

Sabi Sands is adjacent to the world-renowned Kruger National Park and is home to a host of wildlife, including the Big Five



SABI SANDS South Africa

Peek into a secret world

The cheetah that blocked my road. They truly are lovely cats that are often mistaken for leopards but the 'tear streak' line that runs from the eyes to the mouth is an easy way to identify them.



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Photos: Sanjay F Gupta

THE only sound I could hear was of water slowly flowing over small boulders.

The wind was still and the leaves quiet. The morning sun was breaking through the trees and the water shimmered with golden light. The dew-covered grass and leaves glistened; a very thin layer of steam lay suspended on the water. My safari vehicle of 'andBeyond Lodge' stood next to the river with its engine powered off.

We were here to sight the legendary Mapogo lions. These four lions had formed a coalition over the last two years and since then have hunted together, fiercely guarding their game-rich territory from all neighbouring lions. They had claimed their territory in style, killing the previous lions that had ruled this area. Expert trackers of andBeyond had tracked the Mapogo lions a day earlier to this area but since lions can move any time, it was not possible to predict their exact location. We were waiting to hear or see the slightest hint to gauge

their presence in the thick bush of Sabi Sands. The bush acted like a thick wall, hiding all its mysteries and there was no sign of the lions. The river too ran through it without revealing anything.

The African bush has the power to engulf all its tourists into its magic so much so that they soon forget the progress of time. And this is what had happened to me. The memories of boarding my eight-hour-long flight from Mumbai to Johannesburg and then the drive to Kruger were forgotten the moment I stepped into the rustic but inviting reception of andBeyond Exeter River Lodge at the Sabi Sands game reserve. The first thing that struck me as I walked to the restaurant area next to the river in the lodge was the calmness and serenity of the place. Immediately, the sense of belonging to nature crept in. Unlike when I am in a city, this is a heightened state where I notice the slightest movement in the bush, my ears are open to the minutest rustle and I notice everything of

beauty around me.

I was soon greeted by my butler and taken to a jaw-dropping luxurious, large room with two different places to shower and a bath tub in addition – all with a complete view of the river and the bush beyond. I have visited several andBeyond lodges in Africa and every time I step into their suites, the décor and view always makes me smile.

Sabi Sands is adjacent to the world-renowned Kruger National Park and it is famous for its intimate wildlife encounters, particularly with leopards. Home to a host of wildlife, including the Big Five, Sabi Sands is part of a conservation



This lion lost its teeth while fighting with a lion in the process of claiming this territory, but it did not seem to affect his eating pattern as he was completely healthy and strong.



Dik Dik is one of the smallest antelopes (left) in Africa and easily missed if the photographer is not looking carefully. They weigh just 5 kilos.

A herd of zebras raises dust as the sun rises (below)





area that covers over almost five million acres, an area larger than some independent countries. With no boundary fences between the Reserve and the Kruger National Park, this area benefits from the great diversity of wildlife found in one of the richest wilderness areas on the African continent along with the additional benefits experienced on a private game reserve like off-road and night driving. The Sabi Sands Reserve brings together the legend of Kruger Park with the finest Safari lodges, providing a South African experience that is unrivalled for its service, hospitality and Big Five game viewing.

Once in the Reserve, I immediately wanted to go on a game drive but it was late afternoon already. My hopes of being on the evening safari had died when my flight landed late and I knew I would not reach the lodge in time for the evening safari departure. I had travelled to Sabi Sands to photograph its famous wildlife and leopards in particular, but that would now have to wait till the next day.

With little else to do, I worked on the right set-up of my cameras with the lenses, charged the batteries, memory cards, flash units, and had a nice relaxed shower before I was escorted to the dining room.

While I felt that the area was totally safe, the management at the lodge preferred that a tracker with a rifle escorted me to the restaurant and back, as there were some free roaming predators around.

My ranger for the trip – Steve – joined me at the dining table, a lovely private table under a tree with lanterns everywhere. I quickly realised that like me he was a total nature buff and was a ranger for the love of it and not just for a job. We had great conversation over a delicious meal while discussing the magnitude of rhino poaching, new camera lenses, the growth of the andBeyond group over the last few years and our passion for wildlife and conservation. We could have gone on forever but since we had to get up early and leave by 6 am, we wished each other a super safari the next day and left.

As I lied down on my bed, I could clearly see a large herd of elephants drinking from the river. The river was silvery white in the moonlight and many tusks shined brightly. Inspired, I stepped outside into the patio of my room with my pillow and a cover. There was no way I was going to dream inside the room when it was so dream-like outside. I was now truly one with the magnificence of nature around me.

The Mapogo lions with the their buffalo kill (**below & left, top**); two of the young Mapogo walk away from their kill for a bit while the others feed (**far left**).





The large elusive, shy leopard (above) very close to my Lodge. This is what I visited Sabi Sands for. They are often spotted on trees and even carry their prey up not to be disturbed by lions and hyenas.



Black backed jackals (right) are mostly scavengers but are known to hunt down small animals. Their sense of smell is strong and they can smell a carcass from quite a distance.



Giraffe mothers are very protective of their calves and constantly stay between any possible danger (here the vehicle) and them. A newborn calf weighs around 100 kg and is born after a gestation period of about 15 months.

The next morning, waiting by the river for the lions, I felt exactly the same – I was one with nature. Steve and I were concentrating hard to decipher any sound, sight or smell that would lead us to the lions. A kingfisher plunged into the river and flew away with its first catch of the day. An orange-billed hornbill, with its typical call, flew from a tree to our right. Did it fly on its own or something made it? We could not judge, but Steve slowly backed up from where we could get a better view of the area to where the sound came from. There was no movement but we saw some animals

appearing from the thickets in front of us and what first seemed to be huge moving rocks, slowly turned into a small herd of cape buffaloes. They crossed the shallow river and moved towards us grazing whenever possible. As I looked amazed at their huge size, they suddenly stopped grazing, turning their eyes instead in the direction that the hornbill had flown to.

The sudden flight of the hornbill and the silent but attentive stares of the bulls was enough motivation for Steve and he turned his vehicle and started off-roading through the bush in that direction. He assured



The area supports a number of birds of prey like red-eye hawk (below) and scavengers like vultures (right)



Travel Tips

How to reach
 Drive time from Johannesburg airport: 6 hours.
 Flight from Johannesburg to Exeter: 25 minutes.

Best game viewing: March to October.

Dressing for Safaris: Most people wear shorts and a T-shirt during the day and put on long sleeved shirts and long pants in the evening for warmth as well as protection from mosquitoes. Khaki, brown, olive and beige colours are best for safaris and game walks.
Malaria: The Sabi Sand Reserve falls within a Malaria area. Anti malarial prophylactics are recommended.

me that he went off-roads only when necessary and never over rare shrubs. His skilled driving soon had us on a dry riverbed with thick foliage all around. We were now observing the buffaloes from their side of the riverbank and were actually closer to them than before.

Within moments of stopping the car Steve pointed out to a barely visible lion in the grass. The lion was crouching and looking intently at the buffaloes. It started crawling towards them and I raised my camera to my eye. The distance between the buffaloes and the lion was at least 70 metres with open land in between and if the lion charged, the buffaloes would be able to escape. Lions bring down prey not by chasing, but by ambushing. The prey is faster and has more better stamina than almost all predators, except the cheetahs. This lion needed to be closer to the buffaloes if it wanted the hunt to be successful and as the bulls were large he would need all his strength to put the weakest of them down.

But lions have their own mind, and suddenly our lion swung into action. The buffaloes saw him coming and pandemonium broke out. They ran in the opposite direction towards tall trees but to everyone's surprise two other lions emerged from these trees, and within



andBeyond ensures visitors are brought relatively close to wildlife. As long as no one steps out of the car it is totally safe.





Exeter Lodge (above) is right on the shore of the river and has a lovely plunge pool for the hot summer afternoons. The bedroom of andBeyond Exeter lodge (below). There are no fences and one is in direct connect with the African bush.



moments were on top of one of the buffaloes. Even with one hanging by the buffalo's neck and the other biting its tailbone, the buffalo did not fall to the ground. It was then that the lion that had initiated the hunt joined in and the buffalo was dragged to the ground.

It was an incredible, well-planned hunt made by the Mapogo lions that I had just witnessed, a sight that was going to stay in memory for long. Steve slowly rolled the vehicle through some slush closer to the now exhausted lions. The buffalo herd had vanished and the lions had started feeding. From behind them, limping badly, their fourth brother joined in. Steve

informed me that he was recovering from wounds inflicted from the coalition's previous hunt. He did not immediately start feeding but waited for the rest to first get their fill. There was plenty for all to last at least three days. Steve backed up his vehicle; it was time to give space to vehicles from other lodges a chance to approach.

The morning had turned out to be one of the most amazing safari experiences and it was just 8 am! We found a nice open patch on the dry riverbed and stopped for Steve's special – Chocomococa (coffee, coco, sugar and Amarula), which he made with great panache. We sipped the coffee and looked at

hippos grunting and splashing joyfully in the river.

Refreshed, we were back on the search for new sightings. Steve's radio came alive with the excited voice of another andBeyond guide, who animatedly described the location of a leopard that had just been spotted. For me it was godsend opportunity, as I was here to photograph leopards.

Steve did not waste a moment and we rushed towards the location. However, just as we were about to reach the area, we faced a roadblock; there was a cheetah lying lazily right at the centre of the road. The bush belonged to him and we had to patiently wait

for him to give way. I knew I was watching a relatively rare species and under normal circumstances I would have spent considerable time photographing it, but at that moment I just wanted to be able to sight the leopard. And the wait was not that long; soon we reached the point where the leopard was. He was large and was on a mission of some sort. We managed to see and photograph the beautiful animal just for few minutes before it disappeared behind some tall trees.

This had been a fantastic morning and I knew the evening would be equally great, as we knew where the lions were feeding. The river's secrets were now not so hidden. ■

This inquisitive young male came within ten feet of the vehicle. There was a brief stand off and he slowly moved back to everyone's relief. Elephants rarely attack but if they do they can easily overturn a safari vehicle.