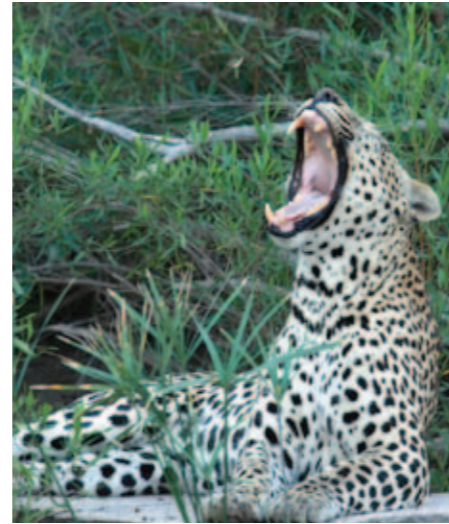


Lion Sands Luxury

Text: Fransje van Riel
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There is something profoundly luxurious about having a three-course lunch while observing wild animals. Seated at a table for one, on a spacious wooden deck that is shaded by tall riverine trees, I enjoy another mouthful of carrot and lemongrass soup while a large male nyala feeds close by. Idyllically, a herd of elephants appears shortly afterwards, slowly moving along the sandy soil of the dry riverbed.

A short 40 minute game drive from Skukuza Airport, in the famed Sabi Sands Game Reserve, the Lion Sands River Lodge is a haven of tranquillity, luxury, and modern African chic. There is a stillness, a sense of peace even, despite the lodge's high occupancy and ample staff.

After lunch and an hour or so of leisure time, tea is served before the afternoon game drive. Shaking hands with guide Benry Steyn and tracker Juice Khoza, I climb into the front row of the game drive vehicle. Seated behind me is a charming family of four from Germany and, following introductions and a few need-to-know facts and instructions from Steyn, we are off.

Meandering along a dirt road that

winds through mixed woodland and thick shrubbery, we admire a small family of nyala and, a little further on, a sizeable herd of impalas.

As much as I admire their exquisite nature, there is of course the business of big cats. "Cheetahs are not a common occurrence here at Lion Sands," Steyn informs us. "We do have a pretty high density of lions and leopards. Of course there are no guarantees we will find them, but one never knows."

About half an hour later, he brings the vehicle to a halt in an open clearing to allow Khoza to jump off the tracker seat. "There is a dry gully beyond those trees," Steyn explains. "From here it is pretty much impenetrable, so Juice is going up ahead to look for tracks."

He laughs at my consternation. "Juice knows exactly what he is doing. He is an expert tracker; totally confident on foot. This is the old way of tracking and it is still the best."

We continue driving, taking the long way around to the sandy track that cuts across the riverbed and allows us access to the other side of the bank. It is Caroline, the German family's 24-year-old daughter, who breaks the few

minutes of silence. "Leopard," she states. None of us take much notice, thinking she is joking, but she persists, causing Steyn to reverse. "A bit more," she says. "More...there!"

We all gawk, for lying on a flat rock on the other side of the riverbed, close to a small pool of water, is a huge male leopard who has perfectly positioned himself to ambush any unsuspecting animal intent on coming down to drink from the water's edge.

Performing a hurried three-point turn, Steyn drives back along the road while calling Khoza on the radio. "He is very close to us," he says. "We will pick him up and then go back."

Stepping out onto the road, Khoza climbs in the tracker seat and after a few minutes we return to see the leopard still lounging on his rock. Every now and again he stirs, raising his head to yawn before laying back down.

I was hopeful, but never expectant. It is the unpredictability and surprise; that is what safaris are all about.

For more information on Lion Sands Game Reserve or reservations, please visit www.lionsands.com or email res@lionsands.com ■