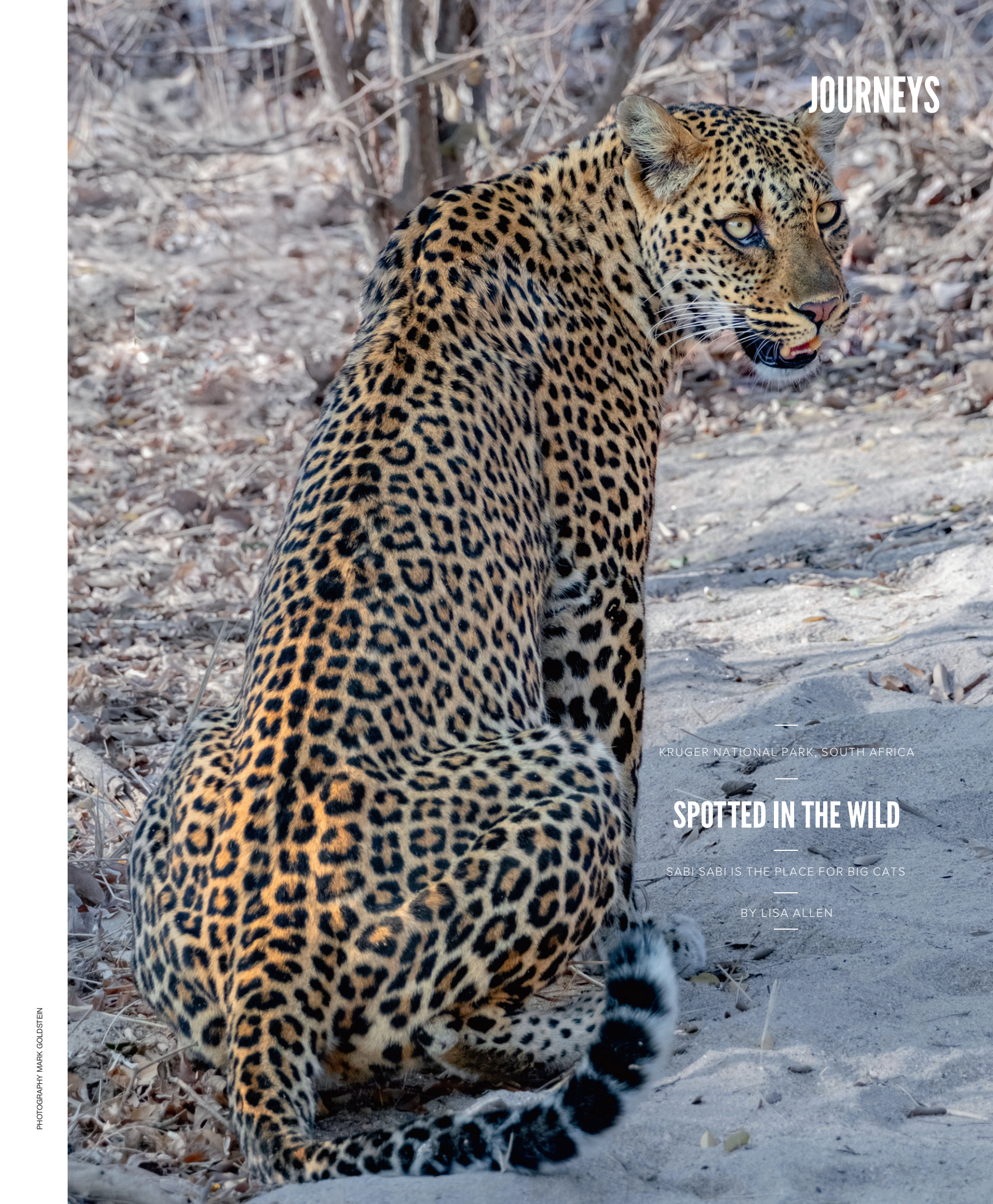




JOURNEYS

—
KRUGER NATIONAL PARK, SOUTH AFRICA
—

SPOTTED IN THE WILD

—
SABI SABI IS THE PLACE FOR BIG CATS
—

BY LISA ALLEN
—

"If there is one more thing that I could do, it would be to go on safari once again."

– Karen Blixen (1885-1962), author of *Out of Africa*

It's 5.30am deep in Africa's sub-Saharan savannah country. From the bumpy back seat of the safari vehicle, having morphed into full Jane (as in Tarzan) mode, I am about to spend a morning watching a leopard feast on a kill, a baby jumbo throw a tantrum, and two chummy zebras face opposite directions to better scan the horizon as they watch for their mortal enemies: lions.

We've set off from the Sabi Sabi private game concession adjoining South Africa's Kruger National Park. Sabi Sabi has four lodges, ranging from the ultra-upmarket Earth Lodge, carved out of natural savannah, to the classic Bush Lodge, the epicentre of the vast operation owned and run by a local South African family since 1979. There are no fences between Sabi Sabi and Kruger; the animals, and us, pass unimpeded over the dividing line.

This is one of the best places in the world to see leopards, which luckily for safari lovers are extraordinarily easygoing around safari vehicles. It's common to see

members of the Big Five – lions, leopards, buffalos, rhinos and elephants – each day, which makes Sabi Sabi an exquisite place for a first safari. Indeed, on our first visit to Bush Lodge, we came across a leopard and elephant, just metres apart, within 20 minutes of climbing into our safari truck.

A safari is not a cheap holiday, given operator costs are accelerating at the speed of a lion hunting zebra. Conservation and anti-poaching initiatives are among the reasons prices tend to be higher than other bucket-list travel experiences. Anti-poaching activities such as de-horning rhinos to stop the mania for their horns are costly, usually involving helicopters, light planes, teams of vets and dozens of ground staff. Many operators also employ 24-hour armed anti-poaching units to combat poachers. Rhino horns and rare pangolins (the most trafficked animal in the world for their meat and scales) are prized by the Chinese and Vietnamese for their supposed health-giving benefits.

Sabi Sabi is, however, running its own ranger and tracker programs, recruiting local village kids for training. Sabi Sabi's director of marketing, Jacques Smit, says children from the village communities are given top priority to join one of four



Wild: clockwise from above, Earth Lodge; a weaver bird making its nest; an elephant beside the Zambezi River; a suite in the Bush Lodge

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JOURNEYS



Enroute to our ultra-luxe tented camp Dulini Anabezi for four nights, we view a pride of eight lions, hundreds of buffalo, plus warthog families. This camp overlooks the Zambezi River and a floodplain teeming with elephants, hippos, crocodiles and birdlife.

We also take in a lone “bachelor herd” of Cape Buffalo. These smaller herds are made up of old or sick male buffaloes that have been kicked out of the main herd because they can’t keep up the hectic pace. Rangers jokingly describe these old guys as “retired military generals”. You can’t help but feel sorry for these aged folk.

In a new trend, Dulini Anabezi is hosting large groups of wealthy Texans who employ their own private photographic guide for trips. These private guides, usually

American or South African professional photographers, charge up to \$US3000 a day to instruct or take the shots for their clients. The Americans also pay the guide’s accommodation and extra fees, and rent their own private safari vehicle instead of sharing with other guests.

From our luxe tent replete with indoor and outdoor showers, private pool, a standalone bath and king-sized canopied bed, we see elephants, warthog and the Cape Buffalo herds roaming the floodplains right out the front.

The resort also offers water cruises in the company of crocs and hippos. One evening our guide surprises us with a visit to a deserted island in the middle of the Zambezi River. He lights a fire and sets up a makeshift cocktail

educational programs: ranger, tracker, chef or waiter.

Whether or not you are lucky enough to secure one of these locally trained guides for your safari, you can be sure that replete with G&T in hand you can scan the animal-rammed savannah in safety, and then relax back at the lodge in extreme comfort.

After three nights at Kruger we head to Zambia – described as “the Botswana of 20 years ago”, only

cheaper and filled with more animal life. It offers an Attenborough-style surplus of animal sightings, including elephants.

Elephants, you say?

Zambia’s Lower Zambezi has plenty of tuskers, apparently some of the largest herds in southern Africa, so a trip to Jeki via privately chartered light plane is a must. We land in a four-seater, noting – with alarm – 11 zebras scattered across the bush runway.



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bar complete with white tablecloth for us to enjoy the sunset. Our ranger and two waiters ply us with fried spiced chicken and vegetable tarts. They have just one word of caution: “Don’t get too close to the water’s edge.” Presumably because of the Zambezi’s rampant crocs. As we sip some of South Africa’s finest wines, we spy elephant groups wading across the Zambezi River at dusk in search of rich grasses.

Later that week, we dive deeper into Zambia, travelling to the remote South Luangwa National Park, whose wildlife viewing is among Africa’s finest if you like the big cats. But you can also spot Thornicroft’s giraffes here – a rare subspecies unique to the area.

South Luangwa has luxury accommodation such as the new Chichele Presidential Lodge, as well as rustic camps deep in the bush. We stay at the Bushcamp Company’s Chamilandu Lodge, perched high in a treehouse constructed of thatch and reed that overlooks the Luangwa River.



There’s no need to go on safari as the animals came to us. Out front we spy a young hyena having breakfast, along with hippos, buffaloes, baboons and elephants.

Back on the Lower Zambezi I open my luxury safari tent door at Dulini Anabezi late one afternoon to find an elephant staring me in the face, with a bachelor buffalo herd of five bulls close by. They have come to our safari camp to shelter from the marauding lions.

But the elephants and buffaloes are obviously unaware of the lone male leopard that’s been seen lurking silently in the shadow of our boardwalk. Needless to say, sleep was fitful that night.

Up close: clockwise from above, a warthog and elephant at Sabi Sabi; leopard; giraffes; a mongoose family

CHECKLIST

Getting there: Qantas operates direct flights from Sydney to Johannesburg. South African Airways has also recently started services from Sydney to Johannesburg via Perth.

Stay: Kruger’s accommodation ranges from basic self-catering facilities to super-luxury lodges in the adjoining private reserves, such as Sabi Sabi’s Earth Lodge. This overlooks a large waterhole, which until recently was home to a pod of eight hippos. (Following a fight between family members, or a male hippo trying to dominate – rangers offer varying opinions – the hippos, which can travel up to 30km at night, have decamped.) These days, elephants, wild Cape Buffalo herds and rhinos enjoy the quieter waterhole. Rates at Sabi Sabi Bush Lodge start at \$4670 inclusive of food, wine and tours. sabisabi.com

Eat: At the Sabi Sabi breakfast table, choose from a buffet or a la carte. Our breakfast of spinach frittata with guacamole, jalapeno and sour cream is served with Shangaan slow-roasted tomato and rustic seed bread. The kitchen never closes at Earth Lodge and we take lunch choosing from rib eye with mushroom miso cream and shoestring fries, Coronation chicken salad, or Caprese salad. The more adventurous can eat closer to home by choosing an ostrich burger with crispy onions and home fries, washed down with a delicious Colmant Brut Rose which has the crucial Cap Classique branding, the moniker used on South African sparkling wines made by the traditional method.

Do: For organised tours contact Remarkable Africa, remarkable-africa.com