

Isolated

Bush Escapes

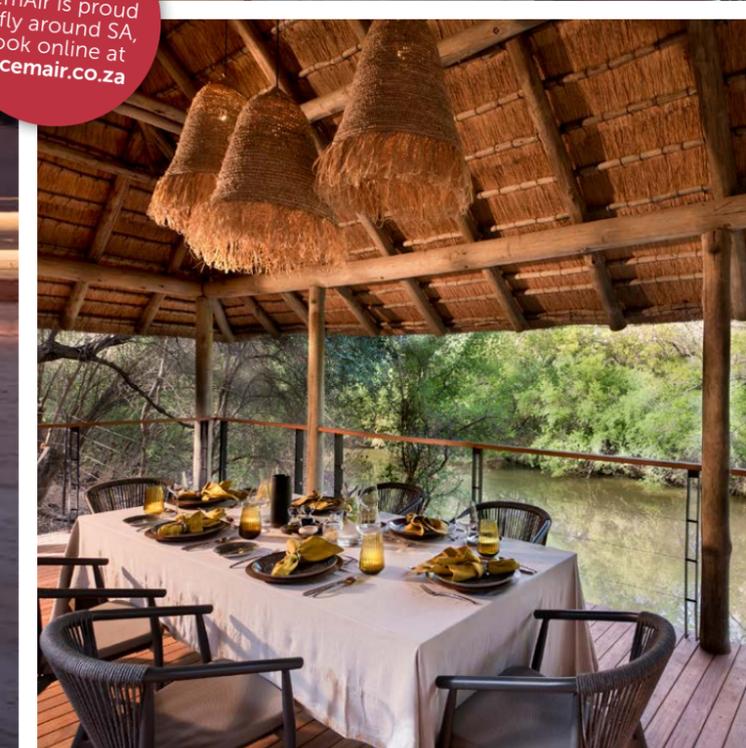
Redefining the 2020 understanding of 'isolation'

In our new post-lockdown landscape, fewer environments seem as enticing right now as the bush. When travel restrictions were finally lifted the desperation to reconnect with the bush was more than palpable, and off I went to be reunited with the wilderness.





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Here are three of my most enticing and undeniably luxurious bush breaks in South Africa – all waiting to welcome you in their glorious isolation.

MORUKURU MADIKWE

All around the bush was proudly wearing her summer green. Four of us were driving as far from the city as we could get – which in our case meant stopping just short of the Botswana border (which at the time of the trip was still closed). Sharing the border with South Africa is Madikwe Game Reserve, a drive just short of four hours from Johannesburg.

Despite tracing its outlines several times on maps, I'd never visited in person, and with most first-time experiences, the anticipation was tangible. The reserve covers an impressive 75,000 hectares, making it the fifth biggest in the country, yet what landed up feeling like one of the quietest.

Throughout the reserve, you'll find the scattered hills of Tshwene Tshwene - the

last geological disturbances before the land levels out into the plains of Botswana. This protected habitat is plentiful in wildlife, home to the Big 5 and also wild dogs and cheetah.

The Madikwe lodges are high-end, and perhaps the most exclusive of these are the three Morukuru Family properties - the sister lodge of Morukuru Family in De Hoop which only recently scooped up the award for the top lodge in Africa by Cond Nast. Morukuru Madikwe comprises three separate exclusive use homes sleeping four, six, and ten people, respectively.

Our home was Owner's House – the spacious two-bedroom villa hidden in the thicket. Owner's House has only just undergone a magnificent renovation. The renowned Fox Browne Creative team were tasked with giving this private villa its refresh look. Modern touches complement the traditional lodge charm, including custom-made and handwoven headboards, inspired by the traditional basket weave of the

Tswana culture of the region.

The villa features a lounge, study, outdoor bath, sunken fire pit, pool, and then a very generous deck with multiple dining areas. Whereas many lodges stand out in the bush, Owner's House has been carefully constructed in the bush, resulting in an integrated wilderness sanctuary, entirely in harmony with the surroundings.

Arriving in time for lunch, we walked across the deck to the Sala - a thatched dining area elevated high above the river. Our soundtrack was the gentle rustle in the trees as a troop of vervet monkeys grazed the surrounding branches, and the melodic sound of the swollen river below. The magic continued later at nightfall when the lodge transformed into an enchanting forest illuminated by lanterns, candles, and underfloor lighting.

If it's an isolated experience you're after, it doesn't get any better than an exclusive use rental. It's only you and your party, and

it's you who gets to call the shots. Never having had this privilege before, I decided to test the ropes.

At dinner one evening I asked for chocolate flapjacks with breakfast. Lo and behold, the next morning, a plate of the most delicious pancakes I've tasted were waiting for me. Since the programme was also entirely at our discretion, feeling like I deserved a sleep-in, I requested that we skip the early morning safari and instead opt for a later bushwalk. This was easily done, and instead of waking at 05h30 for a game drive, at 08h00 we were walking through the bush following rhino tracks.

Of course, the 'exclusive use' factor also entirely comes into play on safari itself. Since the vehicle was ours alone, we were able to choose where to go and how long to spend at each sighting, not having to worry about other guests on the vehicle. For us, that meant spending significant time with the ochre-coloured elephants – the red colouring as a result of red clay soil that they



coat themselves with as a natural sunscreen.

In addition to the kilometres of wilderness, seemingly devoid of anyone else, Morukuru has its own piece of private land, meaning not only do they have exclusive traversing rights in this secluded section, but also allowing for a variety of unique bush dining experiences. The staff delight in arranging these moments, which add unforgettable surprise elements to your stay.

Perhaps it's time to find yourself at home in the bush. After all, the experience at Owner's House – or one of the other two private homes – is nothing short of that. Morukuru Madikwe is exclusivity at its most homely. Visit www.morukuru.com for more information.

SIMBAMBILI GAME LODGE

Thanks to CemAir, a short 55-minute flight connects Johannesburg to Hoedspruit. It felt like we'd barely left as we were touching down in Hoedspruit. After a two-hour drive through the Lowveld, the Simbambili team were welcoming me to their secluded piece of wilderness.

Simbambili Game Lodge is every bit the chic safari experience you'd expect, replete with the quintessential fire-pit sundowners, earthy-toned design, all centred around the daily rhythm of safari. Twice a day you set out wide-eyed in the chance to revel in the main attraction: the startling wildlife concentration in the Sabi Sand Game Reserve is one of the reasons people travel from around the world to visit.

In particular, leopard fans will be excited to note that the area is home to the highest concentration of these elusive cats in the world. On our first safari, we were afforded the chance to track a magnificent male. Our guide Mike and trekker Conrite had an uncanny ability to foresee the cat's movements, giving us several opportunities for my most memorable Leopard sighting ever.

Simbambili features only seven units, so the isolation check-box is safely ticked. In-between safari your private plunge pool waits to bring respite from hot summer afternoons – and also game viewing opportunities for spotting any wildlife passing by. The units also offer a private sala or outdoor daybed for languishing away the day with no separation from the surroundings. Visit www.thornybush.com for more information.





PHINDA FOREST LODGE

It may have been around ten years ago - I don't remember exactly when it was - but what I do recall is the sense of awe the first time I laid eyes on one of 8BEYOND Phinda's Forest Lodge units in a glossy magazine. Hidden in the dense forest these glass-encased units seemed from a design perspective, beautifully ahead of their time - but also achieved something rather magnificent; they removed all barriers between guests and the wild were removed.

The floor to ceiling glass walls means that nothing from the surrounding natural world is missed - from the twitch of a bird in the foliage or grazing antelope passing slowly through the forest.

Beyond the magnificence of these accommodation units themselves, the Phinda Private Game Reserve is in its own right a natural wonder worth visiting. Encompassing 28,000 hectares of wilderness, the reserve is also home to seven distinct natural habitats: woodland, grassland, wetland, and forest, interspersed with mountain ranges, rivers, marshes, and pans.

In addition to the usual safari activities, there are also some exciting add-on activities such as specialist walking and tracking safaris, a sleep-out under the stars, and other rare participative conservation experiences such as rhino notching or pangolin tagging. Visit www.andbeyond.com for more information.



Text by Jared Ruttenberg
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