

safari

THERE'S something up ahead, except we don't yet know what it is. Benry Steyn, our guide at Lion Sands River Lodge, has just taken us offroad and is now expertly manoeuvring the open Land Rover through the bush. Juice Khoza is our tracker and, seated in the small fold-out seat at the very front of the bonnet, he is using hand signals to help Benry navigate around some of the thicker acacia bushes and younger knob-thorn trees.

We're in the Sabi Sands, at Lion Sands Game Reserve, holding on tight as we plunge into the mixed woodland. A few short minutes later I see another game drive vehicle. And then, inching forward, the leopard.

Lying beautifully poised atop the crisp, russet-coloured vegetation, the spotted big cat is perfectly relaxed and unperturbed as we slowly drive closer.

Benry's tone is hushed. "This is Ndzilu," he says. "Which in Shangaan means fire." He goes on to explain that in September 2013, when Ndzilu was nine months old, her whiskers were singed off in a controlled fire. "No one is actually sure what happened but at the time she was already doing a lot of exploring on her own while her mother was out hunting. My guess is that she might have been curious and simply got too close, for none of the fur on her face or body showed any signs of being scorched, nor did she have any other injuries. It's hard to believe now," he says, pointing at her. "Just look at those lovely long whiskers!"

I can hardly believe my luck. I mean, only a few short hours ago I was still traipsing around the domestic terminal of Cape Town airport and now this! What a different world.

Oblivious to the stir she has caused among our small group, we watch Ndzilu pawing at the grass, flicking up the bottom half of an impala leg which she settles upon to chew. It is perhaps the gradual onset of dusk that eventually causes Ndzilu to get up and start moving into the bush.

Walking very closely behind our vehicle, she blends into the grass with us following at a respectful distance. I am still taking photographs



YOU LOOKIN' AT ME: One of the three male lions on the reserve relaxes in the bush.

Pictures: FRANSJE VAN RIEL

I can hardly believe my luck. I mean, only a few short hours ago I was still traipsing around Cape Town airport – now a leopard – writes **FRANSJE VAN RIEL**

until the animated voices behind me cause me to look up. Still unsure what's going on, I finally see a flash of fur and a daze of spots. There, ahead of us, shrouded by the copper-coloured vegetation, is a second leopard.

"Scotia," Juice says, turning to us from the tracker seat. "It is Ndzilu's mother."

Ndzilu appears not to have noticed her mother and just carries

on walking. We are told that since her daughter's independence, Scotia gave birth to a new litter of cubs. "That was 10 months ago," Benry says. "But we suspect that one of the cubs was killed, as we haven't seen one of the cubs for quite some time now."

Scotia is unhappy. Lowering her head and pressing her body low to the ground, the mother leopard is stalking her own daughter and



BECKONING BED: Feeling like royalty in the luxury accommodation is the order of the day at Sabi Sands Game Reserve.

unsure of what will happen next, we watch with bated breath as the gap between the two spotted cats slowly closes.

Ndzilu has moved behind a thick cluster of shrubs and is almost impossible to see. Scotia, in the meantime, has caught up with her.



JUMBO FAMILY: A herd of elephants march by after crossing the river.