

# Well spotted

The Sabi Sand Game Reserve is well-known for its brilliant leopard sightings. But how genuinely realistic is the hope of seeing one of these elusive felines?

**The size of this plane** is proportionate to the level of adventure that lies ahead, I muse as our aircraft flies over the brown winter landscape in the Sabi Sand Game Reserve. The smaller the plane, the greater the adventure. As if in confirmation, plumes of heat shake us with turbulence. Once we've steadied, I peer down through the windows and look for animals below. I see nothing but dry, stick-like trees on small koppies and sigh. It's hard to imagine the countless animals – leopards among them, supposedly – purported to live below.

*For more info, go to [dulini.com/river-lodge](http://dulini.com/river-lodge).*

On the ground though, the outlook is more promising. Busy drooling over the lunch menu at Dulini River Lodge, we almost don't notice the three giraffes that appear above the jackalberry trees. Their slow, lumbering gait draws them closer to the perennial Sand River that lies between us. A large kudu delicately picks his way along the bank to drink from the shallow pools and a

troupe of baboons start to bark downstream. Staff hurry to check that windows and doors are closed against the opportunistic marauders. And then, elephants. The grey hulking shapes lumber towards us as we sit on the deck under the sausage tree, scarcely believing our luck. Twenty minutes into lunch and we needn't even go on the afternoon game drive!

Game ranger Justin Hall is having none of that, though. Between him and host Ronnie-Ronnie Mdaka, we are pried from the cool shade where refreshments appear endlessly on silver trays and thrust into a quiet Land Rover that purrs in the afternoon sun.

"What would you like to see?" asked Justin.

"Leopard!" I blurt out. I can't help myself.

Justin chuckles. "The standard, then. You know, guests here often see leopard before zebra, even." I can't quite bring myself to believe him. Leopards are notoriously difficult to find: I've spent a fair amount of time in the bush and have only seen one once before.

The 65,000-hectare Sabi Sand Game Reserve is one of South Africa's oldest, with the seeds of creation planted in the late 1800s. In 1948, it was officially founded by private landowners and now shares a 50km unfenced border with the Kruger National Park. There are goals of extending it into Mozambique and Zimbabwe to form a massive Peace Park.

## Comfort and cats

The area is known for two things: luxury lodges, and leopards. It doesn't skimp on either.

With approximately 12.2 leopards per 100km<sup>2</sup>, you're virtually guaranteed to see one during your stay. The high density is partly due to successful conservation



### Destination Dulini

- Every season offers brilliant game viewing in the Sabi Sand Game Reserve. Spring brings about new life in the trees and animals. Summer has thunderstorms that revitalise the bush. Autumn is cool and pleasant, while the dryness of winter thins out the bush thickets and makes for easier game viewing.
- I stayed at the intimate Dulini River Lodge, where the six units all look

out onto the Sand River. Each has a private plunge pool and middays are spent in the dappled shade of tall jackalberry trees, reclined on a lounge and watching animals drink in the river below.

- Rates from R16,790 per person with a 15% discount for returning guests staying for three nights or longer. All meals, drinks, game drives, safari activities and game walks are included.









**How to get there**



Airlink connects Cape Town and Johannesburg with Nelspruit KMIA or Skukuza and from there with Sabi Sands via Lodge Link. [www.flyairlink.com](http://www.flyairlink.com)

efforts funded by the lodges and landowners within the reserve. All 21 lodges take an active part in funding anti-poaching efforts, alien plant eradication, water and land management and community development. For visitors, there's an assurance that their stay benefits the reserve and sustainably supports the community that relies on it for their livelihood. Lodges work hand-in-hand with the Sabi Sand Pfunani Trust to directly benefit residents in the adjoining Bushbuckridge community, where unemployment levels are at 52%. Between them, they've provided (among other projects) education, sanitation and local job recruitment to over 12,400 individuals over the past five years.

**Goal achieved**

Working in a private reserve such as this changes lives, tracker Dyke Ndhlovu explains. This soft-spoken man with a gentle smile used to be a taxi driver in bustling Johannesburg. We battle to reconcile the image of Dyke in that scenario with the Dyke we see now.

"There's pressure on taxi drivers to keep passenger numbers up, because every driver has a minimum financial target that they must reach per day. Otherwise, they don't get paid by the taxi owners," he says.

"What does *Ses'fikile*, the word on that sticker that you see on the back of taxis, mean?" asks Helene, a fellow guest.



# AVIS



“That means ‘We have arrived’,” Dyke replies.

Subsequent to his training at the prestigious Tracker Academy at Samara Private Game Reserve in 2015, Dyke was hired on by Dulini. He can’t imagine going back to his previous life. He’s in his element among the rhythms of the bush, hopping down from his spotter seat often to examine tracks and quietly discuss plans with Justin. They’ve been working alongside each other for three years

“There,” he calls out, pointing to our right. I can’t believe it. Just a few kilometres into our afternoon drive, on our first afternoon, and there he is: a gorgeous, muscular male leopard.

“That’s Ravenscourt. He’s around six years old,” says Justin, slowing the vehicle before pulling off the dirt road and driving closer – another advantage of being in a private game reserve. Ravenscourt looks back at us from the top of a sprawling termite mound, gold from the sunset flecked in his eyes.

*Ses’fikile* indeed, I think contentedly. I have arrived.

Text and photography | **Teagan Cunniffe**



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