

Babes in the bush



FUN AND GAME: City kids enjoy an early morning game drive in Madikwe

Picture: ADELE SHEVEL

G OING to a game farm with the kids made me slightly apprehensive. Our little girl, at four, is not the world's greatest animal lover. She runs away from dogs and calls our furry friends "those yukky animals".

But it was the prospect of going to a child-friendly game lodge that hooked me — as a bare minimum, a room dedicated to kids' activities could serve as a respite from the bush.

We arrived at Lelapa Lodge, one of three resorts within the Madikwe Safari Lodge, after a four-and-a-half-hour drive, the last half hour on a dirt road filled with loads of game sightings, including zebra, impala and elephant. We were met with wet towels and one of the staff offered to change our two-year-old. I nearly fell over with excitement. The personal attention over the weekend did not disappoint.

I ticked off activities for the kids to go on: a family safari drive, washing the car with the ranger, baking, making pizzas, making clay animals ...

The family safari drive was a highlight. Seeing our city kids grasp the railing of the 4x4 as we drove through rugged terrain, watching out for animals whose names our excited two-year-old could barely pronounce was a thrill.

Our game ranger, Andre, was a rough nugget of information. We learnt elephants consume 300kg of grass a day; that impala are part of the antelope family and have very little fat compared with deer and buck. And holding a piece of black-

Adele Shevel takes her two little children to a luxury game lodge

rhino dung brings good luck. We looked at fresh tracks. Our daughter got out of the car with Andre and the other kids when he showed how to use a brandy bush to make a toothbrush and a bow and arrow, and even she picked up the small dried pieces of dung as part of the lesson.

The evening before, she and I had driven through part of the 78 000ha malaria-free reserve. With 31 lodges, half private and half public, Andre knows where to go when kids are on board, and when they are not. We stopped off towards the end, to sip Amarula and Coca-Cola and chew *droë wors* off the table he had set up for us. All the while, our ears were still getting used to perfect silence.

Andre made our game drives and even the weekend memorable. Our intrepid ranger is more at home in the bush than in a city: he drives around proudly and can come face-to-face with a lion or an elephant but Johannesburg traffic turns him into a wreck. In the bush, his excitement was infectious.

My greatest challenge of the weekend was balancing game drives, which can easily last up to four hours, with a desire to enjoy

the luxuries of our stylish suite. The rooms at Lelapa Lodge — Tswana for "family" — have an over-sized oval bath and outside shower, not to mention a plunge pool. Great naps are part of the joy after some high-octane nature-gazing, and in between the Eco-House is the place to go. It has skulls, skeletons, bones, a telescope, a small makeshift planetarium, games and activities and the occasional scorpion and spider (in tanks). At all times, minders are available — at a price.

So when is the best time of year to go? Andre talked about the advantages of each but couldn't commit to a particular season. "It's like choosing between your children."

The food over the long weekend was delicious. Two meals were particularly memorable: the breakfast set up for us in the bush, which with green canvas chairs and long tables felt "Kenyan colonial"; and the braai in the boma at dinner time, where wine and drinks were at hand for a stylish meal with good glasses and fine crockery alongside pap, chicken and meat.

My most stressful yet strangely exciting safari experience was when we were about to be run at by an elephant (part of a herd of 20) on the early-morning, no-kids drive, but "the matriarch" pushed the potential aggressor off the track to protect the status quo. Turns out, it's not just lions that are fiercely protective of their little ones. This time, I won't forget it.

■ *Shevel was a guest of Madikwe Safari Lodge*

GETTING THERE: From Johannesburg, it's four hours to Madikwe, plus a half hour once you're in the reserve. Pass Sun City towards the Derdepoort border post. There are some dirt roads. From Zeerust (five hours to the reserve), take the R49 to before the Botswana border, turn right on the Derdepoort Road and travel past Tau Lodge and Derdepoort gates.

WHY GO: Madikwe Safari Lodge is made up of 20 luxury suites, a great base for the game-rich area and the drives with an informed ranger are a treat. Rangers are constantly updating one another via walkie-talkies in a language only they understand to ensure a limited number of vehicles. It makes it all feel very *Out of Africa*.

THE FOOD: While the kids' menu offers the usual fish fingers and burgers, the "grown-up" food is delicious and elegantly presented. Maybe not the kind of portion sizes Daddy (a real meat-and-potatoes supporter) is used to but the starters and mains cumulatively satisfied his needs. The fish in white-wine sauce, bobotie and haloumi salad could teach most trendy city eateries a thing or two.

RATES: From R5 999 per person per night sharing. Children under 16 (sharing with adults) pay 50%, while children under 6 stay free.

CONTACT: Madikwe Safari Lodge, 011 880 9992 or www.madikwesafarilodge.co.za. E-mail res@madikwesafarilodge.co.za for reservations.