

A SOUTH AFRICAN SAFARI

AN ADVENTURE OF A LIFETIME

Text and photos by Dr Mark Wong

Dr Wong is a senior consultant general and colorectal surgeon in private practice. He is an avid traveller and enjoys sharing a good Bordeaux red and long weekend strolls with his wife.



"It seems to me that the natural world is the greatest source of excitement; the greatest source of visual beauty; the greatest source of intellectual interest. It is the greatest source of so much in life that makes life worth living." – Sir David Attenborough

The animal kingdom has always held me in awe, and as a child growing up on a staple of wildlife documentaries and cartoons, it was my dream to visit the African continent – a land of unrivalled natural beauty and diversity.

Our African adventure started from Johannesburg, where a short connecting flight took us to Skukuza, the gateway to Kruger National Park. We were warmly greeted by Anthony, our ranger and guide. Anthony wasted no time in giving

us a passionate introduction to the rich and diverse ecosystem of the region as he whisked us away in our game-drive jeep to the luxurious Lion Sands Ivory Lodge. Located in a private game reserve on the banks of the mighty Sabie River, guests were pampered with all the luxuries of modern amenities, set amid the beautiful backdrop of the African wilderness. Travelling in winter, we were prepared for cool mornings and nights, and dry weather free of bugs, all of which were a welcome respite from the sweltering heat back home. Wanting to take full advantage of the glorious afternoon, we quickly dropped off our luggage and boarded the jeep once again for our first game-drive. Onboard our trusty vehicle, we were introduced to our expert tracker, Kruger, whose warm disarming smile epitomised the hospitality of the lodge. He seemed so at home, perched precariously at the front of the jeep, seeking out animal tracks and the best path for our vehicle. Together, Anthony and Kruger were like the dynamic duo of Starsky and Hutch, on a mission to share with us the beauty of the African bush.



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On the wild side

As we manoeuvred deftly in and out of dry river beds, through a contrast of dense green vegetation and scorched scrubland interspersed with thick pine bushes, we were constantly reminded of how vast and stark the bush was, although there was a simple pleasure in feeling lost and small within it at the same time.

Like any first-timers to a safari, it was our hope to catch a glimpse of the famous African Big Five (ie, the lion, leopard, elephant, rhinoceros and buffalo), despite having been amply reminded that there was never a guarantee of sightings. Nonetheless, we kept our hopes up and thanks to the brilliance of our trusted guide-and-tracker duo and some good fortune, further aided by the well-coordinated system of rangers radioing each other with key sightings, it wasn't long before we had our first sighting of the amazing animals.

The highlights included a rare sighting of leopards, the most elusive of the Big Five. Not only were we lucky enough to come

across a mother leopard nursing her cub with a fresh impala carcass at a nearby tree, we had another sighting the following day of a male and female leopard enjoying a well-deserved rest in the grass after a vigorous three-day courtship, where leopard couples are known to mate every 30 minutes!

We were also treated to several sightings of herds of grazing elephants, including one incident where we were charged at by a jittery female accompanying her calf – a stark reminder of how wild these animals truly are and of our humble place in this ecosystem. Other memorable sightings included the majestic African buffalo, a grazing pair of mother-and-child white rhinoceros, as well as the elusive and highly endangered black rhinoceros. Sightings of a den of hyenas and a pack of resting African wild dogs were an added bonus to a thrilling and very rewarding first safari visit.

The icing on the cake came on the final day; after having tracked a pride of lions for two days, we came across the pride resting on the track in the early morning. Little

did we know that we were about to be treated to one of nature's most awesome spectacles – a successful lion hunt and kill. As the drama unfolded before our eyes, we sat glued to our seats in the jeep as the lions encircled the impala and, through stealthy coordination, ambushed their unsuspecting prey in a ruthless fashion. The crunching of bones and tearing of flesh was thrilling and chilling all at the same time, especially since all this was happening just a few feet away from our uncaged vehicle!

The wild aside

Being a colorectal surgeon at heart, I was drawn to the similarities that we share with the animals in terms of stool patterns, with herbivores producing typical pellet-like stools and the carnivores having more tubular shapes. It made me wonder if the plant-eating animals are often bloated and constipated like many of my fibre-loving patients! And this fascination led to our guide introducing us to the South African sport of dung spitting (called *Bokdrol Spoeg* in Afrikaans), where



pellets of antelope stool are spat out of contestants' mouths to see who can expel them the farthest. Needless to say, our guide's enthusiastic demonstration on not one but two kinds of animal dung left us all in stitches!

The natural excitement of being outdoors and on the game drive was amplified by the brilliant stage management of the Lodge staff. Our daily routine involved a 6 am wake-up call and a light breakfast delivered to our rooms. We then headed out at 6.30 am in the crisp morning air for our first drive of the day, with a break for a quick snack in the middle of the bush, where we would find a table, ready-laid with silver cutlery, champagne and enough fresh food to keep us going for a week. We then returned to the Lodge by 9.30 am,

greeted by cold towels, for a sumptuous breakfast and a lovely rest in the comfort of our rooms, with time to savour the beauty of the surroundings. After a siesta or catching up on some reading, we would head out for the afternoon drive at 3.30 pm, where we break for sundowners in the bush to enjoy the magnificent African sunsets. The transition between creature and comfort is so seamless that we often have to remind ourselves that it isn't every day you stop to have a gin and tonic at sundown in a field of grazing zebras and impalas.

Recalling the words of Sir David Attenborough, we left Africa feeling fortunate to have been witness to nature's excitement and awesome beauty, and blessed with wonderful memories to last a lifetime. ♦

Legend

1. White rhinoceros mother and calf
2. The photogenic Grant's zebra
3. Sundowners in the African bush
4. The lionesses prepare for the hunt
5. The family with our guide and tracker setting off for the morning game drive
6. Mother leopard nursing her cub
7. Giraffe mother and calf
8. A bull elephant in the bush

