

# BUSH BABIES

*Wild animals, a friendly guide and as much space as a noisy family needs . . . Clinton van der Berg's brood could not get enough of Mahikeng game reserve*

**GUNNING IT OUT OF JOHANNESBURG LATE ON FRIDAY IS NEVER THE BEST OF FUN, BUT** cresting the hill that leads to Magaliesburg is one of those small joys that make travel so appealing.

Your shoulders soften, your knuckles get their regular colour back and there's a tangible holiday feel. My reaction was simple and inelegant: 'Yippee!'

The thought of a cold beer and quality family time sweetened the prospect; this is what being in the country does to you.

My son, Joshua, aged nine, was equally excited. A boarder at a school nearby, he was thrilled to swap his circa-1970 digs for the luxury of a modern country lodge, especially one with wild animals.

'I can't wait,' he said eagerly. 'I want to explore.' One of the roads out of Magaliesburg leads to a hamlet called Koster and along this road is the 700 ha Mahikeng game reserve, which is home to the lodge.

Local game ranger Simon Siaga met us along the road to show us the way in a game-viewing vehicle, and it all seemed rather strange as the headlights fanned across the mielie fields, shadows dancing up and down.

But as the mielies gave way to bushveld, our spirits lifted at the sight of our lodgings. One of four units on the property, the place was spacious and inviting and my two oldest could not wait to explore. Joshua immediately jumped into his en-suite bath and was most impressed with the modern tap system. 'Look, Dad, even little shampoo bottles.'

At which Jessica, who is 15 going on 26, sighed, 'Josh, it's like that in *all* hotels.'

When it was time to crank up the gas braai – the lodge is self-catering – one of Mahikeng's own came out to welcome us. An adult genet arrived on the deck, looked around and decided to stay. Daniella, aged 22 months, immediately decided it was a cat. 'Cat, cat, cat,' she squealed excitedly. However, its razor sharp teeth and the certainty that it was wild and prone to attack if cornered, ensured we didn't get too close. It stayed all through the time I prepared dinner. We both did this timid little dance around one another, neither of us entirely sure whether or not to get comfortable.



The remarkable thing about Mahikeng is how luxury seemingly gets parachuted in. You feel as if you're a long way from civilisation and yet it is all exceptionally functional and well appointed. Built on two levels, the rooms are first rate and the bathrooms have all the modern-conveniences you would expect from urban life. The huge ground-level lounge and kitchen are incorporated in a single area, ensuring a free-flowing, family-friendly environment with wide open windows to take in the splendour of the bush.

For my wife, Oxana, the greatest joy lay in the underfloor heating. 'It makes all the difference,' she purred, as winter was making itself felt.

As the new day dawned, Joshua demanded we explore. Mahikeng is home to 13 species of game, none of them of the flesh-eating variety, so setting off on foot brought with it a certain sense of anticipation. The only fear was of spiders, snakes and thorn trees, all easily avoided with a careful eye and common sense.

We made our way to the gentle stream, a tributary of the Hex, and spotted a Cape eland in the undergrowth. Birds of all shapes and sizes flew overhead. Later, a warthog gave us the evil eye from beneath an acacia tree, only to dash off the instant I trained my camera on him.

Joshua quickly took off his shoes and paddled in the stream. 'Look, Dad!' he yelled, wielding a jawbone he had fished out. 'What is it?'

'Er, probably a big antelope.'

He fished more bones out. 'I'll ask Simon,' he declared, curious to know precisely what it was and how it had met its end. Simon arrived at our door much later for our pre-arranged game drive. Happily, the reserve is well stocked and before long we were looking at herds of gemsbok, zebra, impala, kudu and red hartebeest. We even spotted a couple of mongoose dashing across a kikuyu plain. But the giraffe, big as they are, eluded us.

'How about elephants, you got those?' asked the ever-curious Joshua. 'What about lizards and scorpions? And snakes?'

Simon, who is from Venda and qualified as a ranger eight years ago, responded thoughtfully each time. Chatty and helpful,

he was a fountain of knowledge and clearly enjoyed interacting with guests, even the inquisitive little ones. 'We don't have elephants, but there are many lizards and scorpions. I've also seen six or seven puffadders, but never near the lodge.'

Halfway through the drive he led us to an enclosure where Billy and Bonnie, two white rhinos, are housed. Billy's mother was killed for her horn and he was brought to the lodge at just six months old. Simon hand-fed the pair then later jumped into their enclosure with nothing more than a branch for protection. They watched carefully as he up-ended a bucket with horse feed, which they love. With ample food on offer, they were happy to ignore Simon, barely metres away.

The hope is that one day they, too, will be released into the reserve, despite the ever-present danger of poachers. There are plans to introduce buffalo and sable before long, although this would obviously curb the carefree hikes that make Mahikeng such an appealing prospect to visit.

The highlight of the drive was arriving at a lookout deck, the highest point of the reserve, from where you can survey the entire valley below. With the sun dipping down fast, the colours were soft and vivid, with the lodge barely visible across the vast divide.

A day out in the bush always inspires a hearty appetite and we were looking forward to the mielies my wife and son had mischievously 'liberated' from the fields earlier in the day. As the meat cooked on the braai, the mielies were being readied in the pot.

The meat was good, the mielies were not. Unripe and unready, they were dispatched straight to the bin. (I'm sure there's a moral in there somewhere.)

The next morning, Joshua, ever the pioneer, opted for the outdoor shower on the upper deck, from where he could look out across the valley. He shouted to us to take a look and as we did so, seven giraffe strode by, not more than 150m away. It was a glorious sight as they made their way up the mountain with the regal bearing of sentry soldiers.

To see such a giant up close is to be reminded of Africa's splendid appeal, but

## *'What if they attack us, Dad?'*

we wanted more. As we set off on another walk, crossing the stream and traversing moderate hills, we hoped to see them again. And as we crested another hill, there they were, all seven beautifully silhouetted against the early morning light. They simultaneously looked at us as we slowly advanced, closer and closer, to within 100m. It was a magical moment. I couldn't take enough photographs.

Aware that we had taken in far more than we ordinarily could have expected, we simply stood and watched as these magnificent beasts fed and absorbed the sight of four excited visitors, among them baby Daniella, who was more than a little anxious.

'What if they attack us, Dad?' asked Josh. 'Relax, son, it's not going to happen. We won't be going any closer.'

It was the perfect garnish for a charming weekend away, where the most strenuous demand had been a gentle hill hike. The city grind seemed a long way away and as we headed back a friendly pair of warthogs looked at us suspiciously before scurrying off. It was a final reminder of what we were saying goodbye to. **①**

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