



The tree house overlooks the unspoilt environment of the park, natural bush for as far as you can see. And up here, you'll be safe from predators.

Tracking animal movements

Caroline Hurry has a wild time at Narina Lodge at Lion Sands. Peter Berg-Munch took the pictures.

RAYMOND Themba's obsessions lean towards the scatological. Chalk it up to the way the Lion Sands Narina Lodge ranger uses a hard white hyena turd to write his initials on a rock. From the civet that feasts on the beetles eating its faeces to crocodile poo's former use as an internal contraceptive, and hyena stools that provide shell-hardening calcium to the tortoises that feed on them, I'm discovering 101 uses for dung.

Thanks to Themba, I can now tell the difference between kudu and giraffe pats. They look and smell the same, but having further to fall, giraffe droppings tend to scatter compared to the kudu's more compact contribution.

Plunging his hands into a rhino pile next to the road and rooting around in the fecal offering, Themba holds aloft a small twig. Black and white rhino happily share this midden, he declares. Could dung be a metaphor for racial harmony? I add it to the 101 list as Themba explains that black rhino eat twigs and leaves while the white variety graze grass. He proffers two handfuls as though offering rusks. "Black rhino dung is high in tannin content and reddish in colour. White rhino dung is black.

"Both dominant males kick their faeces and spray urine in every direction to mark territory. A youngster challenging the dominant bull will do the same.

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Above, a view from the Narina Lodge deck, the Tinyeleti table with a view and the Narina bathroom.

"This causes a fight to the death unless one of them runs away."

That's assuming the poachers don't get them both. With 536 rhinos killed in South Africa by the end of July this year alone, news reports predict a death toll of up to 1 000 by December. People working within the national parks are often involved, Themba tells us. Sadly, for many employees it's easy money.

With nine years of experience and rifle bullets on his belt, Themba cuts a reassuring swathe through the Sabi thicket. He knows the Latin name of every tree and plant

in the park as well as all their cultural applications. Take the buffalo thorn or blinkblaar wag-'n-bietjie bos (*Ziziphus mucronata*), prized for its berries and by buffalo for its shelter from lion, which are forced to think twice - "wag-'n-bietjie" - before pouncing.

The impenetrable branches placed around the kraal deter burglars and a branch dipped in goat's blood and placed on the roof wards off lightning.

The thorns - one pointing forwards, the other backwards - also come in useful for snagging spirits.

Kick the bucket in an untimely way - a lion attack or car accident, say - and a relative will take a buffalo thorn branch to the place of your death, hook your spirit to the thorns and bring it on home to be buried with you. Good to know.

Themba shows us how to fashion an effective toothbrush from the magic guarri (*Euclea divinorum*) shrub and we inhale the delicate citrus fragrance of the hairy knobwood tree (*Zanthoxylum humile*), used as a perfume by the local women.



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We learn about the fig wasps that help pollinate trees. The female burrows into the fruit to lay eggs. Larvae hatch inside the fig, providing many an unsuspecting primate with more than a mouthful.

We drive towards the Sabie River, where we're thrilled to see a rare saddlebilled stork taking off from the edge of the water; its black and white wings flapping like laundry on the line. We see two prides of lion, and buffalo aplenty; their plait-like horns lowered like the bonnets of Voortrekker wives.

After a sumptuous dinner involving lamb chops and red wine in the boma, courtesy of head chef Lindiwe Ndlovu, we sleep as soundly as the leopard stretched out on a warm rock, spotted earlier by George Minisi, our tracker.

Our accommodation at Narina Lodge is like something Harry Wolhuter might have built, had he won the lottery. From my egg-shaped bath overlooking the Sabie River, I can see a monkey's turquoise testicles, so close is he. Monkeys in such proximity are always a treat for me.

Between game drives, we lounge in comfy chairs on the deck of our splash pool scouring the surrounds with binoculars. From here, G&T in hand, I see elephants crossing the river; a crocodile sunning itself, a dainty bushbuck pulling at the grass, and my husband in his underpants. So private are the chalets, you can be naked. Only elephants breaking branches on the other side of the river will see you.

The last night of our stay is spent in the Tinyeleti treehouse – a sturdy high wooden platform enabling guests to sleep under the stars in the Kruger Park.

All we can hear is the Sabie River murmuring a lullaby punctuated by the chortle-barks of fat grazing hippo. Here, a white-tailed mongoose forages for insects. There, a low-slung scavenger slinks through the shrubbery. A hyena prowls under my bed. Beat that, Tim Cahill.

In some places, the branch balustrade surrounding Tinyeleti, our triple-decker forest ship, seems to have been gnawed by a sharp-toothed predator.

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We saw plenty of buffalo on our game drives.



The Scops owl with his yellow eyes



A hyena slinks through the bush.

A perch beneath celestial canopy

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"Probably a leopard," surmises my husband, but this only adds to the "Me Tarzan, You Jane" moment.

There's a telescope to scan the game or the night sky - Tinyeleti means stars in Shangaan - a chemical loo downstairs, double bed swathed in mosquito netting and bubbly in a silver ice bucket on a table set for two. I have a husband and a hot water bottle to ward off the night chill.

From our lofty perch, we become part of the wilderness, one with the savannah and the high-pitched hoot of a scops owl. This is the place to see a shooting star. "Wow," says my husband from the telescope on our deck. "Look at this."

Half expecting a UFO, I squint into the lens to see a hippo bull opening his mouth wide and wagging his head. Through the telescope, his teeth look terrifying. A frisson of fear snakes up my spine for the first time. Themba has long driven away with a cheery wave and a warning not to undo the latch. The only thing protecting us from nocturnal predators is a torch and a two-way radio.

But how stunning is the diamond-encrusted celestial canopy. Like the guest of honour at a star-studded party, the waning moon arrives late to illuminate the white torsos of shivering knobthorns stripped by elephants of their protective bark. Soft rain refreshes our upturned faces in the wee hours but that's not what wakes us. Rather it's the clink of cutlery on plates.

Something is rooting around the remnants of our dinner. We shine our torch and a striped genet darts away - having polished off the chicken nuggets, his muddy prints visible on the tablecloth.

Dawn is barely a pink smudge on the horizon when I hear hyenas in joyous harmony, like a morning tabernacle choir on laughing gas. Hysterical giggles declare: "Hee! Hee! A scrub hare for me!" Well, maybe. Still, it's a fitting finale to memorable night.

● Caroline Hurry was a guest of Lion Sands and the MORE group. www.travelwrite.co.za

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Is it a bird? is it a plane? Lion look up at a helicopter flying overhead at Lion Sands in southern Kruger.



A mischievous monkey is fascinating to watch.



IF YOU GO

A private game reserve in the Sabi Sands with 45km of Sabie River frontage offering the Big Five, prey animals and the highest recorded density of leopard and impala in Africa, the MORE group-owned Lion Sands offers five-star safari experiences at Tinga Lodge, Narina

Lodge, River Lodge, Ivory Lodge and 1933 Lodge.
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