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## SOUTH AFRICAN ADVENTURE

by Andrew Mersmann



This was going to be the trip of a lifetime...an easy phrase to espouse but not so easy to live up to. I had taken a previous safari trip to South Africa, about eight years ago, and it remains my unreserved answer when I am asked my favorite destination. The usual, standard safari experience, however, left me wanting more. The proximity of animals to an open vehicle was breathtaking, but it was all I could do to stay in my seat and not scream to block out the chatter of other lodge guests who were rightfully enraptured, but annoyingly vocal. I really wanted to get away from groups, to become grubby and immersed in as many elements of South African adventure travel as I could manage in one trip.

Who would be charged with creating and then manifesting what became a Herculean task of organization? The mother/daughter team of Marcia and Elizabeth Gordon of **Extraordinary Journeys**, the upscale, bespoke vacation safari planners pulled out all the stops, daring us to dream of ever-bigger adventures. It became almost comical as they suggested grander and greater options we wouldn't have thought up on our own—my partner and I instantly wanted to do it all. We wanted out of the Jeep, so out of the Jeep we got. Walking safaris, mountain biking in the bush, research leopard tracking, rare rhino tracking, great white shark cage diving, canoeing to search for crocs and hippos, tiny twin-engine flights over the ocean and game parks, horseback riding, elephant education encounter and ride, zip-line through the treetops, private game drives, and more, all embraced in the lap of luxury at top-flight lodges, manor homes, and hotels. It was insane, and we were giddy in anticipation.

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All this in one day, and we're not done yet. A short drive brings us to **Skyway Trails**, Africa's longest zipline aerial cable trail. We whizz over the Sabie River in what is one of the nation's last remaining naturally forested valleys. It seems more like Northern California than my idea of Africa, with plentiful shade and huge trees where we perch on platforms before zipping off to the next. The young staff seems to love their jobs, and making it even more fun is the young family with us—the youngest child is three-years-old. This tot is terrified at first, strapped in with one of the guides, but by the end of more than three hours of adventure, she's swinging along on her own, waving back at mom and dad, screaming in joy as she flies over the treetops.

We fall into bed exhausted that night, after setting the alarm for an early morning flight to the next over-the-top, luxe lodge.

**Singita** is a name familiar to the luxury safari crowd as it has been the benchmark against which others are measured for quite some time. Their two properties in a private section of land within Kruger, adjacent to the Mozambique border (where we jumped the fence one day, just to say we'd been there), are part of a private concession, so all the animal splendor for which the national park is famous is ours, without any crowds. With that exclusive access, the guides and trackers can go just about anywhere for flat-out brilliant game experiences.

(Page 1 of 2)

**Singita Sweni** is a six-room exclusive resort perched on the bank of the hippo-filled Sweni River. The resort's modern contemporary style is airy and open, like a delicate tree house suspended on stilts to have minimal impact on the environment. Our suite is gargantuan with three showers (two indoors with glass walls to the view, and one entirely outside, cantilevered into the trees), bedroom, sitting area, private deck with outdoor bed, and huge bathroom. The interior walls are canvas curtains that can be pulled aside to open the space entirely, and exterior walls are almost all floor-to-ceiling glass. Except for the blessed presence of air conditioning, it might be hard to even discern what is inside and what is out in our unique aerie. The lodge's public areas are also thrown open toward the river with cozy nooks and seating areas with no walls, breezy dining room, and a gracious swimming pool. Throughout, dark bronze and deep woods are set off by vivid apple green accents. The food is a huge priority at Singita lodges, and the chef is masterful with her ingredients and converses with every guest to determine likes and dislikes and aspirational foods we may have always wanted to try. We are even treated to a private wine tasting with the sommelier in the small but fantastically stocked wine cellar.

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Our guide, James, is matinee idol handsome with whip-smart expertise, blond hair, and sonorous voice. James trains other guides for work, so he is the cream of the crop, and his mellow demeanor makes our African idyll feel even more relaxing...even when surrounded by 19 lions...

At Singita we have amazing game drives in the vehicle, with James and our tracker, Given, as well as biking and walking safaris, and bush dinners outside. To maximize our animal experiences, we forego sundowners and lazy times. Because our spotting luck has been so good already, there is no pressure to bag the Big Five, so we spend what feels like real quality time with individual animals, even getting to know the personalities of a few. These include a brother and sister pair of cheetahs who wrestle in the rain like kittens; a herd of elephants that feasts lazily in the late afternoon sun; and a "Mountain Pride" of lions, 19 in all, including three sets of cubs.

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- [WHERE TO STAY](#)
- [WHERE TO PLAY](#)
- [WHERE TO EAT](#)
- [WHAT TO DO](#)

We spend two entire evenings among the pride. The first evening they are lolling in a dry wash, cubs nursing, two adult males sleeping, and females keeping one eye open as our Jeep creeps quite close. Other vehicles with guests come and go, but we enjoy the golden hour of light, and deep into dusk, among our furry friends, content to just spend time there. The second evening with "our" pride is a bit more adventurous. The pack has been

dispersed, spooked by something, so we search in vain for a while, eventually finding two females lapping water. Over the course of just a few minutes, cubs and adults emerge from various hiding places to reconvene, with us in the center, as they arrive from every direction. Then they are on the move through tall grass so James repositions the Jeep ahead a few times, so they are always approaching, even splitting on either side of us. It would be just a short lean out of the side of the vehicle and I could pet a kitty on its way past. During my last safari it was too much to fathom that I was seeing these magnificent beasts through binoculars...this time, it brings tears to my eyes that we are so completely immersed in the life of the bush. As darkness engulfs the openness of the area, the energy shifts, and three females strike out alone to hunt. We follow, barely able to see them here and there, as it is illegal to shine the powerful night lights during a hunt (it temporarily blinds the hooved creatures, giving an unfair and unnatural advantage to the predators).

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We had just been discussing over a lantern-lit bush dinner how we had no desire to see a kill. James is surprised to hear this, the majority of guests get very excited by the adrenaline rush of a hunt. We still weren't buying it, or wanting to see it, so it's exactly what we got. When the three females took a small impala, it never knew what hit it since it happened so fast. The rest of the pride emerged instantly from the dark (we had no idea they had kept so close), and amid a frenzy of vicious snarls and growls, did everything they could to grab a piece and retreat a safe distance to eat. To see a kill is rare, and even more rare is to be the only people who really didn't want to see it, and still witness it. Lucky? I suppose so, in a way.

On our final day of safari, a group of about a dozen new game ranger recruits arrive to participate in an intensive training exercise and sleep out in the open bush. I only half-jokingly ask if I can join them and sleep out in the wild. It is a personally precarious place to put myself as it is along the razor sharp edge between dropping off the grid to live a life of adventure and animal experiences or going home to my already magnificent, if urbane, life. It could have gone either way...I could easily decide to stay. This kind of adventure, this intimacy with uncontrolled nature, is a line of demarcation you cross in your heart. An immersion in wildlife makes passions about the world strengthen, steels commitments to protection and conservation, and makes us better stewards of the planet.

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We do see plenty of dung beetles as we walk through a rhino midden (the common area where rhinos defecate) where thousands of the insects glimmer iridescently in the morning sun. We are accompanied by a professional team of trackers familiar with the very few, very endangered, very skittish, and very aggressive black rhinos to be found in this region. **Black rhino tracking** is a rare and exclusive opportunity, and this is one of the only areas where it can be done thanks to the successful conservation work at Phinda. There are only about 4,000 black rhinos left in the world. Our goal is to locate an animal, sneak up silently and downwind (Daryl keeps shaking a sock full of ashes to determine wind direction) to get somewhat close without the animal ever knowing we are there...then get out without being charged, as they have something of a hair trigger. We start pre-dawn but it is hours of Jeep then hiking time before we spot a big bull flanked by a few zebras. There are lots of silent hand signals and careful stepping through wet grasses as tall as we are. When we finally crawl the final few feet to a good viewing spot, if you told me it was a Triceratops, I would easily believe you. We know how fortunate we are to have gotten this close, following him from copse to fallen log, until we've had our fill...all before breakfast.

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Our pre-breakfast routine is one of many that had us on opposing schedules from many of our fellow guests. With our commitment to adventure came a price: 4:00 or 4:30 A.M. wake up calls, hours before the others in the lodge, and usually back late for breakfast, plus heading out for dusk game experiences a good hour before others and returning much later. Most safari schedules leave lots of relaxation time, which we still had, but in more modest amounts. It meant we didn't get to appreciate the brilliance of our lodgings quite as much, but brilliant they were. Our suite of rooms flows one into the next, with nary a straight line or wall to be found. The organic shape hugs

the cliff, and sitting room, deck with private infinity-edge plunge pool, bedroom, bathroom, plus indoor and outdoor showers, are all on different levels. Chunky wood shutters close over enormous windows, but we have them thrown wide at all times, watching the colors of the valley change as entire seasons seem to pass in a day. Our final night at Rock Lodge, we return from hours of enjoying a night game drive to hundreds of candles lit in our suite and a bubble bath, chilled Champagne, and a multi-course dinner served on our private deck—a brilliant send off, making it even tougher to leave.

Between our three-day bookends at über-luxury game lodges, we have two days at adventure-focused **Hazyview**, a city that seems to have sprung up outside the gates of **Kruger National Park** for the sole purpose of pumping adrenaline. Our hotel room at **Perry's Bridge Hollow** is enormous and comfortable with a spacious sitting area, outdoor patio, and outdoor shower as well. The hotel is part of a "trading post" complex with a few restaurants and shops, and serves as the nerve center for some of the high-energy activities in this region, so we are superbly located.

We arrive late in the day at the local airport, so our first night is just a catch-up...for which we'll be grateful after the adventure marathon we have the following day. We are up early to head to **Horse Whispers** for a two-hour outside on beautiful polo ponies into the bush and hills. The greenery is buzzing with cicada and we weave into and out of shady groves and streams, then spend long stretches in open and sunny fields. There is more walking than we hope for as recent rains have made trails a bit stumbly, but we get in some nice long canters and even a few gallops through the fields before it is over far too soon. A trot on a spirited mare as clouds gather and roil over the hilltops is pretty much an ideal morning to me...and the day just gets better.

Since we egged our horse guide on to get more and more time in the saddle—we've missed a chance for lunch, so it is straight to our next adventure at **Elephant Whispers** (a sister program to Horse Whispers). This is one of the most incredible programs I've seen. Dedicated to assuring the future of the African elephant, the team at Elephant Whispers has rescued several ellies that were scheduled for being shot in a culling program (government sponsored thinning of the herds), and trained them for close-up and thorough encounters. From the enormous, six-ton Tembo to smaller juveniles, this is not about circus tricks, but science. An elephant lies down in the shade so we can feel his ears, eyes, toenails, surprisingly spongy feet, tusks, trunk, and learn all about elephant health and habits as we do. The tactile sensations are amazing and this patient giant is so calming to us. This afternoon's nearly two-hour experience is heightened not only by riding Tembo through the field afterward, but also by the presence of the only other guests, a couple from Poland in which the young wife is blind. Watching her learn the elephants strictly through her sense of touch is affecting to the point of tears for all. Elephant Whispers also has resident volunteer programs I would love to come back and do some day, to work directly with the graceful pachyderms.

There is no way to lessen the time it takes for the flight, blessedly direct from New York to Johannesburg, but business class on **South African Airways** sure does lessen the toll it takes on our bodies and psyches. Their service is so gracious and smooth, and even with weather delays making us miss a connecting flight from Johannesburg to Durban, they seamlessly pop us onto the next flight.





From Durban, we are met by a private driver (as *Extraordinary Journeys* set up for every land transfer) for a three-hour drive from Durban's tony, beachside, **Oyster Box Hotel**, through rolling hills of vivid sugar cane fields and high grasses undulating in the wind. In every mud puddle we pass I'm searching for hippos, or a giraffe's head to pop up from the trees, but this is a multi-lane toll road like any other. It is a bit like knowing California has bears and keeping my eyes peeled for them while driving up Highway 99—I'm in the right region, but certainly not the right place...yet.

It isn't long before we get to the **& Beyond** property at the Phinda private reserve. **& Beyond** has a network of luxury lodges throughout much of Africa's most popular destination nations as well as a few in India. They also have an outstanding commitment to the local communities where they are based, the wildlife, and the culture and heritage of local people. They are a leader in philanthropy and outreach, and a model for other safari providers throughout the continent.

We're just inside the gates when we begin passing zebra and impala every few feet. It's like someone backstage shouted "Cue the wildlife"—the place is bursting at the seams with animals. Here the road became dirt, and the excitement ratcheted up significantly, as we approached our decadently luxurious digs for the next three nights, **Rock Lodge**. The six oversized suites cling to the side of a cliff in a style that blends Mediterranean and Flintstones. We're met with cool towels and a welcome drink proffered by the staff that will quickly become like family here at our cozy hideaway. There is a public area with lounge and a dining room that we never really use since we dine out on the deck that cantilevers over the intimate valley below (where a lioness is napping near her recent kudu kill).

We're barely sitting for two minutes on the deck for lunch, admiring the cliffs across the way, when a monkey grabs a bread roll, looks us straight in the eye and I swear smirks before grabbing a second roll and leaping away. It was all lighting fast, but not so fast that his pale gray body and dark face weren't able to communicate, "Hey Newbie. I own this joint. You're just passing through." It was the first of so many close encounters with animals we lost count, and an auspicious way to start.

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-  [WHERE TO STAY](#)
-  [WHERE TO PLAY](#)
-  [WHERE TO EAT](#)
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Our guide at Phinda is Daryl, one of the head rangers and specialists, and it is like being on safari with a professor who knows everything yet still has the enthusiasm of a puppy—the best of both worlds. Along with our tracker, Bernard, the four of us cover endless ground and quite quickly see the **Big Five** (elephant, lion, buffalo, leopard, rhino). Pleased to get that milestone out of the way (some safari experiences are spent entirely seeking the Big Five) we spend hours under the limitless sky, including a night watching a social gathering of pups and adults at a hyena den (did you know all hyenas, male and female, have penises? The females have a "pseudopenis" that can be up to 7" and females are far more aggressive and always dominate males); male lions stalking then fleeing from hippos; lions mating and rattling the earth with the roaring of their lovemaking; and as part of the **Phinda Specialist Safari** research project, four-wheel-driving through impassable thickets, using telemetry, to track leopards, that ends with us nearly running one over—he was so relaxed and lolling by the side of the road.

The animals we encounter seem fearless. The private airstrip near where we are staying is like a convention center for animals, with groups of impala, zebra, warthogs, and more enjoying the flatland and good sightlines to keep an eye out for predators.

We have a private Flight of the Fish Eagle airplane trip this morning, to zoom in a tiny two-seater prop plane over the nature reserve, small hut villages, and eventually to the coast of the Indian Ocean where the blue and white striations of waves tumbling onto the beach are like pop art, and dolphins cavort in the deeper blue. It feeds my passion for wanting to get a pilot's license on this perfect day of seemingly endless visibility.

A rocky shore is quite a navigation challenge on our way to a canoe put-in to go paddling in search of hippos and crocodiles. The lazy river is ours alone, accompanied by occasionally deafening birdsong and flitting feathered friends that buzz like mosquitoes around the shore. The water is too shallow for hippos—they will have moved on by this time of year, but we see telltale flattened reeds along the banks, and slide tracks in the mud that made it too clear that crocs are beneath and around us, instead of a comfortable distance away. When catfish blow bubbles next to the canoe, we pick up the pace of our paddling, trying to laugh off the hair standing up on the back of our necks. Daryl is as ecstatic about the smallest critters to the largest, and each one gets us caught up as well. Our favorite Daryl quote is when he quite seriously exclaims, without a hint of irony, "Oh God, we haven't even started on dung beetles!"



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