



# Madikwe: where the 'Ugly Five' were born

**Julia Donaldson, author of The Gruffalo, explains how the least likely animals at a game reserve in South Africa inspired her latest book**

here can't be a writer who hasn't been asked "Where do you get your ideas?" and experienced an inward groan. My usual (and truthful) reply is "In the bath," but at least an aide to cite in this article an actual place on the map, the Madikwe Game Reserve, in South Africa.

One of the perks of going on an overseas book tour is being able to tack a holiday on to the end of it. That's what I did last year when I was performing stories and signing books in Cape Town and Johannesburg, with my guitar-playing thespian husband, Malcolm, in tow.

As soon as our events had finished, we headed north, towards the

Botswana border, for 11 days of safari. I'm normally the sort of person who likes climbing stairs and following footpaths, so I wasn't sure how much I would enjoy sitting in a Jeep for two three-hour expeditions each day.

I was also dubious about the 5.30am wake-up call each morning. But when it came to it, I found the whole experience a wonderful mixture of excitement and tranquility. I loved the end-of-lecture as-the-rain-forests-are-coming-back-to-life reliability of each journey, and found

Julia Donaldson, 49, characters, top: two warthogs, wildebeest, spotted hyena and meerkats; top, right: meerkats; top, right: meerkats; top, right: meerkats.



that three hours was a perfect length of time: if you spotted a wallowing hippo, or a pack of wild dogs, or a male rhino harrying a female one with her baby, or a herd of elephants splashing and drinking and tussling by a pool, you could hang around and see how the situation developed, without "thinking" "Oh dear, that time's nearly up - better move on".

The animals were mostly very nonchalant about the jeeps, and sometimes a lion would walk so close that I could have reached out and patted his head (which probably wouldn't have been a good idea). The lions would make eye contact with us individually, but as long as we stayed still and didn't seem to feel threatened or want to threaten us.

There were usually between four and six of us in the jeep, along with Lucky, our ranger, who drove it, and Charlie, the tracker, who perched on a little seat in front and would suddenly point to the left or right, directing our gaze to animals we might never have noticed otherwise. I had the extremely knowledgeable, not just about the birds, but also long as we stayed still and didn't seem to feel threatened or want to threaten us.



African animals to track on foot: lion, leopard, rhino, buffalo and elephant. We did have one quite scary elephant encounter. Whereas the females and juveniles go about in herds, the older males are mainly solitary. Usually if we saw one it would be by the side of a path, munching leaves and taking little notice of us. But as we drove along a wide path one early evening, we saw a large beast approaching us in a determined way. It's ears were flapping, which is a sign of aggression. Lucky went into reverse, but then routed in the moment of inspiration came the day

**It's ears were flapping which is a sign of aggression**

READER OFFER: Been day escorted tour taking in Victoria Falls, Botswana and Cape Town, includes return flight, accommodation and touring program, from £2,799 per person via Rivers Travel (0333 44 2850; telegraph.co.uk/t/botswana).

We saw a herd of wildebeest. My husband remarked that, despite their ungainly proportions, he thought they were rather noble. Lucky replied, "I'm sorry this, Malcolm, but they're one of the Ugly Five". The Ugly Five? And who were the other three? "The's hyenas, the spotted leopard and the meerkat." I immediately asked my story came into my mind with the twinkle at the end of her eye: "happens to wrestle with story yln before I can sit down to write the story of The Ugly Five".

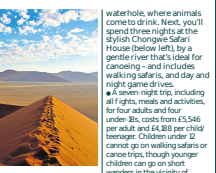
We did get to see a spiky, lumpy and maddy wart about in a watering hole caught a glimpse of a shot. The two ugly birds ed our laptop conf med it



## FOUR GREAT FAMILY SAFARIS

### Animals and beaches

**South Africa**  
The Kwandwe Private Game Reserve in the Eastern Cape is a 54,000-acre haven for the Big Five - and its Ecce Lodge (right) has a great programme for kids: family suites come with a plunge pool (plus private ranger, tracker and vehicle. The rangers' "bug hunts" and "pooch patrols" will keep children amused. Then you'll head to Tsala Treetop Lodge, one of South Africa's most spectacular hotels, with treehouse villas and suites high in the Tsalakamma forest canopy. Just six miles from Plettenberg Bay, Tsala is ideally situated for the Garden Route's golf, hiking, scuba diving, cycling and beaches, though the hotel is only suitable for children aged eight and older.



A seven-night safari and beach adventure over February half-term costs from £4,388 per person based on a family of four. The price includes three nights in a family suite at Kwandwe Ecce Lodge on a fully inclusive basis, four nights in a two-bed villa at Tsala Treetop Lodge on a B&B basis, all international and domestic flights, private road transfer to Kwandwe and 11-day car rental (Botswana/ Zimbabwe).



### Celebrations

**Zambia**  
Zambia has luxurious private houses of great charm, which work well as a base for groups with children. You have your own space and guide, set your own schedule, and the lodge is in a rural area. Expert Africa will help choose child-focused guides who know how to bring young people into the safari. Start with four nights at Luangwa Safari House, which overlooks a

### Low-stress

**Madikwe**  
Safari is as expensive: there's no two ways about that. But for families dreaming of taking their children to Africa, this is a relatively budget-conscious way to see animals in the wild. Leave your malaria pills at home when you visit Madikwe, a South African private game reserve the size of Lincolnshire. Base yourself at Letaba Lodge (below) in a family suite with its own plunge pool. There's no age limit, and children will enjoy the special activities - including making pizzas, star gazing and games nights - as much as the thrill of going on game drives in search of the Big Five.



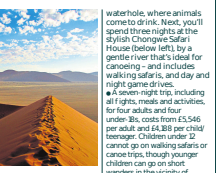
A 11-night safari for a family of four costs from £3,849 for two adults and two children. The price includes flights and is based on a December 2017 departure (virginholiday.co.uk).

### Sally Pook



### Animals and beaches

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The Ugly Five is a picture book by Julia Donaldson and Axel Scheffler, available from Alison Green Books (books.telegraph.co.uk, £12.99)

