



EAT OUT IN AFRICA

At these luxury bush lodges, the experience is as much about fine dining as it is about game viewing. By **Jane Broughton**



Reliable year-round game viewing (especially with promised big five sightings) remains South Africa's safari trump card. It's not, however, everybody's idea of fun to rise at dawn and bump along dirt tracks for hours in search of animals in order to earn breakfast. If you're of the opinion that a sojourn in the bush should be as much about enjoying delicious meals and wine tastings as ticking off bucket-list species, then check into one of these local lodges. Crammed with creature comforts, they all offer attention to detail in the kitchen that is surpassed only by their commitment to conservation in the veld.

SINGITA LEBOMBO

Lebombo Concession, Kruger National Park, Mpumalanga

Set within a privately leased, 14 000 ha concession in the northern reaches of Kruger National Park, Lebombo has a reputation for being edgy, understatedly glamorous and unconventional. It's also known for excellent sightings of the big five, including large prides of lion.

Indigenous gardens and timber walkways connect the treehouse-style, glass-walled guest rooms that are dotted between huge spurge trees above the N'wanetsi River.



Last year, the design stakes were raised further with a substantial refurbishment by Cécile & Boyd, and Sally Tsiliyiannis from GAPP Architects/Urban Designers. A new kitchen and restaurant, plus an out-of-the-box approach to safari dining – overseen by chef Liam Tomlin of Chefs Warehouse in Cape Town – are evidence of Singita's ongoing obsession with the art of dining well.

There's even a nifty climate-controlled wine-tasting gallery, with a substantial cellar of hard-to-find, exceptional South African wines from which to choose. If you fall in



love with a particular vintage, a stash to enjoy at home can be couriered to your door. Same goes for the furniture.

There are no regimented mealtimes or drawn-out courses after a long day in the sun here. Instead, dinners consist of mix-and-match small plates, allowing guests to eat as much or as little as they please. The open-air lounge has a bar serving coffee, smoothies, juices and cocktails, as well as snack-sized portions to nibble on during the day – charcuterie and cheese plates, home-made pâtés and parfaits, and salads and desserts in jars.

singita.com



UPLANDS HOMESTEAD

*Kwandwe Private Game Reserve,
near Grahamstown, Eastern Cape*

An Eastern Cape safari is often underrated, despite impressive game viewing, arresting landscapes – statuesque euphorbia trees and aloes dominate the hills – and zero threat of malaria. Prime pick is Kwandwe (Place of the Blue Crane), a private reserve covering 22 000 ha of former farmland along a section of the Great Fish River, now restored to pristine wilderness. With just two lodges and three exclusive-use villas dotted between thicket-covered hills and open plains, breathing space is guaranteed.

Bumping into other vehicles on a game drive is rare, which means regular sightings of the big cats – in particular, cheetahs and lions – and plains game are leisurely. Short, kid-friendly drives take little ones up close to non-aggressive creatures such as zebras, giraffes, monkeys and warthogs.

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Uplands Homestead (an original 1905 farmhouse sleeping six in its three grandly proportioned bedrooms) has recently been completely redecorated and kitted out with a boma for authentic Eastern Cape campfire sessions.

Guests at any of the villas can sign up for a three-day cooking course under the direction of Kwandwe's executive chef, Ilze Curling. By the end of it, the whole family will be able to produce traditional favourites such as crumbly mieliemeal porridge, pot bread, mielie bread, boerewors, chakalaka and braaied venison; and modern treats like malva-pudding-flavoured doughnuts, and prickly pear, aloe or spekboom sorbet.

The beauty of checking into your own house (such as Uplands) is that it comes with dedicated staff, plus a private vehicle, guide and tracker – privacy *and* flexibility in spades.

kwandwe.com



MAKWETI SAFARI LODGE

*Welgevonden Game Reserve,
Waterberg, Limpopo*

This intimately scaled lodge (housing just 10 guests in five dreamy suites) feels like a home away from home – which is exactly what it has become for its New York-based, South African-born owners who visit several times a year. The location is the 40 000 ha Welgevonden Game Reserve in the lovely Waterberg, a leisurely three-and-a-half hour drive from Joburg.

Easily accessible it may be, but after a few game-rich drives – yielding cheetahs, elephant, white rhino, blue wildebeest, zebras, red hartebeests, cheetahs, impala,

kudu, waterbucks and giraffes – you feel light years from the real world.

While Makweti is among only a handful of lodges in Welgevonden open to paying guests, the area's landowners all pool their annual levies for the greater good of the whole reserve. This sustainable conservation model protects vital animal habitat within the greater Unesco-proclaimed Waterberg Biosphere Reserve, of which Welgevonden is part.

Game viewing aside, Makweti has a solid reputation for serving elegant cuisine with a pan-African twist, always dished up with spectacular views. The day starts with coffee and oven-fresh muffins, followed later by a hearty breakfast after the morning drive. There's plenty of time to siesta, take a dip in the pool or have a massage before a suitably late lunch, which may be grilled chicken skewers with a peanut dipping sauce and a crunchy salad, followed by pavlova piled high with fruit and cream.

On your return in the early evening from another game drive, dinner is guaranteed to be delicious and fortifying, paired with excellent local wines, and served in varying locations depending on the time of year. In summer, it's usually under the stars; in winter, in front of the fire. Pleasure-seekers take note: the longer you stay, the better the rates.

makweti.com



PIONEER CAMP

Londolozi, Sabi Sands Game Reserve, Mpumalanga

Welcoming guests in just three exquisite, deeply private suites, Pioneer Camp is one of five individually run safari lodges dotted between 500-year-old ebony trees along the Sand River in the 14 000 ha Londolozi private reserve, which the Varty family has been involved in since 1926. Londolozi, in turn, is in the Sabi Sands Reserve, which shares an unfenced border with the Kruger National Park.

Pioneer Camp's contemporary decor borrows from classic explorers' camps of old to retain the romance of the past.

'An element of surprise runs through everything we do at Londolozi,' Ridgewell says. 'Our guests always seem to have a lot of fun, which is only enhanced by not knowing where the next meal is going to be served.' Bush dinners are always very magical, but they are weather dependent, which makes boma evenings the next best thing: an evocative scene is set with dozens of lanterns and abundant food cooked on the grill, and paired with epic South African wines.

While plenty of good food punctuates and defines each day in the bush, there are also luxurious spa treatments, al fresco yoga classes, interpretative walks, and visits

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Its social hub is a thatched, open-fronted lodge designed for indoor-outdoor dining and lounging. It has a bar, wine cellar and interactive kitchen, overseen by executive chef Anna Ridgewell.

Ridgewell may find recipe inspiration in cookbooks, but she keeps all of her menus 'close to Africa', as she says, using fresh, sustainable, ethically sourced local ingredients (which include venison, smoked salmon trout, nuts and subtropical fruits). Nothing is fussed over or fiddled with. Over the years, lunches have moved away from a buffet-style feast to a daily à la carte menu of crowd-pleasing comfort food perfectly in tune with the laid-back setting.

to one of Londolozi's many community projects, while learning about Shangaan culture from the delightful staff.

londolozi.com ①

Federal Airlines flies daily from Kruger Mpumalanga International Airport and OR Tambo International Airport to a selection of top safari lodges in South Africa. To book a flight or for more information, visit fedair.com.

For travel arrangements to these lodges, contact Diners Club Concierge Service on 0861 DINERS (346377), complimentary for those who BELONG.