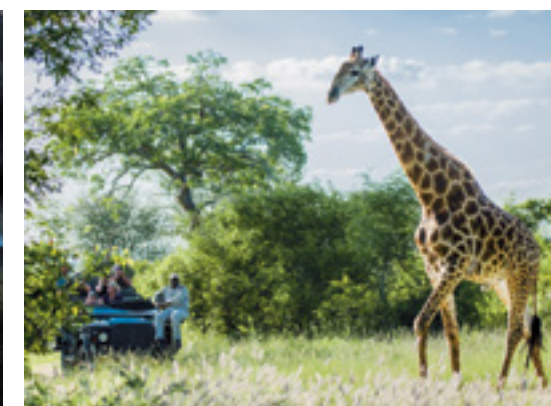
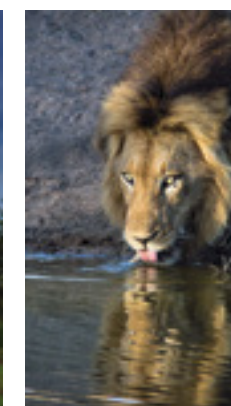




Words Chris Maxwell

## In the footsteps of lions

A short flight out of Johannesburg, but a world away from the bustle of South Africa's commercial hub, luxury game reserve Sabi Sabi offers the chance to switch off and immerse yourself in nature at its wildest



Squatting down at the edge of the watering hole, you place your hand next to the fresh footprint of a lion – the same one that had taken a drink here a few hours earlier while you watched from the safety of a jeep. While your guide assures you that Africa's top predator has moved on and is probably cat-napping in the mid-morning sun, your instinct is to look over each shoulder, hair standing on end, as you realise that you really are out on foot in the wilderness where the continent's "big five" – lion, leopard, buffalo, rhino and elephant – roam free.

A walking safari is just one of the ways in which Sabi Sabi private game reserve brings its guests as close as possible to nature. Located in South Africa's Sabi Sand reserve – 250 square miles of pristine bushveld next to the Kruger National Park – the resort is a collection of lodges that have won international

awards for their hospitality and green credentials. Indeed, Earth Lodge, *Director's* destination, has secured a place among *National Geographic's* "Unique lodges of the world", an exclusive list of outstanding boutique retreats in extraordinary locations "with a demonstrated commitment to sustainability, authenticity and excellence".

An authentic safari experience starts from the moment you step off your flight at the small but beautiful airport at Skukuza (a twice-daily 50-minute hop from Johannesburg, which makes this a viable short break when visiting the city on business). Your transfer to the lodge, courtesy of a friendly guide in an open-topped jeep, takes the form of an informative hour-long game drive. You'll catch sight of your first veld fauna – on this occasion, a mongoose, a herd of waterbuck and a huge bull elephant – as you learn to roll

with the exhilarating bounces of a ride through the bush.

Greeted with a welcome cocktail and a chilled face-towel at Earth Lodge, you take a curving underground passage that emerges on to a stunning open terrace whose foreground water features and plants blend into the wilderness beyond. There are no fences to keep the wildlife at bay here. Guests can walk around freely by day, but you must call for a chaperone whenever you want to move between your suite and the lounge, bar and dining areas after dark. The antics of the 18-strong local lion family, the Southern Pride, around the lodge are well documented – visit YouTube and search "lion gets a fright at his own reflection" for a taster. But rest assured that you're more likely to see warthogs nipping at the lawns or curious impalas staring back at you from a safe distance as you enjoy your afternoon tea.

### Accommodation

*Director* travelled with specialist tour operator Best of South Africa Travel. Tailored packages start from £2,220 per person sharing, inclusive of return private air shuttle; VIP meet-and-greet service; transfers; two game drives daily; walking safaris; all meals; sundown drinks; selected local beverages; house wines; and all conservation fees.

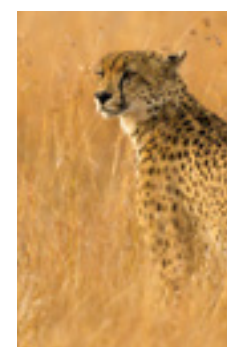
Add four nights at the five-star Cape Grace hotel in Cape Town for £825 per person sharing on a bed-and-breakfast basis. Prices exclude international flights and are subject to availability.

In Johannesburg *Director* stayed at the Saxon Hotel, Villas and Spa.

[bestofsouthafricatravel.com](http://bestofsouthafricatravel.com)

01233 802727

[saxon.co.za](http://saxon.co.za)



### Getting there

*Director* flew from London Heathrow to Johannesburg with South African Airways, and from Johannesburg to Skukuza with SA Airlink.

[flysaa.com](http://flysaa.com)

[flyairlink.com](http://flyairlink.com)

To maintain harmony with their surroundings, the lodge's 13 suites have been set into a slope and built from a mixture of the local earth and thatching grass. Each luxurious interior has been individually designed, featuring bespoke furniture and wooden sculptures by local artists. All suites have ensuite bathrooms, but they also have a private plunge pool and shower outside, enabling you to bathe al fresco while keeping your eyes trained on the wilderness for animal activity.

If you want to be sure of tracking down the region's most celebrated creatures, you'll need some expert help during the game drives, which take place at both ends of the day. This is where Sabi Sabi takes the experience to another level, with its hugely impressive roster of guides. After being woken before dawn to enjoy the glorious sunrise over breakfast, guests

head out to discover which animals are making the most of first light. The pairing allocated to *Director*, ranger Eve Wood-Hill and tracker Patrick Nyalungu, have decades of experience between them. Their rapport was seemingly telepathic as they detected buffalo, white rhino and leopard tracks. Nyalungu's ability to spot a single dusty leopard footprint from a fast-moving jeep was as worthy of admiration as the animal itself. The evening safaris, which start just before dusk, pause for drinks and snacks to be served at sundown before continuing in the dark with the help of Nyalungu's spotlight, returning to the lodge in time for dinner.

The rangers rejoin the guests at their dining tables, set outdoors

at the edge of the bush, to share anecdotes and field more wildlife questions (an elephant's trunk, we learnt, contains more than 60,000 muscles). Local ingredients are celebrated in dishes from an ever-changing menu that on *Director's* visit included pan-fried kingklip (eel) with greens, roasted cauliflower and sauce vierge, and butternut and chickpea curry with cashews and apricot chutney. For special occasions Sabi Sabi will even set up a private table for you a short drive away at the reserve's secluded *jabula* (Zulu for "be happy") deck, which overlooks a waterfall. It's the perfect chance to be completely alone with nature, consider what you've seen so far and speculate on where you might find that next set of lion tracks. ①

### Special offer for IoD members

IoD members can obtain a discount of £100 per person and also enjoy a free private dining experience while on safari by quoting "IoD" if they book with Best of South Africa Travel by 30 September 2017.