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THE MAGIC OF MARATABA

A unique bush safari experience

Anton Prehobias

Many South Africans are under the illusion that luxury safari lodges are reserved exclusively for the rich, famous and the occasional tourist looking to profit from our weakened rand. We all know how unique 'Big Five' game drives are to our continent, but how many of us have actually been on one? If you're looking for a luxurious bushveld holiday, Marataba Safari Lodge promises an affordable (and healthy) experience for those with adventure in their veins and the spirit of Africa in their hearts.



The Marataba Walking Trail Lodge offers a healthy, luxurious and scenic bushveld experience.



For a plain old Cape Town boy/ie like me, the joys of a bushveld safari is not something we coastal folk get to experience too often. The closest we'll get (when the Southeaster isn't screaming at 50km/h and blowing out our Blitz firelighters), is lighting a braai under a starry sky and gawking at a few passing guinea fowl.

Mind you, if you're out hiking on Table Mountain, for example, the chances are good that you'll run into a congress of mischievous baboons invading your picnic basket or spot a few roaming rock dassies. When the latter occurs, we'll loudly and proudly proclaim to the world the relatively unknown fact that the dassie is an ancestral derivative of the elephant (seriously, Google it!).

So when Marataba invited me for a weekend's stay at their Walking Trails Lodge, I immediately jumped at the opportunity. You see, while I'm a big fan of 4x4 and enjoy

off-roading just as much as the next guy, I'm not particularly keen on being lugged around in an overcrowded game viewer.

There are few things worse than being stuck in a vehicle with a bunch of obnoxious, camera-snapping tourists for hours on end. Like a proper Capetonian, I enjoy a bit of fresh air, and nothing quite says 'the great outdoors' like donning your hiking boots and exploring the wild.

Place of sanctuary

Deep in the Waterberg biosphere of the greater Limpopo province lies Marataba Safari Lodge – a lodge that extends over towering peaks and rolling valleys and offers some of the most spectacular wildlife scenery Africa has to offer. By car, it's a mere three-hour drive from OR Tambo International Airport (Johannesburg) and situated within easy reach of towns like Thabazimbi, Ellisras and Rustenburg. What's

great is that Marataba can easily arrange transfers to and from the airport.

Marataba (meaning 'place of sanctuary') lies in the eastern sector of the magnificent Marakele National Park, at the foot of the Waterberg Mountains. Within a dramatic landscape encompassing vast plains, dense bushveld, winding rivers, deep gorges and majestic mountains, Marataba is an exclusive 23 000-hectare private concession with an abundance of 'Africa's Big Five' and a multitude of other animal species including rare antelope such as roan, sable and mountain reedbuck.

This malaria-free wilderness is also home to the world's largest breeding colony of the endangered cape vulture. Birdlife within the park is prolific with more than 400 species having been recorded – truly a birder's paradise. Marataba strives for the harmonious integration of humans and nature with hardly any footprint on the local environment. +



Scan this QR code to watch an up close and personal experience with Marataba's elephants.



The Walking Trail leads you into heart of the Waterberg biosphere with breathtaking scenery and amazing animal encounters.

Upon our arrival, we were met by a senior game ranger and our trail guide for the weekend, Wikus Potgieter – a man with a knuckle-cracking handshake, a stoic expression, and a military precision that's evident from the way he meticulously trims his beard to the way he holds his hunting rifle. To clarify, the rifle that rangers carry is merely a necessary precautionary measure should any encounter with a wild animal go awry. However, Wikus assured us that this is unlikely.

Wikus is a seasoned game ranger and modern day 'animal whisperer'. After many up close and nerby encounters with everything from rhinos, elephants, lions, buffalo and hippo, he's never as much as fired off a warning shot (although I do not doubt his ability to handle his weapon). With an intense knowledge of the local fauna and

flora, Wikus has a serious passion for the bush and loves all forms of wildlife.

Even as we drove into camp, our appetite for wildlife sightings were treated with a few hors d'oeuvres when we spotted several waterbuck, zebra, impala and warthog grazing lazily, and seemingly undisturbed, on the lodge's terrace. I couldn't help but notice how comfortable these animals were with all the human activity around them. To which point, Wikus handed us our 'indemnity form' and said with a grin, "Wait, you ain't seen nothing yet."

Over the weekend, I felt like I really got to know Wikus. After a few failed attempts at breaking the ice with a series of animal jokes, Wikus eventually warmed up to me, especially after I mentioned that I write for the *Land Rover AFRICA Magazine*. Excitedly, he told me about his own pride and joy,

a 1994 model Defender 110 CSW. According to Wikus, the vehicle was in such bad state, the previous owner couldn't find it in his heart to sell it and gave it to Wikus instead. Wikus told me that he took great pride in restoring and rebuilding the Landy to its original condition.

After a delicious lunch at the main lodge, we were treated to a short game drive in the lodge's game viewer (pity about the Cruiser!) and were escorted to the Walking Trail Lodge – about 12km away from the main lodge. Situated high against the face of the rich, red mountain rock, bearing down on the verdant plains at its base, it's not hard to imagine a time long past when Stone Age settlers sought refuge in the sanctuary of Marataba. The area is one of the oldest in the world, dating back some 2.5 billion years.

The Walking Trail Lodge is all about healthy living. The lodge believes in conservation with a limited footprint on the environment, but with no compromise on luxury and comfort. Apart from the lengthy hikes and fresh air living, guests are treated to an interactive culinary experience with Marataba's chef who specialises in fresh, organic and delicious meals – many of which are prepared on an open fire.

It also never seems to get cold in Limpopo. During our visit in September, only the start of the South African spring, the temperature registered a moderate 23 - 27 degrees Celsius, with clear, sunny skies overhead. Our nightly game drive delivered some fantastic animal sightings, which included jackals, wild cats (which closely resemble a house kitty, but not the kind you want to pick up and cuddle), as well as two male lions and a majestic leopard searching for prey.

But the highlight of the trip commenced the next day. A wake-up call of 05h30 saw the group of seven people gather in the communal dining area. Armed with backpacks, hats, sunscreen, cameras and a little breakfast pack, we headed out on foot for an eco-safari tour like I've never experienced before.

"The rules are simple," said Wikus. "Keep in a single file, keep your voices down, and should anything happen, make sure you put a big rock or tree between you and the animal. But don't run, unless I tell you to." That was reassuring from Wikus. Yet, I still felt extremely safe with the seasoned game ranger at my side. ▶

Bush living at its best

The Walking Trails accommodation consists of luxury eco-suites situated at the foot of the Waterberg mountains with a 180-degree view of the Waterfall Valley. With en suite shower and bath, private viewing deck and all the necessary amenities for a comfortable stay, this is a home away from home. The Eco Trail Lodge is a 'Scandi-Setan' style dwelling perched lightly on the earth and fully powered by the sun's energy. Those seeking a digital detox will find it here.



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It wasn't long before Wikus signalled for us to stop and hush. A group of three white rhinos stood grazing roughly 200m from us. It was a sight that nearly brought tears to my eyes. Thanks to poaching, seeing these highly endangered giants in their natural environment is a privilege that future generations might never get to experience. They gently went about their business as we crept a few metres closer. Rhinos have terrible eyesight and didn't spot us immediately, but thanks to their keen sense of smell, they got scent of our presence and moved on.

Marataba offers a variety of trail options, differing in degree of difficulty and fitness required. I don't claim to be in the best shape, but I do enjoy a good hike, and even the 60-year-old lady from Iran had no issue

with the walk. Wikus took us deep into the bush, teaching us all the unique little signs of animal behaviour evident in the way they feed and defecate.

Another real highlight came on our final morning when we set out in search of elephants. After some searching for these elusive behemoths (it still boggles my mind how these four-ton mammals can keep themselves so well-hidden), we eventually stumbled upon two big bulls. Reaching within touching distance, the jumbos decided to have their breakfast right in front of us.

They uprooted a big old thorn tree with the greatest of ease, and stripped the roots with delicate precision, like tearing off strips of biltong, feeding lazily and

seemingly unthreatened by our presence. The sight even brought tears to the eyes of our American lady friend (who said that she didn't even cry at her own wedding!).

This walking safari experience was something that I'd recommend to anyone with a bit of adventure flowing through our veins. If you enjoy wildlife (big or small), the walk in the great outdoors and a luxury bush holiday, you'd be hard-pressed to find anything better than Marataba within the borders of South Africa.

While a night's stay here could cost you between R3 000 and R4 000, it's still more affordable than many of the lodges out there offering a similar experience. Visit www.marataba.co.za for more information. 🦁



Interesting safari facts

- Giraffes only need five to 30 minutes of sleep in a 24-hour period. They often achieve that in quick naps that may last only a minute or two at a time.
- The difference between black and white rhino is not in the colour. The Black Rhino has a smaller hump on the back of its neck, a smaller head and, unlike the white rhino, are browsers, eating from higher bushes or trees. The main difference is that the black rhino has a hooked lip as opposed to a flat-based lip, which is related to their eating habits.
- An elephant's trunk can grow to be about 2m long and can weigh up to 140kg. The trunk is made up of 100 000 muscles.