

# South Africa – SAFARI!

All the stars lined up and we're off to South Africa for a safari. An AIMS Congress, the Comrades Marathon and a dear friend who happens to be an honorary ranger in Kruger – a confluence of happenings which resulted in us have a 'trip of a lifetime'. We're on Safari!

The AIMS Congress brought together race directors from around the world and our dear friend, Paul, put together a 10d safari for a group of friends with a common yearning to see the best parts of South Africa. We start in Durban and finish in Johannesburg. One bus, a group of friends and a lifetime of memories to be created. Let's go!

## Monday – Day 1

Safari day! Paul has previously told us not to bother with an umbrella as it NEVER rains in June. We wake to rain!

There is an excited buzz in the air as Paul briefs us on the days to come and we're introduced to our first guide, Jaco and our bus driver JC.

We collect our safari kits – a good size carry bag containing a zip up fleecy jacket, safari hat, beanie and kit with luggage tags, torch and a memento bottle opener. The scene is set. Our kit bag will be our 'day bag' from here on in.

We board the JC express coach and hit the road and very shortly the bush opens up before us. Our sights are now firmly set on finding the Big 5 – lion, leopard, buffalo, elephant and rhino. The skies clear quickly and there's nothing but blue sky ahead.

We cross into **Hluhluwe** (shoosh-loo-ee) National Park and, within a minute we're seeing elephant dung and lion tracks.... the day is indeed becoming more exciting. We transfer into game vehicles for a 3-hour trip to our overnight accommodation at the **Hilltop Resort**. By the time we arrive, we've seen:

- ) ngala
- ) baboon
- ) giraffe
- ) rhino
- ) warthog
- ) chameleon – which was a real treat as it's now dark and our driver spotted him on a fern like plant next to the road. Ok, he is bright green but he's only a few inches long. Superb eyesight!
- ) Glossy Starling



*Glossy Starling*

We also learn, very early in our trip, the difference between a white rhino and a black. White rhinos are grazers, ie eat grass, and have a wide mouth AND a lump just behind their neck that prevents them from looking skywards. Black rhinos are browsers, ie they eat from trees and shrubs up off the ground, looking skywards and have a beak like mouth.

We also pass the many rondavel houses – each house, most quite simple in their construction, has a rondavel or round house in the yard, for ceremonial purposes.

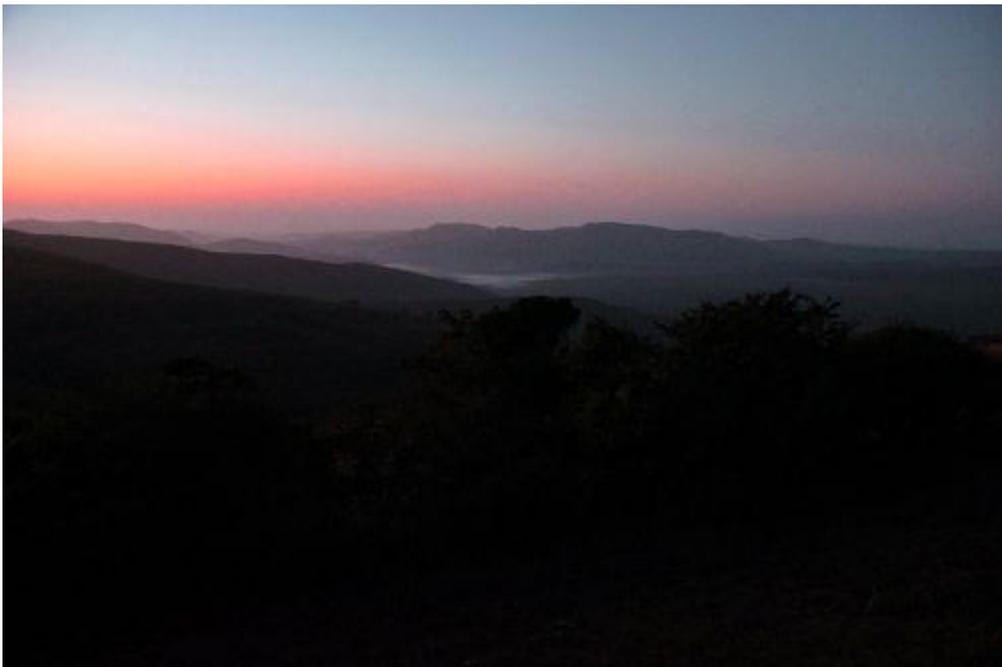
We have a seamless check in and by the time we get to our rooms our luggage has been delivered. Before leaving Durban we sorted out our stuff and packed all our safari clothes into one port, putting the other port into the hold of the bus where it will stay for the next nine days.

We meet our friends at the bar for a pre-dinner drink and are thrilled to find that drinks are extremely cheap! 14 rand for a gin & tonic, ie about AUD\$1.50. The bar is very authentic with all safari bits and pieces about the place.

Dinner is a buffet and the food is excellent.... we sit at a long table and talk about the first day of safari. After dinner, the staff put on a song and dance performance.... must be part of the criteria for hospitality jobs that you can entertain as well. They are wonderful and we pass the hat around afterwards.

## Tuesday – Day 2

We wake to a magnificent sunrise and gather on the deck to witness the surrounds coming to life. As we return to our room after breakfast there is a deer (of some variety) close by. And dozens of baboons... everywhere... foraging in the bins, on the road, on the thatched roofs.



We're on the bus and off to Kruger and along the way see grazing buffalo, giraffe (remarkably close by), elephants and their calves, warthogs and birds of all sorts of varieties.

Jaco also teaches us some of the local words:

- ) LEKKEE – pron, lakka – means nice
- ) DANKEY – pron. darn-kee – means thank you

We cross into **Swaziland**. Sugar cane is a major crop and there are plenty of pineapples and bananas as well. We drive through the capital, **Manzini**, which is a bustling town.

We stop at the local markets, where they have a beautiful candle shop, and have lunch at the local markets. The salads are fabulous and, in my opinion, a much better option than the many Swazi Burgers that come out, laden with fried onion rings. Many purchases are made at the candle factory before our departure, as well as some knicky-knacks from the local stall holders. I buy a rather lovely candle holder, which is the shape of a local Swazi lady as well as some matching candles.

We call into the **Nowenya** glass factory, which has the most exquisite glass objects at such cheap prices. The manager gives us a talk, describing the history of the factory and how they make all their products from recycled glass. We also witness the glass making process in the adjoining rooms, where the temperature sits between 35 and 45 degrees.



Knowing we still have a long way to travel and already full ports, I limit my purchases to a hippo wine stopper.

Our accommodation this evening is at the **Forresters Arms Hotel**, with its every so slight English feel to it and magnificent views across the valley to the hills.

After our pre-dinners, in a cosy room with a blazing fire (the heat is nearly killing me... it's just not that cold!) Judy, the proprietor, gives us a run down on the hotel's history, as well as her own. The girls in the hotel are dressed in traditional "daughter in law" dresses while some of them are wearing Swazi dresses.... absolutely gorgeous.



*Swazi sunset*

Dinner is, once again, fabulous. We are given menus and are told we just order one course at a time BUT they are very small servings so we can order as many of each course as we desire, ie soup and another entrée, a couple of mains and why would you stop at just one dessert! The food is brilliant and we are again treated to a song and dance routine by the staff. It is becoming clear that everyone can sing and dance in this part of the world.

We again sleep very soundly in our remote location. The night is cool/cold and the beds comfortable.

### **Wednesday – Day 3**

Breakfast is super... loads of fresh fruit and hot options.



*The women do all the heavy lifting around here*

We have a mid-morning comfort stop on the bus and there is a little roadside market. More shopping and a number of us come away with some fabulous beads/earrings. They cost next to nothing, ie five sets of beads for less than \$10 and everyone is happy.



*Swazi shopping mall*

We cross the **Barbarton Mountain Lands** and there are occasions where we all hold our collective breaths as JC negotiates a very narrow, dirt road with steep embankments. The area is home to the oldest and best preserved rock and sedimentary rocks on earth. It is here that the story of life on earth began and Jaco is a mine of information about the area. It is here that the evolution of the biosphere which supports all life on earth began and it is the home of bio and geo diversity. It is one of the seven geographical wonders of the world. WOW.

We pass through **Piggs Peak** which had legal casinos prior to 1994 when they were first legalised in RSA in 1994. It is now home to a thriving timber industry.

Jaco is running an hilarious contest of nations on the bus with points awarded (or deducted) for comments, insights, or anything else he chooses. The current point score is AUS 2, NZ 1, CAN 1, USA -10 (for inappropriate comment) and RSA 10 (because Jaco can). Many laughs are had.

We're still battling the dirt road and there are dense pine and eucalypt forests on all sides. The rocks are predominantly GNEISS (proc. nice) monoliths.

We also learn another phrase – BY-A DANKEY, 'thank you very much' as well as the acronym TIA "this is Africa" which seems to suffice to explain any anomaly, time delay, intrusion, etc.

We pass through a small town which is home to an asbestos mine which closed down in 2002. The open cut mines are still very visible and the asbestos is still subject to being blown around by the wind.

We cross the border back into RSA and are now on the 40km **GEO TRAIL** or **GENESIS ROUTE**. The surrounding hills are full of rocks.... gneiss, granite, basalt and black rock, which was used for making spears and tools.

Another new word – NGUNY, which is the indigenous cattle.... and dogs!

Jaco explains that the difference between the colours of the rocks:

- ) the black rocks hold the beginnings of life
- ) the red are so coloured due to oxidisation
- ) and the white is due to ash (volcanic)

These rocks remain after the seas retracted 120 million years ago.

We enjoy lunch at the **Diggers Retreat** before continuing to **Care for Wild**, where they care mainly for rhinos who have been orphaned or injured but they also have lions and other animals for which they care. We are once again on open vehicles, where we will stay for the next four days as we venture through **the Kruger National Park**.

Petronel gives us a presentation on their work before we go to the rhino pens. Along the way we are introduced to Emma, a 3yo miniature hippo, who is just gorgeous.... she clearly thinks the humans are her mother and she loves the pats and attention fostered upon her by an excited group of tourists.



*My new friend Emma  
(my old friend Georgios in the background!)*

The rhino rehab area is another treat..... the rhinos are so docile and friendly, until they want more hay at which time they make a hell of a racket. We go to the baby rhino pen where there are three little ones..... again, they are quiet and happy to rest in the waning sunlight.



*My other new friend Solarno!*



*You guessed it.... another new friend*

It is all over far too soon and we bid farewell to Petronel and her co-workers, gaining an understanding of how critical the rhino poaching is in Kruger and the work that is being done by a committed group of people.

We are treated to evening cocktails in the middle of nowhere..... it is as black as pitch and the 'Amarula girls' have created a pop up bar. Amarula is South African Baileys, made from the Amarula fruit..... the elephants eat the fruit and then become very wobbly. Paul welcomes us to **Kruger National Park** and introduces us to our guides for the next four days – Jaco will continue and is joined by Steven, Johan and Sandra. KNP covers an area of 4.4 million hectares and will be our home for the next four days. We are instructed to **NOT** wander away from the group.



*Protection*

I wander over to Steven and Johan to ask if they have tranquilisers or bullets in their rifles... they are obviously there to protect us..... and they inform me they are bullets. Tranquilisers take 15mins to work and, by that time, the lions have created a fair bit of carnage in the camp. The seriousness with which they take our safety is comforting.

Jaco does a brilliant presentation on the stars, the best I've ever witnessed (and we've had a few) before we pile in our jeeps and head to **Berg-En-Dal Rest Camp**..... Berg meaning mountain and En-Dal meaning valley.

## Thursday – Day 4

We're off on a 7:15am game drive and see lots of elephants, impala, giraffes, wildebeest as well as a bright blue bird with a crimson breast, which is christened 'the blue bird of happiness.' Our jeeps come with toasty woollen blankets for each person to ward off the cool morning air.



*Dumbo!*



*Male Impala*

Our driver is Johan and we soon establish our jeep as the 'Commonwealth truck'.... with us, and our friends from NZ, Canada and England. The group really clicks well together, as we all do with Johan, and we have a super time.

Paul and Jenny have invited us to their holiday home at Malalene for breakfast....once again it's a WOW moment. Their pole house is on the banks of the crocodile river at Malile, with KNP on the other side. There is a hippo swimming to the left as we enjoy coffee on the deck in their magnificent garden.



*Brekkie venue*



*What a view... that's Kruger on the other side of the Crocodile River*

We make our way into the house where a magnificent spread is laid out. The house is stunningly beautiful and full of safari artefacts. A gorgeous little girl comes up the steps, she is the daughter of one of the staff who live on site. The little girl's name is Jenny, she's 5yo and she quickly gets comfortable on my lap. She is an absolute sweetheart and tells me she has a baby brother, named Terry, who is only 2 months old.



*Jenny... too gorgeous for words*

Jenny has made us all feel so welcome and invites us to explore the whole house, which we do with much eagerness! There is a 'sports bar' on the top (of three) level with one wall hosting a stunning fresco of the Big 5..... Paul and Jenny are passionate about the wildlife and commit time, money and energy into the preservation of the animals.

They also provide for people in the local village which we visit after tearing ourselves away from such a place of beauty. The village people are dirt poor and their habitat confronting. Yet the children have wide smiles and are overly excited to see us.... probably as they know that Jenny brings them a lolly each when she visits. On this occasion we have bags of lollies to hand out and the children are loading their hands, pockets and mouths with as many treats as they can possibly carry.



*So cute!*



*Handfuls*

I have a chat with a local woman with a wide-eyed bub strapped to her back. I say the bub looks sleepy and she tells me he is sick. It is a heart rending moment when I realise this is the woman Jenny had talked about.... she has AIDS and so does the baby, who is only 12 months old. Esmerelda walks with me and beckons two other littlies to come with her.... a little girl about 3yo and a boy about 2yo. I ask if they are also her children and she tells me the little boy's mother died last year and his uncle (mother's brother) died last week. The boy is cared for by his grannie. Jenny tells me that grannie is also extremely ill and the small boy will soon be without any family at all. Amongst all the natural beauty is terrible heartache.



*No future..... so sad*

I meet another mother who has a beautiful baby, Bryce, who is 2mths old. Many of the people have AIDS and many have already died. There is a local school which is now abandoned as the local government decided that the children should go to a different school, a distance away. The building is now in ruins and not used for any purpose.... in a village that is so poor they have been abandoned by local authorities. This is the real South Africa.

We enter **Shakuza National Park** (part of Kruger) and visit the **Veterinary Wildlife Services**, where we have an information session. They do rhino sampling, research, transfer and diseases ..... much of what we are seeing and doing is not available to the normal tourist that visits the KNP and this is reinforced by a visit to the rhino Domas where the rhinos are kept. This is a research area so these animals haven't been injured.... some of them will be transferred to other areas, such as Botswana, for breeding but they are now currently in pens. They don't have a lot of human interaction as they don't want them to become used to humans but they do have music playing to assist in calming them down.

One particular rhino is very agitated and he stomps on the ground, kicking up clouds of dust. I ask our guide if the agitation is due to the transport or because they've been taken out of their normal surroundings.... he says they aren't clear on the exact cause. We also inspect the animal transport..... huge steel contraptions which are loaded on the back of trucks to transport elephants, rhinos and giraffes mainly.

We have a late lunch at a local nursery. We are staying in **Shakuza** for two nights so rip into the washing once we've checked into our rondavel shaped accommodation at the Rest Camp. These rest camps are super and we're enjoying life in Kruger immensely.

We don't have a huge amount of time before it's time to head to the golf club for dinner. It's a very mild night and our dinner venue is an indoor/outdoor restaurant, adjacent the 18<sup>th</sup> hole.

Our dinner speaker is "The General," an ex-military chap who now heads up the anti-poaching group. He is clearly a political figure rather than a hands on type of guy and shares with us the fact he met with Warren Buffet who donated \$230 million rand (about USD\$23m) to the cause. There's lots of charts, pie graphs and figures being projected but he soon realises he needs to wrap it up as the group is fading fast.

## **Friday – Day 5**

5:30am game drive ..... unbelievable! Team Commonwealth groups together and claim our truck/driver and this seems to set the pattern of keeping the same group for the entirety of our KNP experience.

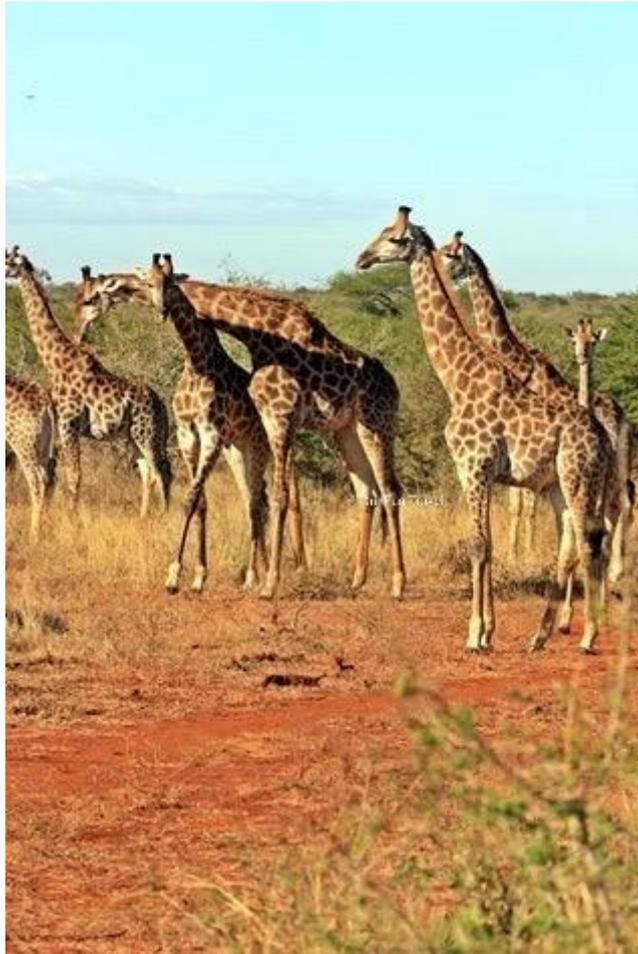
- ) rhino
- ) elephants
- ) zebras
- ) giraffe
- ) guinea fowl
- ) impala
- ) lions

- ) vultures
- ) nyala
- ) baboon
- ) warthog
- ) crocodiles
- ) water buffalo
- ) hiippos
- ) kudu
- ) wilderbeest
- ) ostrich

The lions are a group of seven, four females and three cubs, who wander out from the bush on our left, walk mildly around the truck, have a bit of a look at us and keep on moving into the bush on the right side. They are not fazed one bit by our presence and the cubs are super cute and playful.



*Family*



*Giraffe play*

We have an hour's drive through an area that is dense with wildlife... everywhere we look there are animals and birds. We reach our destination, on top of a hill on the Mozambique border, complete with razor fencing. Ranger Nils arrives on his camouflage motor bike to give us a talk on poaching.... this man has serious weaponry with a gun strapped to his hip, just next to his knife. His rifle remains on the bike.

Nils' talk on poaching is an eye opener..... a hands on description of what the park teams do to try and prevent the rhino poaching. There are 23 regions within the park, all with their own leaders, and Nils has been awarded the top award for the past three years. He details how they trek into the bush, for nights on end, trying to curtail the poachers who come across the Mozambique border. The cruelty of the poachers is horrible as is the death and destruction they leave behind. The poachers themselves are mostly poor villagers, with extensive bush and tracking skills, who are paid \$5,000 rand (approx.. US\$500) for the rhino horns, which are then sold for hundreds of thousands of dollars. The cartel behind the rhino poaching is also responsible for drugs and arms dealing. Nils is impressive both in his knowledge and commitment to the cause. Our group is realising how serious the rhino poaching is.

We enjoy the drive back to Shakuza and, by now, we've had a 12 hour day in the game vehicles.



The day has cooled off somewhat, as has the night. Tonight we are off to a Bush Braai, and dinner in the open. Once again our trusty guides with the guns are never far away! The dinner is cooked in solid steel pots, over an open flame and features traditional meals of meat, chicken and vegetables. The night is really quite cold and we have our fleeces on, as well as beanies, as well as blankets from our jeeps and any other warm clothing we have. A check on the iPhone confirms the temperature is 11 degrees. Lighting is from candles on our tables. It's a fantastic night but when the 'first jeeps' are announced as departing everyone leaves immediately..... enough of the cold, back to civilisation.



## Saturday – Day 6

We have a late start today, with an 8:30am brekkie and a 9:30am departure to **Satara NP**. We keep the same crew in the truck to continue the good times.

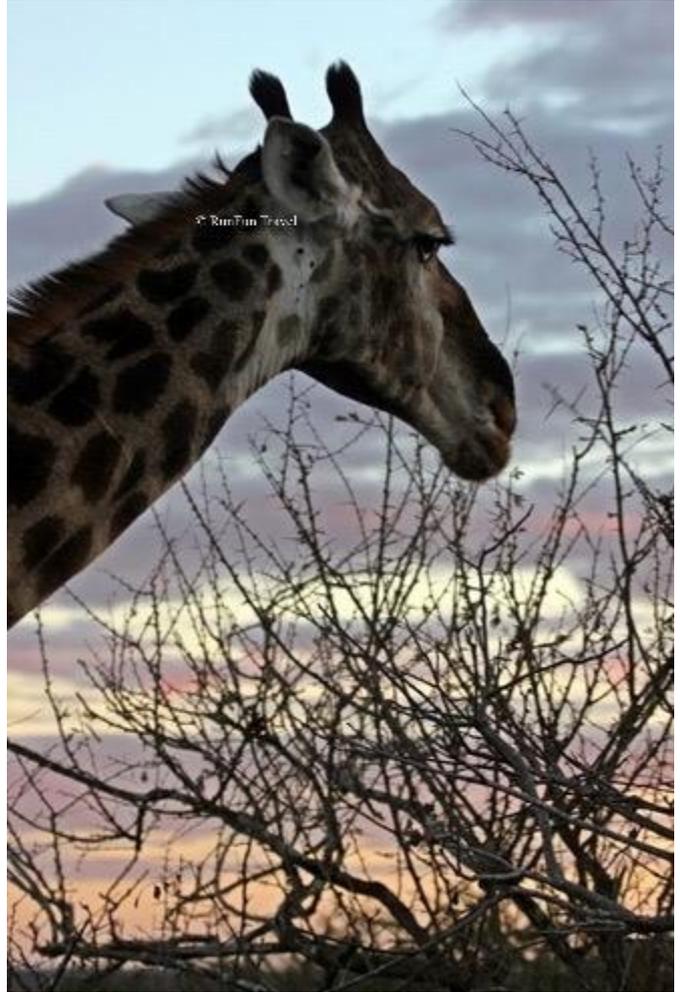
We pass by a water hole, where there are impala and hippos. We then see a journey of giraffe stroll out of the bush and make their way to the water hole. Watching them drink, legs splayed apart, is a real treat..... they drink the water then thrown their necks up wildly, spreading water everywhere.



We arrive at the **Satara Rest Camp** and check into another rondavel cabin. We then enjoy a sunset game drive at 4pm where we witness a magnificent sunset. Along the way we see baboon, buffalo, crocodiles, nyala, impala, zebra and water buffalo. Sandra is our guide as Johan has taken a group out on a bush walk this evening.



*The magic hour*



*African sunset.... magic!*

Dinner is at **Mugg and Bean**, a coffee shop chain that has the rights to the food outlets in Kruger. The food is ok but the service is fairly poor. We ordered ahead and they still manage to take forever and bring out lukewarm dinners. But no one cares as we're having a ball and it's all about the company.

Animals seen today:

- ) baboon
- ) buffalo
- ) crocs
- ) nyala
- ) impala
- ) zebra
- ) water buck
- ) dwarf mongoose
- ) steen buck
- ) tree squirrel
- ) vervet (monkey)
- ) stork
- ) giraffe
- ) warthog
- ) wilderbeest (also known as gnu)
- ) slender mongoose
- ) white rhinos
- ) birds

After dinner we're encouraged to come join the bonfire that Ocky has lit.... it's really cold and my teeth are chattering as we walk over to the bonfire. And what a bonfire it is! The thing is raging away on a cement slab and putting out an enormous amount of heat. Also, to heat the cockles of our collective hearts is Amarula and red wine.

Once we've settled in, Vanessa brings out her steel string guitar and starts singing. Not only can this woman wield a gun but she also sings like a bird. What a talent! We have a fabulous evening as she plays all the hits from the 70s (and some from the 80s) and we sing along. What an expected treat to end another great day.

The safari of awesomeness just keeps getting better!

## **Sunday – Day 7**

We leave in our truck for a 6:30am safari bush walk, with Johan and Vanessa as our guides. We drive for 10mins or so before Johan parks the truck. From there we are given a brief but important briefing about the walk we're about to take. Our guides always have our safety foremost in their minds and today is no different. They also have bullets in their chambers.... they take no risks whatsoever.

We are instructed to walk in single file, Johan in front, Vanessa behind him. One of our group enquires as to why Vanessa isn't drawing up the rear and Johan tells us that if confronted by any trouble he takes care of the 'animal situation' and Vanessa takes care of us, ie she needs to be in front of us to issue instructions.

We walk a short way and spot a herd of elephants. They spot us too. Johan motions us to follow him... he speaks in little more than a whisper and we follow his instructions to a T. We make our way across the creek and along the bank on the other side. As we're walking along I spot a rather large baboon come tearing across the grass, where he climbs up a very thin and straight stalk, perching himself on the top. From there he just sits.

During our walk we see hyena, elephants, rhino, zebra and water buffalo. Being up wind or downwind of animals is important, depending on whether they need to be aware of us or don't and Johan expertly navigates the way on our 2hr walk.



*Remnants*

Back at the camp we jump in our trucks and make our way to the exit of KNP. Along the way we come across one of the most extraordinary sites we're ever likely to see..... a lion with his fresh zebra kill, under a tree and RIGHT NEXT TO THE ROAD.

JC (subsequently) says in all his time of driving through the park he has never witnessed such a scene. We are privileged. We spot another lion a few metres away, the other side of the tree.

We cut the motor and just sit... and watch. So close. On closer observation (with the binoculars) the lion has had a fare feed of the zebra. Once they have made a kill, they remove all the innards (which they don't eat) and drag the animal to another place. Here they'll rest, as they are tired from all the activity, until they are ready to eat.

This mighty animal eyeballs us as we click, click, click with our cameras. I am looking at him, through my lens, and we lock eyes. He is staring right at me. Johan comments that he is watching someone in the truck. I am certain it's me. What a moment. I am intrigued by the enormity of the paw, draped possessively over his meal.



*Look at me.... look at meeee*

After a while he looks sleepy and his eyes start to droop. We continue to sit. And watch.

Eventually we pull away and take up a position the other side of the tree. The second lion is younger and has the 'prettiest' face and amber eyes. He is a beauty.



*Pretty boy*

Eventually we leave and continue our journey, each one of us aware that we have witnessed a most remarkable moment.

Our next stop is the exit from Kruger, where we will say farewell to our guides. The past four days have been nothing short of incredible and there are some heavy hearts, on both sides, as we say our fond farewells. Johan, Steven and Sandra have kept us safe and shared with us their skills, knowledge and friendship. Jaco and Vanessa will continue with us to Joburg.

As it's Pentecost Sunday, we have a short service, conducted by Ocky. At the end, our guides are called forward and we give them a resounding standing ovation. At 12:30pm we exit the magnificent KNP.... there is a palpable heaviness in the coach.



*Johan... ranger extraordinaire*

Our sadness at leaving our guides is lifted instantaneously when we arrive at the luxe **Kapama River Lodge**. Wow! We enjoy a magnificent lunch, on the river, before checking into our rooms. Huge, airy, comfortable bed, deep bath and a view into the private game park a few metres from our deck. Luxury.

We think we might have a swim but, on testing the water (in the pool), decide maybe not. It's really cold. So, I have a soak in the bath instead. Some of the group take advantage of the day spa.

4pm and we're off for a game drive in this private reserve, with promises that we will find the elusive leopard plus many other animals as well as sunset cocktails. Unfortunately, due to some chaos at the truck station, team Commonwealth has been separated .... not a problem but we've had a rip roaring time these past few days.

Our guide, Rassy. We see lots of impalas and a few warthogs. Impalas are referred to as 'McDonalds'- one because they have a black 'M' on their bottoms (not unlike a black version of the golden arches) and two, because there's one on every corner.

After a lot of driving and not many animals, Rassy stops by a lake – within seconds a pop up bar is set up and Rassy is asking what we'd like to drink. After he's finished serving everyone he then asks us for our room numbers..... goes down like a lead balloon. As it gets darker and colder the group gets a bit restless (and a bit bored) until one of the group finally asks if we can go and find some animals. Back in the truck and off we tootle.

It's now dark and we're not spotting anything. We have a 'tracker' sitting out the front of the truck (on his separate seat). He certainly isn't tracking anything, nor finding any eyes lit up in the floodlights. There's no Johan in this group!

Eventually we see other trucks and Rassy takes a right, crashing through the undergrowth and mowing down trees.... which is a bit strange given our past days talking about conservancy. We come across a pride of lions, three females and one young male, snoozing in a clearing. The female closest to us lifts her head to take a look but really can't be bothered with our presence at all. The other three couldn't care less and continue their slumber.



Rassy informs us that this group made a warthog kill earlier, they have full stomachs and will now sleep for anything up to 23 hours. They couldn't be less interested in us.

On passing through the lodge, we find one of our Canadian friends settled in with a glass of red, next to a huge, blazing fire. We dump our stuff in the room and return to join him. As more people mill around, close to dinner time, it is obvious that the whole cocktail scene went down badly... except for JC's truck.....he knew what was coming and told the driver they didn't want to stop for cocktails.

Dinner was by the river again.... it was quite cold but there was another bonfire, in the middle of the open air restaurant, and we all had cosy blankets to wrap ourselves in. The food was again outstanding, as was the company.



*Kingfisher*

## **Monday – Day 8**

During the night I hear elephants making a racket, seemingly metres from our room.

5:30am and we're back in the trucks for a morning game drive. Team commonwealth has re-assembled.

Our first treat is a herd of elephants, which includes a 3mth old baby. They are stripping the branches of close by trees and knocking them down to feast on. Baby dumbo comes galumphing out of the bush, with a tree branch in his mouth.....he spots our truck, moves closer, then charges. He pulls up short and then looks as if he has absolutely no idea what to do next. So he flaps his cute (not so little) ears and wanders off into the bush to the side of our truck.





We sit for ages and watch them go about their business.

Our driver is Angie, who tells us she is taking us to one of her favourite spots in the reserve. As we get closer she then tells us we're about to see something very special... get the cameras ready... no, it's not the leopard.... but it is very special.

As we drive through the yellow grasses we catch sight of a large cat. A cheetah..... magnificent. And then we see the tiny cub following her. The cub is 3 weeks old and the last survivor of a litter of five. Angie tells us that the rangers think that the 4<sup>th</sup> cub was taken by a pack of hyenas – the mother killed a warthog yesterday and the hyenas moved in and stole the kill. They think they stole the cub at the same time. The mother is letting out a continual, mournful cry searching for her missing cub. Apparently she will continue this behaviour for 4-5 days before giving up the search.

We snap, snap, snap, trying to get the best photo of the mother cheetah, with long grass half way up her lithe body and the cub, which we can only really see as it hits the high point in its bouncy steps through the grass.

Then, as if by magic, the cheetah stands atop a mound of dirt.... couldn't be better scripted if we tried. Then the cub joins her. This is photographic utopia. Just when it couldn't get any better, the mother cheetah bends down to her cub and licks her. "Did anyone get the lick" says the photographer from the rear of the truck. I did!!!! Best photo of the safari..... can't believe my luck.



We sit, photograph and watch in wonder at this truly astounding sight. Eventually, the cheetah walks off. We are the only truck to capture this moment as it's "one at a time" apart from the lone person sitting with his film equipment in another truck not too far away. No leopard but we've had the experience of a lifetime. The second one in two days.

Back at the lodge we check out – no 'sunset drinks' on the account! We know that Paul caught wind of what happened and has apparently fixed things up.

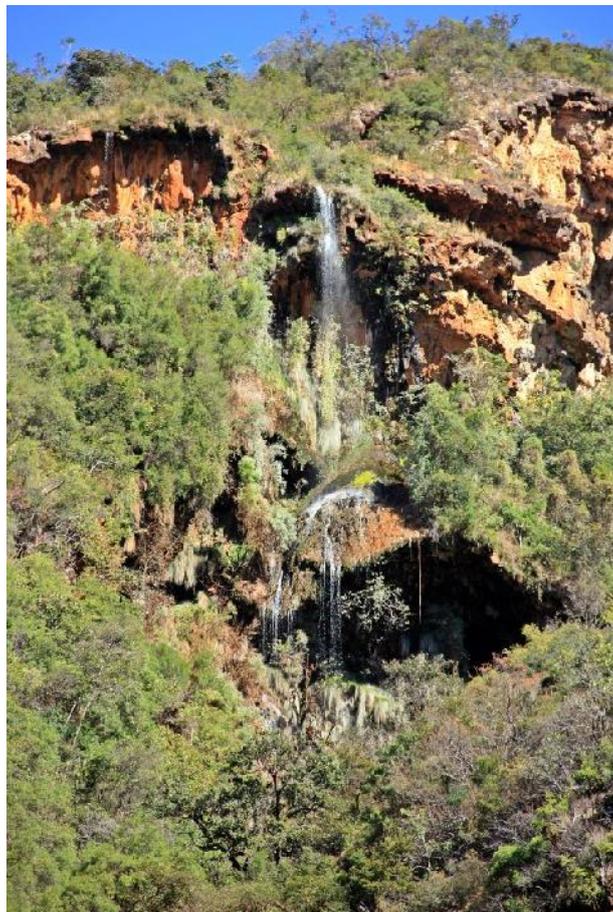
On the bus again to our destination of **Blyde River Canyon** where we board a boat for a cruise up the Canyon. Our guide is Bednek (not Redneck as he keeps reminding us!) and he is a mine of information plus quite the entertainer. We spot a huge python, resting against a submerged rock, with its head just sitting above the water level. Nearby is a huge monitor lizard.



*Blyde River*



A little further down a family of three baboons sit on a rock and there are so many birds! We cruise right up to the base of the **Tufu Falls**, which have carved their way down the cliffs over millions of years.



Next stop is **Bourkes Luck Potholes**, another extraordinary work of nature. The potholes sit in the confluence of the Blyde River – River of Happiness – and the Trier River – River of Sadness. The area had a great deal of alluvial gold in years gone by.



We arrive at our accommodation for the night, "**Blyde Canyon, A Forever Resort**," only just before sunset. The resort sits on the edge of the canyon, which lights up as the sun drops behind the hills.

Today is Pauls birthday and we sing happy birthday during dinner. Never ones to disappoint, the staff join together and sing happy birthday in three different languages.

## **Tuesday – Day 9**

Breakfast is entertaining when the baboons call in on us. We've been sitting in the glorious morning sun, prior to brekkie, chatting away and decide we'll stay outside to eat on their sundrenched deck.

I watch a baboon on top of reception as he walks across the top of the roof.... then down to the eaves..... then jumps down onto the deck railing.... then, within a second, he's on the table, grabbed some French toast, and skedaddled back to the railing, where he scampers away then sits up and proudly eats the toast! It happened so quickly that you'd blink and miss it... which most people did. We are all laughing when Dave comes out with his breakfast and sits down.

The baboon isn't far away and I warn Dave to watch his food. No sooner said than the baboon jumps on the table and grabs Dave's banana..... Dave has one end and the baboon has the other and, on this occasion, Dave wins! We decide to move inside to finish breakfast.



*Toast anyone?*

Today is the last day of our journey and we are heading to Johannesburg for our farewell dinner. There is a distinct lack of interest in boarding the bus this morning and a suggestion that we "do the trip in reverse." There is a profound realisation that this is the end of our extraordinary journey – one we have spent with such good friends – and that we will soon be going our separate ways. We stand around, chatting, not boarding, doing anything but, resisting all efforts, until we have to go.

We stop at a roadhouse for a quick lunch and it's back to reality.... the car park is manned by armed guards, with nasty looking automatic rifles. We are now back in the land of the real South Africa, with armed car jackings and theft.

We reach **Joburg**, a city of 4+ million, mid-afternoon and check into the **Sandton Sun Hotel**. It's a lovely hotel in an upmarket area, adjoining a very slick shopping centre. We don't bother though.

The group gathers in the bar for pre-dinner drinks before we watch a slide show of photo from the safari. We move to an adjoining area where we are seated for our celebratory dinner. Not only did Paul manage to put together the most phenomenal itinerary for an

amazing price but he also managed to “beg, borrow and steal” (as he put it) with the various people in order to save a sizable amount for the budget, which we tonight donate to SANParks.

We thank Jaco for his unforgettable contribution to the tour and he is given a thunderous standing ovation. The same for Vanessa. We have passed around the hat on the bus and give them both, and JC, an envelope with our tips in it to thank them for being far more than tour guides.

Dave makes a speech about the correlation between our AIMS Safari and the Comrades Marathon – Comrades is 90km (about) and the Safari was 9 days. He continues to break it down in 10km segments, relating to each day of our trip, and connects the two. It's a great speech.

We have a representative from SANParks and present him with a cheque of \$227,500R – approx.. \$25,000. \$20,000 will be given to Petronel, at her rhino facility.

Ocky then gives a run-down of “observations on safari” which is very funny. Each person gets an award – Dave's is for being “the most amiable and friendly” and mins is the “Kitty Kat” award. I know it's for my cheetah photo (which had been voted the photo of the safari) but I hate cats!

A fabulous end to an unbelievable journey. But not quite over.....

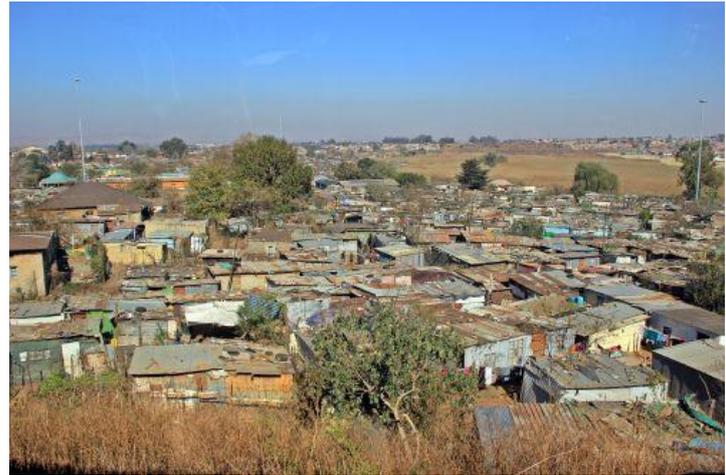
## **Wednesday – Day 10**

We had an option of an additional tour of **Soweto** and all but two of our group is doing the tour! The fun never ends.

Jaco and Vanessa were to join us but now realise that our return is too late for them to make it back to Kruger before dark..... Jaco explains the roads are closed at dark and the have to take winding back roads after dark. This adds a couple of hours to their trip plus it's dangerous due to the animals on the road. We bid very fond farewells to our two dear friends. As Jaco says “this is not the end, it's just the beginning.”

Off to Soweto where we see how the other half lives. Ocky is our tour guide today and gives us a rundown on Joburg as we go. The area of Sandton is the richest 2sq kilometres in South Africa, being home to the major banking, financial and legal institutions. We go past Mandela's house in Sandton.... he didn't live there and the property is now the subject of fighting between his children over his estate.

Soweto is home to 3.2 million people and, interestingly, is a city of contrasts. It was created as a township for black workers who came to work in the mines. While the slums still exist and are home to many poverty stricken families, there is also a more prosperous side to the city, with high end housing and luxury cars. In between there are plenty of middle class families.



We visit the **Hector Pieterse Museum** where the story of apartheid is laid out. Hector was a young boy, of 16 years, when he was gunned down by the police during the uprising in the apartheid years. Inside the museum there are videos of life during apartheid, verbal accounts from those who lived through these times and photographs of life as it was.

In one section there lies the eyewitness account from Hector's sister of what happened on that particular day as well as statements from other witnesses. Next is the statement from the police officer in charge... not surprisingly contradicting the other eyewitnesses and supporting the police who murdered the young teenagers in cold blood. The museum is as confronting as it is compelling.



*The faces of the Soweto uprising*

We take a walk down **Vilakazi St** "the most famous street in Soweto" and then past the house where Mandela resided. On the front wall of his house, a message is inscribed:

*"No one is born hating another person because of the colour of his skin, or his background, or his religion. People must learn to hate, and if they can learn to hate, they can be taught to love, for love comes more naturally to the human heart than its opposite." - Nelson Mandela 1918-2013*

We lunch at the fabulous **Wandies**, in Soweto and are entertained by a lovely chap who plays guitar and sings warming ballads, eg *What a Wonderful World*. During lunch we are all awarded our certificates and I publicly fess up re my dislike for cats..... big cats in the wild, love 'em... domestic cats, can't stand 'em. Many others agree!

On our return the bus drops us at our overnight stop, the **Mercure at Bedford Downs**. A few of us are overnighing and flying out tomorrow and the rest are off to the airport. There are a few tears from some of our closest friends as they farewell us and continue on our way.

The hotel is surrounded by a 12' cement fence with electric wire along the top of it. All the houses in this area are the same. It is a very affluent area with huge houses and lots of protection to go with it.

There is a shopping centre opposite and we meet at the restaurant precinct for dinner. Along with Jenny and Paul, our remaining group is the Kiwis, Canadians and English – team commonwealth is the last standing!!!!

We have a great night at the **Plaka**.... Greek food and all.

## **Thursday – Day 11**

Jenny and Paul ferry us to the airport - Jenny takes a detour to show us where they live..... a lovely house in the older part of the suburb.

We encounter just a small problem when checking in.... we're flying to Hanoi, via Singapore, and our hosts in Vietnam have not yet sent our 'invitation letter' in order for us to secure a landing visa on arrival. As a result, the airline cannot check us, or our luggage, though to Hanoi. The chap at the counter is extremely helpful and we're there for a long time but, at the end of the day, we're going to Singapore and will re-negotiate the position there, in the hope our letter has arrived in the meantime. No problem.

We regroup with the Kiwis in the airport lounge before departure. Our arrival letter turns up via email and Dave gets the staff in the lounge to print it out for us. Phew... just in time!

We depart after lunch for our 10 hour flight to Singapore.

## **Safari Wrap**

I have looked forward to this trip for over 12 months and always knew it would be a moment in time that would stay with me forever. The animals were incredible and our tour guides so knowledgeable but, most of all, we spent 10 days with some of our closest friends from around the world. Hearts were touched, money was raised and donated, excess clothing was also donated to Paul and Jenny's local village and our awareness of the plight of the rhinos in South Africa was expanded. We have met wonderful new friends.

And the South Africans do the best roast chicken **ever!**