

south africa standouts

close encounters of the wild kind

South Africa is seductive; it is wild. It is a photographer's paradise, a gourmet's Valhalla, an adventurer's Utopia.



Text and photos by Marybeth Bond

When a cheetah jumped up on a log, turned his head and stared with his piercing amber eyes, the author was close enough to see his individual whiskers.

From the dazzling city of Cape Town, curled around the base of a 3,500-foot-high Table Mountain, to the mountainous Wine-lands, to five-star, 'Big Five' animal safaris, South Africa should be on every travelgirl's bucket list.

I'm just back from three weeks at the southern tip of the African continent, and here are standouts that made my trip extraordinary.

“There is something about safari life that makes you forget all your sorrows and feel as if you had drunk half a bottle of champagne — bubbling over with heartfelt gratitude for being alive.”

—Karen Blixen, author “Out of Africa”

A rose-colored morning light washed over the grassy savannah as my husband and I bumped along elephant paths in our open-air jeep. Shortly after leaving the lodge we had close-up sightings of a giraffe, hippo and rhino. “How many ‘wow’ moments can you have before breakfast?” our ranger jokingly asked.

We had more than a lion's share of great game viewing, including the 'Big Five' in the private Singita and Sabi Sabi game reserves in South Africa.

The 'Big Five,' a term coined by game hunters and used by safari operators, refers to the most dangerous animals to hunt on foot and often the most difficult animals to see in Africa: leopard, lion, elephant, rhinoceros and buffalo.

Along the riverbed we watched elephants flap their ears as their sinuous trunks snaked about, feet shifting as they lazily sucked water into their trunks then noisily sprayed it in to their mouths.

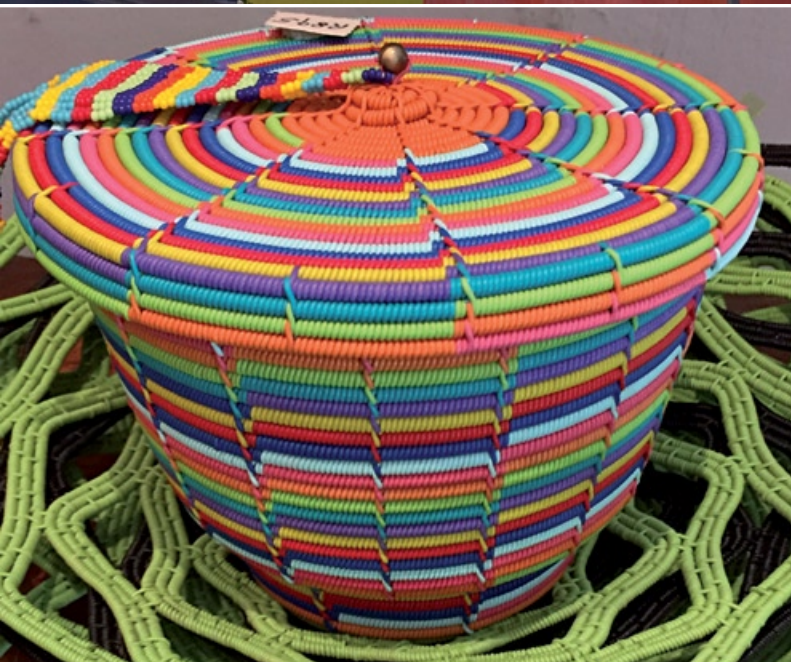
Driving off-road, we came upon a languorous leopard lounging in the warm sunshine. In response to the clicks from our cameras, he jumped up on a log, turned his head our way, lifted his tail and peed in our direction, before sauntering into the bush. We watched in wonder as the spirit of the wild asserted its dominance.

South Africa is a popular safari destination because the game viewing is superb and the leading camps and lodges are among the most glamorous in the world with renowned brands such as Singita and Sabi Sabi.

Both Singita and Sabi Sabi are located in unspoiled wilderness adjacent to the Kruger National Park. Hunting has not been permitted in the private reserves for decades, so many animals are comfortable with the presence of safari vehicles, which allows us, in open-air jeeps, to get up close and personal with residents of these parks. It is a photographer's nirvana to shoot such a variety of wildlife.

My Kind of Place

It is a traveler's dream to stay at a Singita or Sabi Sabi property. The elegant Singita Ebony Lodge showcases the best of sophisticated South Africa. It boasts a wine cellar with over 120 of the



best South African wines and offers the expertise of two sommeliers on property. Between morning and sunset game drives, guests partake in guided bush walks, relax in the spa, visit a nearby local village, taste wine in the cellar, compare aged whiskeys at the bar, or shop at the boutique stocked with museum-quality African art and hand-crafted jewelry.

One afternoon, during a dip in the private plunge pool outside our two-room suite, I watched a herd of elephants, hiding their babies between their legs, as they grazed along the river below. As I rinsed off in the outdoor shower, two gazelle stepped out of the bushes nearby. This is my kind of place.

Sabi Earth Lodge, designated a National Geographic Unique Lodge, also offers an over-the-top safari experience. Guests are pampered with luxurious accommodations, plunge pools, outdoor showers, superb cuisine and wine, as well as walking tours, community visits, morning and afternoon game drives, and a stop for “sundowners” — a round of drinks and snacks in the bush as the sun sets.

No one can return from a safari unchanged. “You know you are truly alive when you’re living among the lions.”

—Karen Blixen, author, “Out of Africa”

Crazy for Cape Town

Cape Town is renown for its excellent climate, friendly locals, top-rated hotels, internationally ranked restaurants, boutique shops, trendy wine bars and a nightlife that never stops. Small bays with white sand beaches stretch into the distance dotted with swooping seagulls and sun-kissed surfers.

Although every tourist should visit Table Mountain and the Victoria and Albert Waterfront in Cape Town, additional standouts are the Bo-Kaap neighborhood lined with colorfully painted homes, and Robben Island, which is South Africa’s Alcatraz, a World Heritage Site where Nelson Mandela was detained for most of his 29 years in prison. Robben Island is a

“must visit” to learn about apartheid. Don’t miss a day trip south to see the endangered African penguins romp around Boulders Beach. Climb up the cliff at Cape Point to look toward Antarctica. Below you huge waves crash where the two oceans meet. Watch for marauding baboons along the road. If you’re lucky, you might even spot whales or a great white shark!

A Legend of Luxury

Although Cape Town has no shortage of fabulous boutique hotels, two stellar properties stand out.

From the moment we pulled into the discrete entrance to the Ellerman House, we felt like we were visiting friends in a private estate on the French Cote d’Azur. Once the home of Sir John and Lady Ellerman, British shipping magnates, the Edwardian mansion has a birds-eye view of the ocean. The mansion, transformed into a five-star hotel, is located on 1.5 acres of sprawling lawns in the “billionaire’s residential neighborhood” of Bantry Bay. Often called Cape Riviera, it is home to some of the country’s most expensive real estate.

You may never want to leave the antique-furnished library, parlor and living rooms, or the gardens, pool or spa. Guests often include those who prefer not to be disturbed, such as celebrities, honeymooners, couples and art collectors. The mansion, garden and art gallery display one of the largest private South African art collections with over 1,000 works. We felt sinfully indulgent basking in the epic views from our spacious oceanfront suite, the dining room and terrace while enjoying the exquisite wine and cuisine.

Another five-star hotel with spectacular ocean and mountain views is the Twelve Apostles Hotel and Spa, a Leading Hotels of the World property. It’s located on Cape Town’s most scenic route and is flanked on one side by Table Mountain and the other by crashing waves. Linger to watch sunset with locals in the Leopard Lounge and dine at the award-winning Azure Restaurant with superb French cuisine and seafood. They serve, undoubtedly, one of the most memorable breakfasts in the world with fresh oysters and bubbly.

Explore the Winelands

Imagine California’s Napa Valley with the Rocky Mountains in Colorado as a backdrop and you’ll be close to the South African Winelands, located an hour east of Cape Town.

The famous wine region is grouped in a triangle around Stellenbosch, Franschhoek and Paal and attracts culinary and wine connoisseurs from around the world.

South Africa’s most famous grape and red wine varietal is pinotage. It is a complex and fruity wine. Chenin Blanc is the most widely grown white varietal, ranging from sweet to dry, and used to make sherry, sparkling wine, brandy and spirits.

A hurried day trip from Cape Town doesn’t give you enough time to explore, sip and savor the region. Plan to stay for a few days. You can easily book tours in your hotel or do wine tours on your own or by bicycle. There are wide shoulders on the roads for bikers’ safety.

We started our tasting in Stellenbosch at the spectacular Delaire Graff estate. The breath-taking location, between majestic mountains and vine-covered hills, is reason enough to linger over wine, a meal or to stay a few nights. We had to choose between the indoor art-filled Wine Lounge with a stunning copper roof and the outdoor terrace. We tasted a flight of wine paired with local cheeses on the terrace, regaling in the sweeping views. Then we walked through the gardens, dotted with fountains and statues, and settled into our two-room villa with a huge terrace and private plunge pool.

The renowned Delaire Restaurant was fully booked for dinner with a chic crowd reminiscent of those seen in the Hamptons or Malibu. So we dined before the blazing fire at the casual and creative Indochine, where the chefs pick produce, herbs and fruit daily at the estate greenhouse and vegetable gardens. The result is extraordinary.

Opposite page top from left to right: With a bulging belly, a male lion rests in the shade after a huge meal; vineyards with indoor and outdoor tasting rooms dot the countryside around Franschhoek and Stellenbosch; The Bo-Kaap neighborhood in Cape Town is lined with colorfully painted homes; Aerial view of the Ellerman House gardens, pool and Bantry Bay; A smile and sip of Cabernet France welcome guests in the Winelands at the Franschhoek La Resident and Vineyards Suites; Creative Zulu weavers sell baskets they have made of telephone wire. Each design is different making every basket unique.

For full-on South African glam, Delaire Graff delivers. The property creates a secluded feeling by hugging the contour of the hillside and positioning the villas, restaurants and gardens toward the vineyards and craggy mountains.

Nearby, Franschoek looks and feels like a small town in Provence. Open-air cafes, art galleries, antique shops, small restaurants and tempting boutiques line the main street. Many of the wine farms in the area share a French Huguenot heritage, and you can enjoy the French influence in food and the local Champagne-inspired bubbly.

For two days we biked through the vineyards, sipped at charming tasting rooms and dined at our boutique hotel, La Resident and Vineyards Suites. Located on a 30-acre estate, the luxury property is bursting with vineyards, plum orchards, rose gardens, horse pastures and gardens. Strutting peacocks meandered around the infinity pool and grassy lawns.

Our elegantly appointed suite boasted a four poster bed, opulent chandeliers, antique furniture, dressing rooms and a bathroom the size of a generous studio apartment with a deep, soaking bathtub. French doors in both the bedroom and bathroom opened onto a private terrace with views of flowering orchards, vineyards and mountains. The 11 hotel suites are elaborately decorated with different design influences, from the exotic Tibetan Suite with Oriental antiques and rich orange tones, to the blue and yellow Chambre Blue with its Provencal antiques, velvets and silks. The nightly dinner menus are full of sumptuous surprises and multiple courses, paired with superb local wines. Ask to dine at the informal Chef’s Table next to the big French kitchen to chat with the chefs and see the magicians at work.



Layover in Johannesburg

Rated among the top hotels in the world, the five-star Saxon Hotel is a perfect place to relax and regroup in Johannesburg. The hotel is an oasis of calm and security on 10 acres of tranquil gardens in the fashionable Sandhurst neighborhood, north of the bustling downtown area. The attentive staff, lush gardens, swimming pools, elegant piano bar, smoking library, cocktail lounge, dining room and the tasteful décor of both the contemporary and historic African art are impressive. It’s no wonder the Saxon Hotel has served as home to many world leaders and dignitaries.

In 2015 the South African Rand fell to an all-time low against the US dollar. Its continuing decline makes South Africa an even more attractive destination this year.

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South Africa 411

WHEN TO GO

April to September are considered the best months for sighting big game in South Africa because it is the dry season and animals congregate around rivers and water holes. We went in October and had stellar viewing and good weather in Cape Town and the Winelands. Avoid school vacations, especially Christmas and spring break. Prices are higher, many accommodations are full, and some flights may be difficult to find. Check the South African Tourism website for holiday dates.

HOW TO PLAN

South Africa Tourism: www.southafrica.net/za/en

SAFARI OPTIONS

Singita Lodges: <http://singita.com>

Sabi Sabi Lodges: www.sabisabi.com

WINE COUNTRY

The Delaire Graff Estate, Winery, Dining, Villas: www.delaire.co.za

Franschoek Hotel: www.laresidence.co.za

CAPE TOWN

www.Capetowntravel.com offers an indispensable guide with maps, suggested itineraries, day trips, activities and ideas.

The Ellerman House Hotel: www.ellerman.co.za

The Twelve Apostles Hotel: www.12apostleshotel.com

JOHANNESBURG

Johannesburg Saxon Hotel: www.saxon.co.za

Left: A popular day trip south of Cape Town is to see the endangered African penguins romp around Boulders Beach.