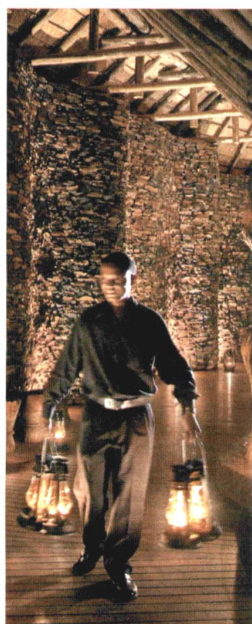


Magical MADIKWE @springtime

There's the bush experience, there's the fancy game lodge experience, then there's Madikwe TEXT TARYN GILL



Heading to the bush in the spring is, it turns out, a smart choice with warm days and cool nights, and thinner vegetation which means easier game spotting. With the first rains expected in spring, the dry savanna transforms into a bright green visual feast, so spring nights in the wild do come recommended.

Getting there is easy enough, with vast expanses of savanna greeting us as we passed out of urban boundaries and faced *regte* rural South Africa, with bottle stores and funeral houses outnumbering schools and small businesses, which is the much-needed reality check for urban middle class families like us of how rural South Africans live. After Madikwe village, the beauty that is Madikwe hit us sooner than expected with about 30 minutes of the most exciting dirt road we've ever had – giraffe, elephant, black rhino guarding their babies with zero sense of humour, impala, waterbuck, all greeting us coolly from the side of the road, a real bush welcome for what lay ahead.

Serene and luxe, the lodge does not take the word 'hospitality' lightly, with personal attention shown to each and every guest, by first name, and almost predicting what you may need before you even realise you need it! The friendly staff and knowledgeable game rangers make you feel a part of the Madikwe family, so the prolific game, the exquisitely simple and fresh food served all through the day and the luxe decor are enjoyed all the more. For those city lasses like myself, the idea of the night ride seemed like just the thrill I needed after an indulgent massage and nap while the kids ran off with Andre, the game ranger bloke who had my kids enthralled from start to finish with bush activities. What a night ride... chilled sauvignon blanc and brandy and cokes served at sunset in the open savanna with a few lady lions resting not too far away, followed by an off-road pitch-black drive into the bush to discover a sleeping leopard, a real up-close and personal encounter.

We even crossed paths with a herd of buffalo who, rangers say, are highly temperamental and come for you like you owe them money. The real key to get a family loving the bush: sharing the knowledge.

Game ranger Andre was a veritable trove of data which meant you not only enjoyed the beauty of the rides but learned so much along the way that the kids left with a deeper sense of the bush and how important it is to preserve it – my five- and 11-year old are now budding conservationists in training.

Let's talk kids... For so many of us, holidays are chosen with one main criteria in mind: the little people. Madikwe Safari Lodge did not disappoint, with kid-friendly food, attentive staff at hand for game drives, baking afternoons, educational mornings in the Eco House and more. Whether they were splashing in our private plunge pool or running off with game ranger Andre, the new coolest guy on the block, they simply had a jol. My daughter sighed lazily after a gourmet braai in the boma, "I feel really special". That night, showering outside under a carpet of stars with a chilled vino waiting for me on our private deck, I thought "I could not agree more".

The one thing standing between you and bush bliss could be the rates. If you are of the means to shell out enough moola for a few nights of this type of experience, read on...

RATES

From R5990 per person per night sharing, children under 16 (sharing with adults) pay 50% of the per person sharing rate & children under 6 stay free. www.madikwesafarilodge.co.za

PS: Apparently it's good luck to have a piece of black rhino dung in your pocket, so don't forget to grab a piece of lucky charm before you leave Madikwe!