

## Andrea Catherwood wasn't too sure about a safari – then the lions popped up and made it...



# TRAVEL



**I**t's our very first game drive at Maratiba and we've stopped by the river, the sun low in the sky, when Jomi our guide, hears baboons we'd seen earlier on the savannah 'alarm calling'.

We bump back along the track and spot them high in the trees, still and staring. We follow their gaze and there, sauntering, side by side, are two, huge male lions. Just a matter of feet from us.

Initially, I'm petrified, hardly daring to follow them with my eyes lest I attract their attention. I'm scared they'd leap at the children, or worse, at me, but they amble right past our open-top vehicle.

Just when I think we'd had a lucky escape, we follow them, at what I'm assured is a safe distance. I slowly relax; it's clear they've no interest in us. And being so close to these amazing animals is a huge thrill. They exude grace and understated power as they pad through their territory, so clearly in command.

By now the baboons who'd announced the lions' presence are some distance away. One lion disappears into the bush. We follow the other round a bend and there in front of us stands a herd of impala. For a split second they're oblivious to the danger.

Suddenly the serenity of the evening is ripped apart. Impala scort in fear and flee, leaping through the air to escape. The scene looks like an ancient cave painting. Behind them, the lion we'd lost sight of charges out of the bush. It's a pincer movement. One impala scampers on the uneven ground, the lion hooks a huge, extended paw across its back and drags it down into the dust. The chase is over in seconds.

The fight fades and the lion drags the dying impala under a tree. His hunting companion lays some way off, allowing the victor the lion's share. We were dumb but exhilarated by what we'd seen as we made our way back to the lodge – the stark reality of life and death. Our beloved pet Labrador, Blue, had died a few weeks before and the family had cried for days, and

we were still in mourning. Now we'd seen another animal lose its life in a brutal, efficient way.

Thankfully, it seemed I was the only one who noticed the parallel and the three boys were so engaged with the drama and excitement of the kill I'm not sure they quite saw it from the impala's perspective.

What an incredible start, particularly after I'd spent the four-hour car journey from Johannesburg telling the boys they'd be lucky to glimpse the back end of a buffalo through binoculars at 300 yards. This was not a safari park but 'the wild' (by supper they were messaging lion pictures to their mates and rolling their eyes at me).

The scene of our very own David Attenborough experience in Maratiba Private Game Reserve in Maratiba National Park near South Africa's border with Botswana. The lodge lies on an ancient trade route and the scenery is almost as dramatic as the wildlife. The winding Motlaba River cuts through the rolling plains against the backdrop of the Waterberg mountains. It's so



**ON THE PROWL!** The two lions, main pic, that Andrea, husband Gray, Ryan, Finn and Jago encountered in the wild



**INTO THE WILD!** Andrea (top), elephants, zebras, hippos, and rhinos, left, in Maratiba National Park. Hippos, below, are 'so graceful in the water, so comically ungainly on land'



## GETTING THERE

Rainbow Tours offers a trip to South Africa for two adults and three children under 12 from £12,500, including return flights with South African Airlines from London, four nights B&B at Hog Hollow and three nights in two suites at Maratiba Safari Lodge. [rainbowtours.co.uk](http://rainbowtours.co.uk), 0044 (0) 20 7666 1266. Also [trailfinders.ie](http://trailfinders.ie)

beautiful that if we'd never seen an animal, I would have happily driven around for hours at a time.

**B**ut there was no chance of that: every game drive was an adventure, from the herds of prohibition-looking wildebeest, to photogenic zebra and baby giraffes. We glimpsed a critically endangered black rhino and watched families of white rhino grazing.

On the river we saw hippos, so graceful in the water and so comically ungainly on land, while kudu and waterbuck drank at the river's edge. Everything was enhanced by our guide, Jomi. He entranced our boys with tales of the bush. He

taught them to track animals and recognise their prints and (clearly knowing his audience) their dung. The boys came back enthusing over you while we'd had a few hours relaxing by the pool.

Maratiba Lodge is a study in safari chic. Calling our accommodation a 'tent' is a major understatement. They are canvas and stone villas with private terraces, raised to prevent unwanted visitors – comforting as you lie in bed listening to lions roaring in a territorial turf war.

The food is as good as the best wineries around Cape Town, but here you watch elephants drinking at the watering hole while you eat Springbok Benedict on the terrace. The experience was absorbing

and immersive; there's nothing that stops you thinking about your inbox quite like the mock charge of a young bull elephant.

Before Maratiba we'd spent a few days on the south coast of South Africa at a place known as The Crags, near Pietermaritzburg Bay. We stayed at Hog Hollow, a beautiful country lodge, friendly and contemporary. Our villa had spectacular views over forest-clad mountains leading to the ocean and the hospitality was superb.

At home, conservation is often on the fringes of our consciousness, here – as we saw at various wildlife sanctuaries – it's in sharp relief. There's a daily fight against poachers and a danger we could sleepwalk into a world with no rhinos or cheetahs. Even the African lions are under threat, their numbers halved since the Eighties.

When our children grow up, I don't want them to look at photos of this trip and say: 'Ah yes, that's where there used to be lions in the wild.'