

## Experience Wildlife Up Close in South Africa

Go off road for an up-close wildlife encounter in South Africa's private preserves.

by [Hilary Nangle](#)



Photo: © Hilary Nangle

From the window of the seven-passenger charter plane, I see only a ribbon of tarmac surrounded by wilderness. There is no terminal, not even a shelter.

"If no one's here to meet me, you won't just leave me, will you?" I ask the pilot, my voice betraying my fear of being left in the scorching noonday South African sun in a landscape rife with predators. Weeks ago, Marcia Gordon of [Extraordinary Journeys](#), specialists in luxury bespoke African safaris, allayed my solo-in-the-bush fears. "You'll be fine," she told me. "You're going to have the experience of a lifetime." Now I was having doubts about just what that experience might entail.

"I spotted your transport on landing," the pilot replies. I audibly exhale a sigh of relief and step off the plane and into &Beyond Ngala, a 37,100-acre, unfenced private reserve within Kruger National Park. Unfamiliar scents lace the sultry air, but what I notice most is the quiet. Other than a muchappreciated whisper of a breeze and occasional bird cry, it's blessedly — if eerily — silent.

My destination is Ngala's Tented Camp, a main lodge and cabins edging the seasonal, currently dry, Timbavati River. Don't be fooled by the words "tented camp." My cabin, one of only six (soon to be nine), resembles a 5-star hotel room, albeit one with screened canvas walls and roof. The mostly open-air main lodge is equally chic, with cozy seating areas by a fireplace and woodstoves to take the chill off the dining area on cooler nights. Sophisticated, yes, but there's no mistaking I'm in the wilderness. By day, I share the camp with roaming warthogs, thieving vervet monkeys and shy impalas; at night, predators prowl, and the silence of the wilderness is marred by their chases and conquests. "After dark, you're not to walk outside without an escort," warns Presence, the camp manager, as she leads me to my tent.

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I'm paired with two couples, guide Dylan Davies and tracker Adam Mabunda for twice-daily game drives in the bushveld, northeastern South Africa's grassy, shrubby and often thorny vegetation-covered savannah. "Embrace everything," Dylan suggests. "If you case a leopard for five days, you'll miss the giraffes, zebras and birds; if you case a lion, you'll miss out on a rhino calf." We heed his advice and are amply rewarded. In three days, I not only sight the Big Five — African buffalos, leopards, lions, white rhinos and African savannah elephants — but also wildebeests, giraffes, zebras, hyenas, jackals, mongeese, hippos, kudus, nyalas, bushbuck, waterbuck, warthogs, baboons, leopard tortoises, scrub hares, even a deadly black mamba snake and termites taking nuptial flights. I consider starting a life list with the exotic birds I'm seeing.

With each drive in the open, safari-style, tiered-seating Land Cruisers, I become more attuned to movement in the woodland and tracks in the road. I begin to notice dung piles and grass patterns, and search the sky and treetops when I hear birdsong. As we observe each species, Dylan shares some of his encyclopedic knowledge. I'm surprised at the ability of a young bull elephant to seemingly tiptoe through the bush and disappear. "You can hide an elephant behind one bush," he quips.

Later, we come across a huge bull elephant in musth, a sexually driven state of heightened aggressiveness. We can smell his glandular and urinary secretions before we see him. He's not pleased when we approach for a closer look. He spreads his ears to make himself look bigger and then suddenly swerves straight for us. Dylan accelerates out of harm's way, but it takes a while for my heart to stop pounding. "He's like a guy in his 20s who's had a few too many drinks and wants to fight the world in a bar. His testosterone has built up, but he doesn't know how to handle it," Dylan explains.

One advantage of being in a private reserve is going off road. When Leanne, who's guiding the other group from our lodge, radios they've spotted a leopard kill, we dodge and weave through the bush. We find the carcass but no leopard. "Hear those monkeys?" Dylan asks. Their shrill, warning cry is unmistakable. "That means she's still around; it's just a matter of finding her."

As twilight cedes to nightfall, we locate the full-bellied cat bedding down in a grassy pocket of the dry river. Adam applies a red filter to the spotlight to ease the blinding effect on her pupils. "There are very few places you can view leopards. They're secretive, shy and quite cunning," Dylan says. "To have them let us into their world is incredibly special." We silently nod in agreement, gazing at the cat fewer than 15 feet away. I watch, mesmerized, deliriously happy, spiritually transported and treasuring the intimate experience.

Another morning, we watch zebras, wildebeests and giraffes grazing and a troop of baboons partying in the trees. We track a female white rhino with offspring, one about 6 months old and the other about 5 years. Dylan enlightens us about preservation efforts that helped the species recover from the brink of extinction, but poaching remains a problem. That afternoon, we're immersed in a buffalo herd numbering more than 300 when the radio crackles with the promise of lions. We approach quietly, stopping less than 15 feet from a big male, three females and a juvenile male sprawled on the grass. Dylan trains binoculars on the big guy's rear flank and recognizes an immunization mark. "I know this lion. This isn't an existing pride, this is a pride in formation," he whispers excitedly. "This lion is one of nine brothers born here five years ago. He might have returned with some of his brothers to claim this open territory and start a pride." One of the females saunters almost within petting distance, and fear etches my face. "These animals are by no means tame, but they are habituated to vehicles," Dylan says. "As long as we don't surprise them, they're ready to let us into their lives." We watch until thunder rumbles and lightning streaks the darkness.

After three days at Ngala, I transfer to [&Beyond](#)'s Phinda Forest Lodge in a 56,800-acre fenced private reserve in Maputaland, a region in northern KwaZulu- Natal. Phinda, where I hope to see the endangered black rhino as well as cheetahs, is distinguished by seven habitats including a rare

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dry sand forest, an extensive marshland and mountains. Unlike Dylan, my guide Sam has a singular approach. With Josiah as tracker, we set out seeking black rhinos, lions and cheetahs in the marshland, bypassing herds of impalas, zebras and wildebeests.

My disappointment at failing to stop for other species is offset by a female cheetah with two cubs. We follow as she stalks an impala herd, but they catch her scent and move off. Later, we come between two lionesses contemplating dinner. One pads by our Land Cruiser so close that my heart races. "Don't move," Sam barks, and we freeze. That, I think, was a bit too close for comfort, and yet Sam, like Dylan, says we were never in danger. Afterward, he surprises us with Champagne and hors d'oeuvres under the stars, a change from the usual cocktails and nibbles.

The next morning, Josiah spots an African python track. I'm thankful when Sam declares the track too old to bother following on foot. We arrive at the marsh as fog lifts, revealing grassy, undulating terrain rippling shades of green and gold accented with shimmers of blue. We stop to observe ducks, hornbills, black-winged plovers and a flock of pelicans. We find another cheetah with cubs and a female black rhino with an adorably ugly offspring, and later have a one-on-one with a harrumphing male black rhino. During a snack break, one of my vehicle mates nearly steps on a Mozambique spitting cobra. "Its spit will blind you," Sam warns. We attempt to find a leopard pair lurking in the woodlands. Sam and Josiah spy fresh signs, ordering us to remain in the vehicle as they track the lovers. They're unsuccessful, but we return that evening. "Hear those grunts?" Sam asks. "They're mating." The male emerges from the shrubby growth and settles down for us to admire him.

On my final evening in the bush, we set off seeking elephants and discover Shangri-La. The sky is azure, the light soft and golden when we come upon two bull males sharing the grasslands of a magical — almost mystical — vibrant green valley with zebras, wildebeests, buffalos and rhinos. If that's not enough, on the hillside behind, giraffe heads rise above trees. We watch in sublime wonder, and then Sam suggests visiting the giraffes before the light fades. We find at least a dozen, including a few heavily pregnant females and two young males sparring by whacking each other with their long necks. We toast our good fortune as the sky stages a Technicolor sunset. As we head back to the lodge under a three-quarter moon and spangle of stars, I'm hoping for one last close-up with lions or leopards, and I smile at the realization that my fears have been tamed.

## South Africa Info To Go

International flights arrive from the United States at Johannesburg's Oliver Reginald Tambo International Airport (JNB). It's approximately 90 minutes' flying time from Tambo to Ngala, 80 minutes from Ngala to Phinda, and 100 minutes from Phinda to Tambo. Extraordinary Journeys arranges flights and transfers.

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