

The lion's share

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The rain falls softly in the late afternoon light, feeding this wild and hungry African bush. Deep rolling thunder rolls across the Sabi River on cue.

Ah, the bush! I haven't been to the Kruger National Park in what seems like forever so my soul sang as we finally near Narina Lodge.

After a slightly hazardous journey from Pretoria, we find ourselves contemplating the Sabi River before us from our ultra-luxurious chalets at Narina, Lion Sands, situated in the world famous Kruger National Park.

Narina Lodge is part of the Tinga Private Game Reserve, which has an exclusive 5000-hectare concession within this area, where guests can view the wildlife on safaris or bush walks, whilst accompanied by SANParks-accredited guides. Tinga vehicles also have access to the entire Kruger road network.

Tinga Narina Lodge has a distinctly African feel. I echo the sentiments of the website completely: "Like the bird it was named after (the narina trogon), the lodge is unobtrusive, yet undeniably beautiful, blending perfectly with the riverine forest vegetation".

The Lodge blends rustic African natural woods, thatch and fibres with sophisticated and understated decor and furniture styles to create that 'mmmmm' feeling. The main area is linked via raised wooden walkways to the nine private suites. It is elevated and built on stilts with a stunning view of the Sabie River. Facilities include a main deck overlooking the Sabie river, a library, wine cellar, boma, lounge, bar and boutique

It's raining leopards and wild dogs on this Friday afternoon in late-August – the first sign of nourishment this part of the world has seen for many, many months but the environment is still quite barren and brown – perfect for game viewing.

We are greeted by the very charming general manager and invited to freshen up before dinner. The thatched chalets are quite an experience. Fitted with every convenience from heated towel rails to under-floor heating in the bathroom, a fully stocked mini-bar and outside shower plus your very own splash pool, the chalets are also completely private and you feel like you own – for a short time – a piece of isolated heaven.

After sundowner drinks, we are dropped off at our abode for the evening, namely Tinyeleti Tree house. The weather is perfect and the first stars are already making a shy appearance as Omega and German, our tracker, familiarise us with our home in the open veldt.

Night falls fast and with hardly any moon...

We had a tree house when I was little. We made it with the help of our father and it comprised a wooden deck precariously balanced among the branches of a giant tree in our back yard. We used to take our sleeping bags up there on warm summer evenings.

Here, instead of a sleeping bag we get a four-poster bed with mosquito netting. Instead of plastic mugs with hot chocolate, we have a set table with real linen, a 'picnic' feast of penne arabiata, olive and camembert cheese tartlets, venison kebabs, superb De Waal wine, soft drinks, crackers and cheese and choc brownies – all accompanied by the finest crockery and cutlery.

Entirely made of wood and overlooking the river on stilts and with a double basin vanity and toilet beneath, the tree house is heaven on earth, replete with a powerful telescope. You are left with a two-way radio for emergencies and then it's just you, the wild and an entire night communing with nature.

The feeling is astonishing. Night falls fast and with hardly any moon, the stars come out and twinkle like a million diamonds. We hear the hippos in the river below us and catch a glimpse of them with the spotlight. The fear of being left alone is completely unfounded as we later snuggle up in the wonderful bed – with warm water bottles! – under the mosquito net.

I wake up twice during the night; once because of the roar of lions in the distance and once because a hyena 'whoops' right underneath us. Waking up and watching dawn break all around from your oasis of a bed is a sensation I simply cannot describe. Omega collects us at about 7 to have breakfast back at the Lodge and then, sadly, it's home time.

Narina Lodge will always have a special place in my heart. It seems to touch the soul, heart and mind and will forever stay there.

Visit <http://www.lionsands.com/narinalodge.asp> for more information and reservations.

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Up close and personal with lions in Kruger. Jo Kromberg

And while lying in your massive bath by candlelight in the last light of day, you can survey the river beneath and the buck or buffalo or even elephants sauntering to the river for a drink.

Dinner is a delight. From the venison pie to a lovely sea bass and the scrumptious breakfasts, the food here is excellent. I have a wonderful lie-in the next morning in my gargantuan bed with its gazillion thread-count linen duvet while my photographer goes on the morning drive.

I can kick myself afterwards, of course, because not only did they spot many buck species, a heard of buffalo, elephants and giraffes but also a lazy pride of lion. We spend the rest of the day relaxing, eating, reading and lazing some more when finally it's time for the afternoon game drive.

The bush is very quiet after the rain but Omega, our game ranger says some rhinos were spotted earlier. And, lo and behold, after tracking them very skilfully we come across two massive, beautiful and highly endangered White Rhino. Watching these magnificent, ancient beasts in their natural habitat is an incomparable experience and again I find it unfathomable that anyone could harm or kill these creatures for their horns.