

Chalkey's TREEHOUSE SAFARI



It isn't every day that I get to spend a night on my own in a treehouse in the middle of the Big Five country. Especially one that has been built around a 500-year-old Leadwood tree and doesn't have any walls or a roof. STORY BY FRANSJE VAN RIEL

So the question is what to pack. A few basic bathroom essentials, sleepwear and a change of clothes, sure, but what else? Grabbing an extra pair of warm socks and a thick jersey, I zip up my small overnight bag, popping in a black coat at the last minute as well. It's winter after all, even if it is sunny and warm outside.

I'm at Lion Sands River Lodge in the Sabi Sand Private Game Reserve, just across the river from the Kruger National Park, and tonight I will be sleeping under the stars. In a tree. By myself. The camera batteries are fully charged and, performing a last check around the room, I leave the small pile of T-shirts and shorts on the cupboard shelf, close the door behind me and head to reception...

The Sabi Sand Game Reserve is a 65,000 hectare wilderness area, famous for its big five sightings and abundance

of five star luxury lodges, and represents the largest private game reserve in the country. Formally established in 1948, it rests comfortably against the south western side of the Kruger National Park, with which it shares its historic origins.

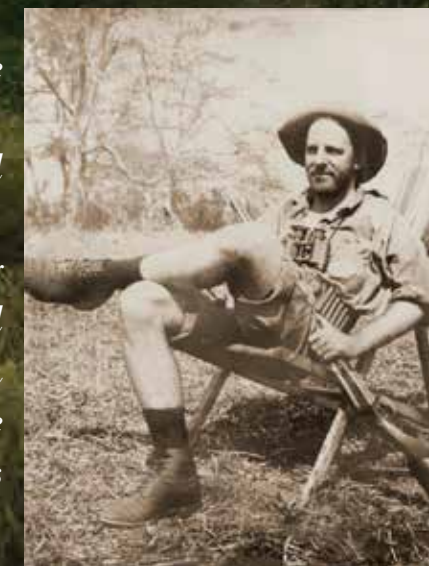
When in 1926 the National Parks Act of South Africa was passed, demarcating the borders of what was then known as the Sabie Reserve, many private landowners in the area were excluded, prompting them to establish their own Sabi Private Game Reserve in 1934. Fourteen years later the landowners decided to join forces and, dropping the fences between the individual properties, the reserve was consolidated into the Sabi Sand Private Game Reserve, South Africa's oldest conservancy of private game reserves.

Amidst these pioneering times, during the mid-thirties, Guy Aubrey Chalkey, an American of Irish descent, arrived in Africa.

Descending upon Johannesburg, which at the time was at its gold rush peak, Guy Chalkey eagerly began exploring opportunities in mine engineering.

Like so many of his contemporaries, Guy Chalkey was lured by adventure and the chance to hunt Africa's bountiful game. It was during one of his explorations in the lowveld that he discovered a property by the name of Kingston 380 KU, which was owned by the Transvaal Consolidated Lands. It took Guy Chalkey's breath away. So moved by the pristine conditions, raw beauty and majestic wildlife, he decided to buy the farm and build a private camp on the banks of the Sabie River for his family. On 25th of November, 1933, Kingston was sold to Guy Chalkey for 4000 pounds and 14 shillings; just a year before the neighbouring landowners created the Sabi Private Reserve.

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There were no roads in those days, so Guy Chalkley carved markers on trees to navigate his way through the bush in his old Ford sedan. Despite these challenging conditions, he completed the camp between 1936 and 1938 and, enriched both spiritually and emotionally by the few years of wilderness experiences, Guy Chalkley refrained from hunting for the rest of his life.

Still, the bush was not without danger. Having to flee from a pack of wild dogs and lions one early evening, Guy Chalkley famously climbed a big Leadwood tree and there spent the entire night.



be kept shut and locked at all times.

Another few steps up is the bathroom, complete with washbasin, cold running water, a table with several amenities, paraffin lamps and a toilet. Finally, up another flight of stairs, we reach the main platform.

There are flickering paraffin lamps everywhere. But the most impressive feature, among the small dining table and chairs, nightstands and cushion-type couch is the bed; a four-poster clad in white mosquito netting. With its 360° view of the savannah thornveld below, it's probably the most romantic bush

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Realising the advantages of filming wildlife from this lofted position, he consequently set up a platform which was perfect for storing the heavy photographic equipment of its day. Now he was able to stay out for two or three days at a time to capture the game moving through the area.

And so it is here, exactly 80 years later, that I get to spend the night in the very same spot.

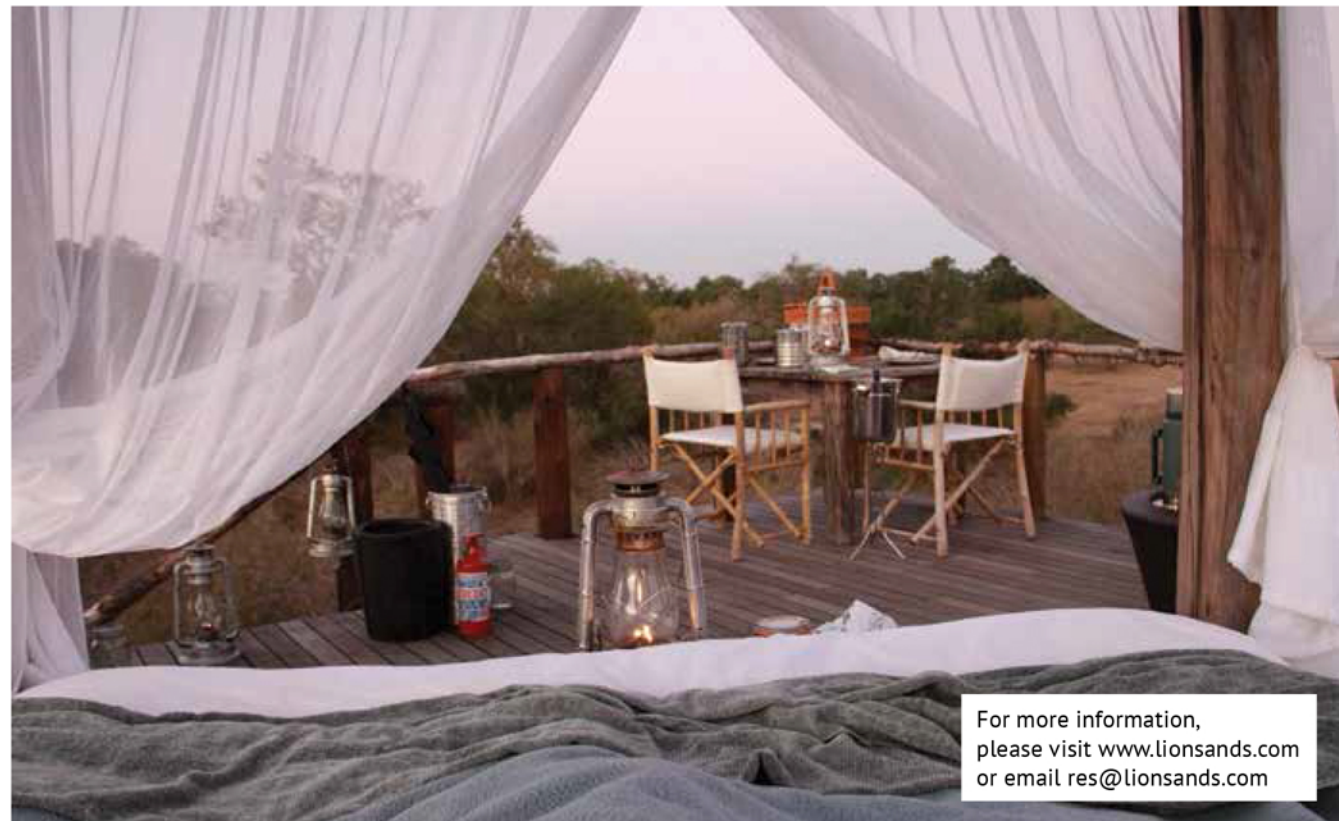
I depart River Lodge at 3.30 pm for an afternoon drive in the open game drive vehicle. My overnight bag will await me at the treehouse, so I have

been advised, and for the first few hours I will be game driving with a family of four from Germany. After that, I will be switching vehicles in order to arrive at the treehouse just before dusk.

And so it goes. Giving a wave of my hand, I climb into a second vehicle driven by a lady ranger called Stef and continue the ten-minute or so drive until we round a bend in the road and Chalkley's appears like an oasis in the desert.

Shielded only by the dead Leadwood's gnarly branches, the platform is accessed by a short flight of wooden steps, separated by a security door which, I am advised, must





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setting I have ever seen.

Still a little taken aback I listen to Stef as she explains the workings of the two-way radio and, nodding that I've got it, I watch her as she bids me a good night and heads down the stairs to lock the security door behind her.

The vehicle disappears from sight and I am left alone. Realising that soon it will be dark, I turn to my overnight case. Does one unpack in a treehouse? I unearth a few essentials while it's still light enough to rummage through its contents and, excavating a red lace nightie which now appears wildly inappropriate, I dig out my toiletries and jersey.

After having settled in, I turn my attention to the small wooden table in the corner of the platform upon which a wicker picnic basket is perched. It contains my dinner-for-one along with plates, cutlery, napkins and a variety of condiments. A stand cradling an ice bucket, complete with a bottle of Mulderbosch Sauvignon, is just begging to be opened.

I read the menu, printed on paper

and clipped to a small board that rests against the picnic basket, and I'm suddenly ravenous. There's a baguette with a filling of Buffalo style mozzarella, sliced tomato and basil, served along several sides; brie and caramelised onion mini-quiches, root vegetable crisps, leafless Greek salad, layered butterbean salad and seasonal fruit.

But first there is the business of an aperitif. Opening the bottle and pouring a glass of wine, I chin-chin to the impala darting across the bushveld's open clearing.

Darkness falls shortly thereafter, unveiling a night sky of a million stars. With the paraffin lamps as my only source of immediate light, I sit down to my dinner, shortly after which a chilly wind picks up.

With all but the last paraffin lamp on the nightstand blown out, I climb between the bedcovers, contemplating Guy Chalkley all those decades ago.

It is during this reflective state that I eventually fall asleep, rousing a few

times to the far off sounds of hippos in the river. By morning, it is the gentle twittering of countless little birds and a fish eagle's soulful cry that wake me. A soft pale light spreads out over the platform and donning my warm socks and jumper, I head to the bathroom. Thankfully the wind has died down, but instead it is now bitterly cold.

Browsing through the contents of a large black storage box, I find two flasks of still-hot water, instant coffee and a cleverly designed three-layered metal container harbouring biscotti-style rusks in three different flavours.

Not long afterwards I hear the sound of an engine approaching and gathering my belongings, take a few last pictures before I spot a vehicle purring down the road. It's time to go. With some sentiment I walk down the stairs and open the security door.

And, quietly, I take my hat off to old man Guy Aubrey Chalkley, who has been the inspiration for this unique experience. ☺