rental companies and contact numbers). Johannesburg to Madikwe is three and a half hours' drive north-west. Alternatively, Madikwe has a private landing strip and flights from Johannesburg to the reserve take under an hour; lodges will help guests with flight arrangements.

### PACKAGES

Tailor-made specialist Audley Travel (01993 838500; audleytravel.com) has a 12-day trip that includes four nights at Tuningi, four nights in the Sabi Sands and one night in Johannesburg, from £4,323 per person, including return flight from London, all transfers, safari accommodation on full-board basis and all game viewing activities. Other UK operators offering safaris in Madikwe include Africa & Beyond (0161 789 8838; africa-and-beyond.co.uk) and Tailor Made Travel (0800 988 5887; tailor-made.co.uk).

### DID YOU KNOW?

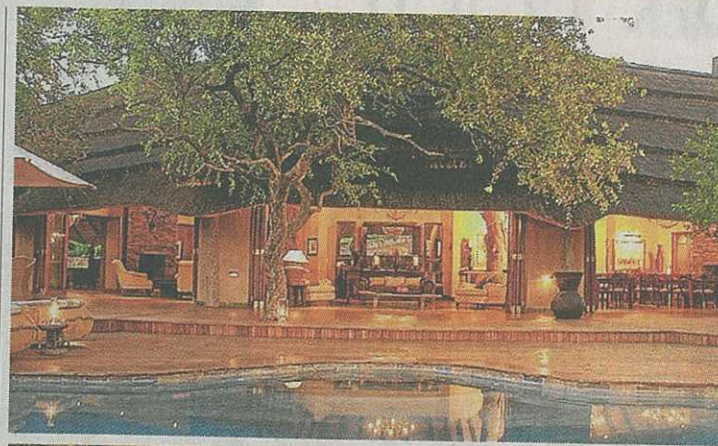
93 miles (150km) of electric fencing enclose the reserve to stop the larger animals escaping

### GETTING AROUND

Because individual day trips in the reserve are not allowed, all the lodges offer safari drives as part of their rates. Guests are permitted to drive personal vehicles through the reserve to their respective lodges, but upon arrival, the only way to get around is on safari.

### THE INSIDE TRACK

- Though Madikwe has the big five (and lion sightings are almost a sure bet), the reserve's real claim to fame is that it has one of Africa's largest remaining populations of the rare wild dog. Though sighting the wild dogs is as much a matter of luck as it is a ranger's skill, be sure to keep your eyes peeled for this coveted canine.
- Madikwe is completely malaria-free, so no medical precautions are necessary. This makes the reserve especially appealing to families travelling with young children.
- The reserve borders Botswana so if you have the time and the inclination, you can step foot in another African country and take a quick tour of the capital, Gaborone.
- Some of the lodges offer tours of local villages where visitors may have the opportunity to buy handicrafts. Most of the lodges have curio shops on site where guests can buy unique handmade crafts, artwork and jewellery.



**Safari splendour: grey louries share the pool with guests at Tuningi, top; one of eight tree-top rooms at Jaci's Tree Lodge, above**

### THE BEST CAMPS

**Jaci's Safari Lodge & Jaci's Tree Lodge £££**  
Five-star camp, offering guests the choice of a tree house in the forest, with a great view of the Marico River, or a more traditional safari lodge. Extremely comfortable with matching service (0027 83 700 2071; madikwe.com; from £250 per person, per night, based on two sharing, including all meals and two game drives daily).

### WHAT TO AVOID

- There's no need to worry about your safety – all lodges have highly trained safari rangers and guests' safety is their primary concern.
- The biggest challenge is getting to the reserve from Johannesburg airport. If you're not being collected, make sure you get good directions and a great map.
- Shorts. Long cotton trousers offer more protection from biting insects and the sun.
- Don't forget your binoculars – they're one of the most essential pieces of safari kit.

### Thakadu River Camp £££

This camp is one of the only community-owned lodges in South Africa. So guests help support the local community simply by staying here; they also have the chance to tour the nearby village of Molatedi and meet some of the local people (11 805 9995; thakadurivercamp.com; from £270 per person, per night, based on two sharing, including all meals and two game drives daily).

### Tuningi Safari Lodge £££

Stunning safari lodge with all the necessary comforts. Accommodation is in elegant private villas overlooking a forested area where zebras and antelopes can often be seen. The fabulous five-star cuisine keeps guests happy between game drives (11 805 9995; tuningi.com; from £275 per person, per night, based on two sharing, including all meals and two game drives daily).

### Madikwe Hills Private Game Lodge ££££

One of the most luxurious lodges in the Madikwe, Madikwe Hills is ideally situated at the top of a hill in the centre of the reserve which means amazing views. All of the rooms have a private plunge pool (13 737 6626; madikwehills.com; from £360 per person, per night based on two sharing, including all meals and two game drives daily).

## YOUR SAY

Your response to last week's article on Montana

*'What made Ian Henderson think that he was on a working ranch? On a working ranch you are up at 6am and you work - checking fences, moving 200 cattle for miles, learning to rope, and so on. A 'mercantile', a spa, mountain bikes and a big screen TV? Any reader booking a week at a working ranch based on this article will be in for a shock.'*

**Peter Dockree**

*'Ian Henderson advises: "Don't wear jodhpurs and an English riding hat ... the authentic cowboy look is much more cool." I would not ride my own horse without a riding helmet, never mind a strange horse in a foreign country.'*

**Jorge de Conceicao Silva**

*'I enjoyed Ian Henderson's article (apart from the hat advice) as I have been to six ranches and each time I was as happy as the 12-year-old girl featured. There are hundreds of ranches to choose from and an excellent starting point is the Dude Ranchers' Association (duderanch.org), dedicated to preserving this special way of life and the wonderful environment in which dude ranching takes place.'*

**Frances Hampson-Jones**

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YOUR SAY