

safari

daughter and is only a few metres behind. We no longer have a visual, but a few long minutes later we hear loud, rasping growls reverberating across the bushveld, followed by the fleeting glimpse of two golden shapes rushing through the undergrowth.

“It’s okay,” Benry reassures us. “It’s nothing too serious. She’s just warning Ndzilu to move away. Now that she is no longer responsible for her daughter, all her motherly instincts are geared towards protecting and feeding her new cub”.

A full, blood red moon rises behind the horizon as we continue our drive. Juice has switched on the spotlight and sweeps the powerful beam left and right, illuminating a small scrub hare and her tiny baby on the side of the road. It almost seems ridiculous to see such a small, vulnerable animal in this dangerous environment.

We are in for a surprise when instead of heading back to the lodge, Benry comes to a halt in a clearing, which we discover is the romantic setting of our bush dinner. Scattered paraffin lamps are flickering everywhere, casting a soft glow over the tables and elaborate buffet. Does it get any better than this, I wonder.

We’re out again early the following day. A lone male lion, lying in an open patch of grass, raises his head to meet the first rays of sunshine. He is one of the three dominant males in the area, known as the Sand River Coalition and, noticing he is injured, I can only surmise that his coalition mates have gone off to leave their companion to rest.

The rest of the morning is somewhat uneventful. That is, until we start meandering along the Sabi River to look for hippos and find elephants instead. There is a finger of land between the two opposite banks and a young male lion resting upon it is watching the elephants as they congregate around the water’s edge. It is only when the herd enters the river that we see the mature lioness emerging from a patch of thick grass.

Visibly upset by the presence of the two big cats, the matriarch raises her head and trumpeting her displeasure, she rushes forward along with several older adult cows in tow. It evokes an immediate reaction.

Fleeing into the reeds, the lions turn a last time to look at the herd before disappearing from sight. Benry laughs: “So much for lions being the king of the jungle!”

The herd is very close to our side of the bank now and, turning to us, Benry looks serious. “Okay guys. These elephants are probably going to be crossing right in front of us, so please everyone, keep still and don’t make any sudden movements.”

One after the other, the elephants heave their grey, bulky bodies up on to the bank and start moving towards the road where we’re parked. For a few tangible, titillatingly short moments we are surrounded by them.

I am off the following day, headed for Tinga, on the Kruger side. Leaving the Sabi Sands and halting for a quick stop at Skukuza airport to arrange the necessary exit permits, we are once again driving on dirt. Navigating the very narrow bridge across the river, it is a short distance to Narina Lodge.

Blending in perfectly with the bush, the six thatched rooms and their setting are so charming that they conjure up tales of an enchanted forest. Wooden walkways separate each widely spaced



ROMANTIC SETTING: Sundowners on the patio.



ALL THE BETTER TO BITE YOU WITH: A leopard wakes from her catnap.

apart room, giving guests complete privacy and, opening the door, the huge room with its stunning, modernist interior, along with the outside deck, complete with private plunge pool overlooking the river, quite simply takes my breath away.

After unpacking and a hearty lunch, I have an hour to relax before tea and snacks are served on the main deck at 3.30. It is here that I meet Jason van Zyl, the guide on our afternoon drive.

Now that we’re inside the National Park, a different set of rules apply. No offroading unless we have a visual of a Big Five animal, Jason explains. In the tracker seat is Emmanuel Siwela and, seated behind me, is an American family from Oregon on their very first African safari.

The sun is fast heading for the nether part of the horizon and I am grateful for the poncho now that it’s getting nippy. Dusk falls quickly



CHILL ZONE: The lower deck breakfast area of the River Lodge.

and soon it is completely dark. Snuggling deeper into our ponchos, we admire a tiny bushbaby that Emmanuel has caught in the spot-

light before continuing our way. But before we’ve even picked up any sort of speed, Emmanuel raises his hand once more and gestures

Jason to stop.

Listening intently for a few moments, he urges Jason to move slowly, then halt again. Flicking the spotlight to his right, he rests the powerful beam on to a spectacular male leopard.

Everyone gasps.

For the first time that afternoon, Jason turns the steering wheel to take the vehicle offroad. “It’s the Boulders Male,” he says, switching off the engine. “A territorial male that occupies the area north and south of the Sand River.”

A continuous series of deep guttural growls hang heavily in the air and the Boulders Male is salivating profusely. “There is another leopard not far away,” Jason whispers as he scrutinises the leopard’s intent stare through his binoculars. “Listen... What we have here is a territorial stand-off.”

We can’t see the second male, despite Emmanuel’s spotlight sweep. “Here, have a look,” Jason says, offering me his binoculars. “This is not the first time these two have come across one another.” Adjusting the settings slightly to my eyes, I can now see the bite marks on the Boulder Male’s front paw and left shoulder.

The growling and unbroken stares into the bush continue and we remain very quiet for what must have been at least fifteen minutes. Then, triumphantly, the Boulder Male rolls on to his back. Realising that the other male must have relinquished by retreating into the darkness, I marvel at the stealth and secrecy that is the very essence of leopards; no one heard a twig break or seen a bush move as the big cat vanished into the night.

Taking off from Skukuza airport the following morning, bound for Cape Town, I look down over the Lion Sands Game Reserve, understanding that it is so much more than just pristine bushveld.

For the animals, it is home.

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