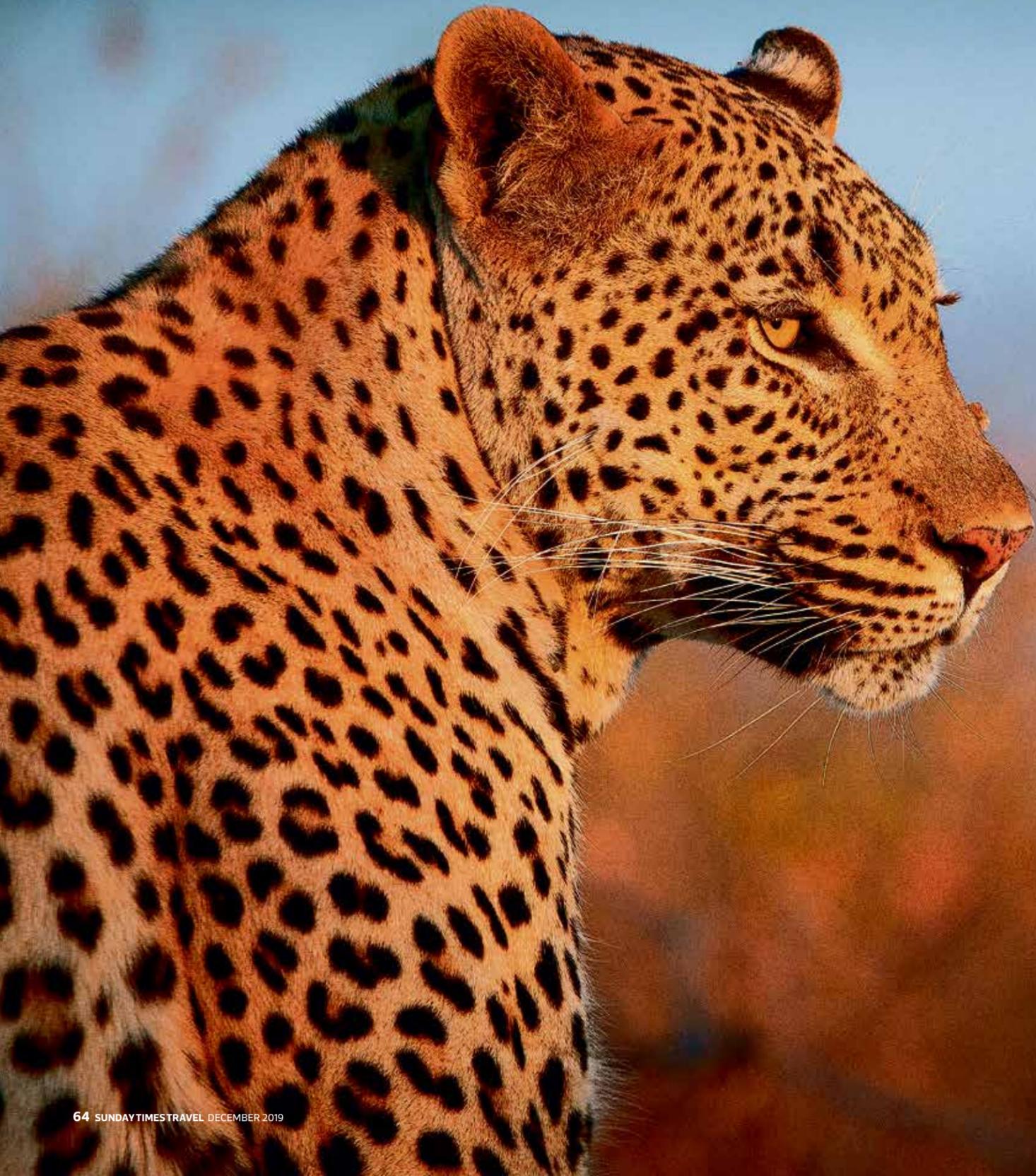




## How do I... pick my first safari?

With 20 National Parks and 70 game reserves, South Africa's safari scene can be bewildering. Let wildlife travel expert **Chris Haslam** be your guide



**T**he first big-cat encounter I ever had in the wild was a one-on-one with a leopard. I'd woken before dawn and, young and dumb, left camp for a morning walk. He was sitting on a fallen tree in what is now South Africa's Kgalagadi Transfrontier Park, glowing Halloween orange in the low rays of the rising sun. We locked eyes across 50 metres of riverbed and then, like a Cheshire Cat without the smile, he disappeared. I reported my sighting to Wayne, my guide, and I'll never forget the flash of horror that crossed his face. Since then, South Africa has occupied a special place in my heart.

If you need an agent, hire a New Yorker. If you want wine advice, ask a Frenchman. And if you seek safari luxury, find a South African – because no-one beats them at carving comfort out of the bush.

If it's your first safari, you *need* comfort. I don't mean spa treatments, fine dining and ludicrous five-star excesses. Rather, the smoky taste of fire-brewed tea in a tin mug at five in the morning; the clink of ice in a sundown G&T mixed on the bonnet of a Land Cruiser; and the sensual delight of a shower beneath the stars.

Safaris are about wildlife and here, as in most of Africa, the term is a misnomer because little of the fauna is truly wild. Habitat loss and human conflict have forced most species into parks and reserves: huge open prisons in which they can roam free as long as they don't leave.

In South Africa, the national parks and game reserves cover more than 3% of the total land area and range from the tiny Garden Route reserve up to the Belgium-size Kgalagadi, via the magnificent Kruger National Park. All have wildlife, but some are much better than others. Which you choose for your first safari depends on two factors: which species you want to see and your budget.

But there's another crucial factor to consider. One of the maxims of guide schools across Africa is the principle that 'you cannot see until you know', so it follows that the more your guide knows about the wonders of the bush, the more immersive and memorable your experience will be. Find yourself saddled with a bad guide and you'll remember your safari for frustration, boredom and missed opportunities. As a first-timer, you probably want

to see the A-list Big Five, comprising, in order of spotting likelihood, buffalo, elephant, lion, rhino and leopard.

So where should you go? The best chance of encountering all five is to visit the Kruger National Park and its adjoining private game reserves in the April-to-September dry season. This is when vegetation is sparse and game tends to congregate around the water holes.

The cheapest option here is a self-drive safari. You fly into Johannesburg, rent a cheap car (there's no need for a 4WD), drive four hours east to Hazyview and enter the park at the Phabeni Gate. Access to the park costs from £20 a day, while safari tents or simple bungalows at rest camps across the park cost from £35 a night. Most of these offer bush walks and game drives from about £25, but you need to book all in advance ([sanparks.org](http://sanparks.org)). The guiding is generally good – many guides who have spent their careers in the private sector end up at the Kruger for the pension – but the bus-like game-viewing vehicles and cafeteria-style catering feel a bit mass-market.

The alternative is a lodge on a private game reserve. The safari will be more personalised, the beds more comfortable and the dining more convivial, but you may need to save up. Londolozi – famous for its leopards and wine cellar – costs £848pp a night ([londolozi.com](http://londolozi.com)). Tanda Tula, in the rhino-rich Timbavati reserve, costs about £680pp a night ([tandatula.com](http://tandatula.com)). Both offer superb guiding and are all-inclusive, but here's the thing: over the road from the Timbavati is the Klaserie Nature Reserve: same wildlife, similar quality guides – but with beds at the Nthambo Tree Camp ([nthambo.com](http://nthambo.com)) from £228pp, all-inclusive.

If you're taking kids, book a safari in a malaria-free reserve. At the eastern end of the Garden Route is the Kwandwe Private Game Reserve, featuring all the species you'd see in the Kruger, minus the mosquitoes.

Putting together a safari is not something you should attempt yourself. Always seek professional advice – it could actually save you money. Try [safari-consultants.com](http://safari-consultants.com), [expertafrica.com](http://expertafrica.com) and [aardvarksafaris.co.uk](http://aardvarksafaris.co.uk) – all have a wealth of experience.

*For safari places to stay, see overleaf*

Sitting pretty:  
leopard in  
the Londolozi  
game reserve

FAQs

**How can I tell if a wildlife experience is ethical?** South Africa is a world leader when it comes to conservation, so if you're on a traditional safari in any of the national parks, you're fine. The worry comes if you're offered experiences that allow you to interact with, rather than observe, the animals. African elephants are almost impossible to train: if you're allowed up close to one, the animal will likely have been drugged or beaten. Unless you are dealing with cubs in a licensed sanctuary that is affiliated with a well-known non-governmental organisation, any big cats that are docile enough to get close to you will have been drugged, too.

the safari

# Remote (re)treats

With early starts and adventurous wildlife thrills, you need somewhere to hunker down quietly (and safely). A pool's a cool plus, as is an ice-cold G&T...

**EASTERN CAPE**

**Karoo Lodge**  
A nine-room, family-friendly homestead with separate honeymoon suites, Karoo Lodge is one of only two places to stay in the 30,000-hectare Samara Private Game Reserve, three hours' drive north of Port Elizabeth. This malaria-free, Big Five spot has been 'rewilded' with animals that were lost during colonial times, including lions and elephants, and has cheetahs and white rhinos relaxed enough for you to get near to on foot (samara.co.za; doubles from £166pp, all-inclusive, excluding alcoholic drinks).

**Ukhozi Lodge**

The boutique 10-roomer Ukhozi, part of a quintet of lodges at Kariega Game

Reserve, manages to be rustic, homely, chilled-out and glam all at once. As well as its bring-your-binocular views from a high lookout point above a wildlife-rich valley, it's a malaria-free reserve with a pool, and staff and guides are laid-back and helpful. The food is wholesome, game-tinged South African fare — don't miss the huge *boma* barbecue (kariega.co.za; doubles from £300pp, all-inclusive, including alcohol selection).

**NORTHERN CAPE**

**Tswalu, Tswalu Kalahari Reserve**  
In the far north of South Africa, surrounded by the Korannaberg hills and rust-orange dunes, Tswalu has nine thatched-roof suites, a villa and swimming pool. They're the only

lodgings in Tswalu Kalahari, the country's largest private reserve (114,000 hectares) and home to black-maned lions, wild dogs, habituated meerkats and rare pangolins monitored by a research team. The malaria-free reserve also runs a junior ranger programme, game drives and helicopter flights. Go walking or horse-riding and spend a night under the stars on the sleep-out deck (tswalu.com; doubles from £1,264pp, all-inclusive, including alcohol).

**Makweti**

Aside from the family of baboons splashing in your private plunge pool, you're unlikely to see anyone else at Makweti — five thatched lodges teetering above the tree canopy mean

10 guests maximum, with animals roaming free at ground level. Lodges decorated with Nigerian beaded crowns from the Yoruba tribe are blissful crashpads to hang out in between sunrise and sunset safaris (makweti.com; doubles from £327pp, all-inclusive, excluding alcoholic drinks).

**NORTHWEST**

**Royal Madikwe**  
A great option for families, Royal Madikwe is a four-suite lodge with two villas: the two-bed Royal and the new three-bed Sovereign House come with separate living and dining areas. Though the Madikwe Game Reserve doesn't feel especially remote (just across the border, the Botswana capital, Gaborone, twinkles at night), it is malaria-free and just a four-hour drive or 45-minute flight from Johannesburg. It's home to the Big Five, as well as black and white rhinos, hyenas, cheetahs, giraffes and wild dogs (royalmadikwe.com; doubles from £586pp, all-inclusive, with alcohol selection).

**LIMPOPO/MPUMALANGA (KRUGER)**

**Kapama Private Game Reserve, Hoedspruit, Limpopo province**  
A sprawling 13,000-hectare reserve next to Kruger National Park, Kapama feels rugged and remote, yet boasts pool, bushland spa, afternoon tea before game drives and even a private jet for transfers. Comprising four luxurious lodges, Karula is elegant, but seriously expensive, while Southern Camp is best for understated style and a relaxed atmosphere (kapama.com; from £962pp, all-inclusive, with alcohol selection).

**Singita Boulders Lodge**

For luxury safaris, Singita sets the standard. Boulders Lodge is one of five Singita properties in South Africa (three in the Sabi Sands Game Reserve, two in the adjacent Kruger National Park), with 12 suites and heated pools, and interiors influenced by the surroundings. Food and wine are focal points. As well as prolific wildlife, including the Big Five, Sabi Sands is the

**Watering hole:** opposite, pool at Tswalu. **Above, clockwise from top left, the family-friendly Karoo; the 10-room Ukhozi; the intimate Thanda in KwaZulu-Natal; elephants at Thanda; the deluxe Royal Madikwe**

easiest place to see usually elusive leopards — they're so relaxed here, they'll stroll nonchalantly right past your vehicle. Cameras at the ready... (singita.com; doubles from £1,570pp, all-inclusive, with alcohol selection).

**KWAZULU-NATAL**

**Thanda Lodge**  
If you want that luxe-lodge look (private plunge pools, four-poster romance, open log fires), but don't have the rand required by the big-brochure lodges, you'll love Thanda. KwaZulu-Natal province used to be harder to reach than other safari zones (until BA began its direct route to Durban, a 3-hour drive away), hence the lower rates. Yet KwaZulu-Natal, in particular intimate Thanda, still sees as many of the Big Five as other reserves; the rhino numbers are especially impressive. Spend one day with photography guide Christian Sperka to ensure you catch it all on camera (thandasafari.co.za; from £235pp, all-inclusive, including local alcohol).

