

5 UNIQUE SOUTH AFRICAN

SAFARI

EXPERIENCES

From a meerkat experience and helicopter conservation flights to hiking in Big Five territory and visiting Africa's oldest trees, these are safaris with a difference.



WORDS AND PHOTOGRAPHY | JARED RUTTENBERG

1

MEERKAT
EXPERIENCE
AT TSWALU

** Northern Cape

Tswalu is South Africa's biggest private game reserve at a staggering 114 000 hectares and this vast stretch of the southern Kalahari is home to some of the country's quirkiest creatures. The inclusive safari experience provides the opportunity to see rare, endangered, and elusive animals that call this valuable conservation area home, including up close and personal moments with the local meerkats.

There are three colonies of habituated meerkats, always ready to offer endless entertainment. Their habituation means they allow for human presence without it disrupting their activities. Guests can spend some time with the mobs at their burrows on an early morning game drive before the meerkats venture out for the day.

Veronique Venter, one of the resident meerkat habituators, says, "On the cute side, it's amazing how you start noticing individuals and their personalities – it's not that different to a human family. You get the quiet one, the crazy one, the clumsy one and so on!" To observe these curious animals from such close proximity is indeed a rare privilege. tswalu.com

FOR THOSE
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2

HELICOPTER
EXPERIENCES AT
BABANANGO

** KwaZulu-Natal

You might have seen the Big 5 from metres away in a vehicle, but few experiences could rival soaring above the bush on a helicopter flight. KwaZulu-Natal's Babanango Game Reserve is a sprawling new 19 250-hectare reserve where wildlife is being reintroduced into an area they once roamed decades before – the biggest private rewilding project in South Africa since Phinda Game Reserve. Thanks to their innovative safari offerings, you can take a flip in their resident conservation chopper.

Guests can book a scenic flight over the reserve, which could include a short stop in the bush, or join in one of the daily conservation flights, aimed to monitor the reserve fences. This offers rare insight into the strict anti-poaching security measures Babanango takes to ensure the safety of their beautiful rhino.

And, with the imminent launch of walking wilderness trails and even Big Five white-water rafting on the cards, the Babanango team certainly knows how to sexy up the safari experience. Extend your stay to include a night or two at the elevated Zulu Rock Lodge, the farm-styled Valley Lodge, or the nearly completed five-star Traveller's Camp. babanango.co.za



Opening spread: One of Tswalu's habituated meerkat colonies clearing the coast before setting out for the day's activity. Clockwise from top left: One of the magnificent baobabs you'll meet during your stay at The Outpost – this one over 30m in diameter; soaring high above the game at Babanango Game Reserve on an anti-poaching patrol flight; feel the thrill of the bush up close and personal as the guides lead you on a Marataba Walking Safari; stroll along the suspended walkways that lead you to the private Safari Lodge Treehouse at Ulusaba.



3

BIG 5 HIKING TRAILS AT MARATABA MOUNTAIN LODGE

**** Limpopo**

If you've frequented the back of a game vehicle a few times, maybe it's time to trade in the seat for a walking safari. Few experiences get the adrenaline pumping like a true walk in the wild. Just over three hours from Johannesburg, Marataba Luxury Lodges offers walking safaris in the Marakele National Park.

From the intimate Mountain Lodge where I was staying, we headed out on our walking safari and within two minutes were abruptly stopped by the raised hand of our guide, Kim. Soon we saw what she'd noticed – black rhino standing guard in the thicket ahead. We had to replot our hike, and head in a different direction. From the get-go, adrenaline was pumping and added to the thrill of an unforgettable safari experience.

The uniqueness of the Marataba terrain only adds to the experience – millions of years-old sandstone mountains run the length of the reserve and many of the hiking trails wind up the ravines that give access up the sides. As if this isn't enough, guests are also treated to a water safari on the perennial Mothlabatsi River in the Waterberg Biosphere as one of the activities during a visit. more.co.za/marataba

4

PRIVATE TREEHOUSE AT ULUSABA

**** Mpumalanga**

Regular Kruger-goers know what a privilege it is to leave behind the masses for the seclusion of a private lodge. If you're keen to take that one step further, then Sir Richard Branson may have a surprise up his sleeve. His two Kruger lodges are located in the Sabi Sand Reserve: the hilltop Rock Lodge and riverside Safari Lodge. What many don't know, is guests can book a stand-alone treehouse for an unforgettable night in the wild.

From Safari Lodge, a thrilling 10-minute walk along suspended bridges and walkways takes you to the Treehouse Suite. Since the lodge has no fences, this walk is a safari in itself, with the opportunity to spot game walking below. Reaching the Xikwenga Dam, your private suite awaits, replete with a viewing deck, bathroom and lounge area. There's no shortage of wildlife that passes by, including a resident pod of hippos in the adjacent dam. Sitting on the deck watching elephants drink just metres away, I couldn't help but think how many times Richard had done the same – and in the wild surrounds how many of his wild dreams had been birthed in the self-same spot. virginlimitededition.com/ulusaba

5

AFRICA'S OLDEST TREES AT THE OUTPOST

**** Limpopo**

While you can of course expect to find the Big Five in the Kruger National Park's most northern corner, there is something else waiting to impress you. Heading to the north of the park, you begin to see fewer people on the road, but more of the ancient baobab trees.

At The Outpost Lodge, my guide Sam was very eager to introduce me to these massive sentries. After an hour's drive, he proudly told me to look up as we turned a corner, and there stood a magnificent creature of a tree, with a startling 32-metre diameter. These ancient African sentries are a sight to behold, and with some of the trees broaching an age of 2 000 years, they have witnessed their fair share of bushveld history.

Once these giants have left you gobsmacked, there's also the country's largest fever tree forest in the vicinity – an army of the greenish-yellow trees creating a wooded wonderland – and mecca for water birds in the adjacent lakes. After a day of sightseeing, return to the lodge and sanctuary of your unit where at the touch of a button, the sides of your private room lift offering views of kilometres of bush – and you guessed it – even more baobab trees.

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GETTING THERE

• • **FLY** SAA flies between Cape Town and Johannesburg and Durban and Johannesburg daily. From there, rent a car and take a short (or long) road trip to any of the destinations mentioned. Visit www.flysaa.com