

Sublime *Singita*

Exploring the Magic of the Lowveld at Singita Boulders & Ebony Lodges

Singita remains one of South Africa's foremost travel experiences, and *Fransje van Riel* takes us on a journey of discovery to two of its most captivating Lowveld destinations.



It is 11 am as we pull up to the Newington Gate at the Sabi Game Reserve, and, eager for our adventure to begin, I greet the uniformed guard. We're early, as check-in is only at lunchtime, so I ask if they could let Singita Boulders Lodge know. "They already know," he says, grinning. It's the first of many wonderful gestures that we're about to experience.

We continue along a sandy track to eventually arrive at the far end of Singita's private airstrip, where senior field guide, Marc Eschenlohr, is waiting for us. We follow him to a quaint thatch lounge that serves as the terminal building, where we park beneath the shade of the carport.

Since it's not yet noon, Marc suggests we go for a short game drive before heading to the lodge. Pulling up a short time later beside a medium-sized tree, he stops. I can't see anything except, ahead in the distance, a game viewing vehicle and a large bull elephant. I take some photos while Anne (my niece) is questioning Marc. "There is something else, isn't there? Where?" I am not paying much attention since I hope to get a good shot of the elephant. A loud gasp follows, then a chuckle from Marc. Looking up from the viewfinder, I look at Anne. Speechless, she points to my side of the vehicle and, following her gaze, my jaw drops – a male leopard, fast asleep on the side of the road.

This is Nyeleti, the famous leopard that was filmed strolling through Singita Ebony Lodge in broad daylight. The clip went viral on social media, and I, for one, could never bring myself to delete it off my phone. And now here he is, peacefully asleep, a few meters away.

We eventually leave Nyeleti to slumber and head for the lodge. Emerging from the vehicle, we walk along a dry stone wall to a lily pond with the tranquil sound of trickling water. The most striking African furnishings, contemporary artwork, and natural, understated décor open onto an expansive viewing deck overlooking the Sand River.

Our ultra-spacious glass-fronted suite also reflects nature's elements and boasts a spacious lounge, a bedroom with a fireplace, a dressing area, a bathroom with indoor shower, and a slipper bath. Little luxury surprises include yoga mats, drawing pencils, a leather pouch containing paints, sunhats, pashminas, a bottle of SPF 50 sunscreen and a tote bag to take personals on the safari drives, are a nice touch. Singita's commitment to sustainability is evident in using materials,

refillable amenities, glass water bottles, and bins lined with paper bags. The private deck with heated pool and outdoor shower offers similar magnificent views over the Sand River and northern bank at the main lodge.

We unpack before lunch. Head chef Xavier Francis and his team offer a daily menu that could easily have come straight from a Michelin-star restaurant. Our personalised plant-based menu features no less than eight choices of vegetarian and vegan dishes, plus dessert. Dishes are beautifully presented and primarily procured from neighbouring suppliers, which ties in with Singita's 100-year purpose to protect this pristine wilderness area and 14 other Singita properties across four African countries for future generations.

TIME FOR A DRIVE

It is still dark the next morning when we head out on our game drive, and after a second cup of freshly brewed coffee, we're good to go. There are prettily wax-wrapped toasted sandwiches and individual glass jars packed with freshly sliced fruits, yoghurt, and granolas, which we are invited to take on the drive. Donning warm jackets, shawls, and beanies, we snuggle into the heated seats beneath thick blankets and ease out of the camp into the private concession.

Not far from the lodge, a herd of elephants approaches a small watering hole, emerging like grey ghosts in the twilight. We pause to watch them drink. More emerge from everywhere; twenty, maybe even forty elephants, some trumpeting, all hastening in excitement at the prospect of water. We are amid the herd rushing past; it is an extraordinary and humbling experience.

After a coffee and breakfast stop, we find ourselves in a beautiful open lake area with scatterings of marula and jackalberry trees.





This is Singita Castleton, the third Singita lodge on the property, a villa rented out privately to families and groups. The setting, with the beautiful homestead and individual cottages, reminds me of a scene from *Out of Africa*.

We continue our drive past a group of dewy-eyed impalas peacefully grazing upon the still-green grass. On higher ground, Marc steers the vehicle toward what looks like an old, collapsed termite mound, overgrown by vegetation. A female hyena is lying at the opening of a sandy burrow, while two cubs are playing boisterously on top. We approach slowly, keeping as quiet as possible, when, after a short while, we catch a glimpse of first one, then a second black, bear-like face. The cubs feel secure enough to leave the den and, squinting slightly into the morning light, plod on heavy cub feet with bushy tails to their mother, who, eyes closed, allows them to suckle.

We depart Boulders Lodge on Sunday morning, relocating to nearby Ebony Lodge with a pit stop at the stylish boutique and gallery. Browsing keepsakes, luxury collectables and a covetable collection of African art by renowned and upcoming artists.

SINGITA EBONY LODGE

At Ebony, Primrose Siziba meets us at the lodge entrance. Anne has booked a massage at the Wellness Area and is whisked away while I am offered something to drink. I settle into a comfy two-seater lounge that overlooks the viewing deck where Nyeleti took his famous stroll through the lodge. There are interesting collectables everywhere, and with the charm of a classic safari venue, I already feel very much at home.

The suite is heavenly too. Outside, the private deck is divine. There is a plush sitting area where, for a wonderfully tranquil time, I take the opportunity to feel at one with nature. I listen to the birds and the impalas rutting in the distance and feel the breeze on my face.

It is a magical moment; to feel so peacefully connected with the earth's elements. Later that afternoon and the following morning, we had triple sightings of a beautiful female leopard, named Nkuwe. Our visit has reminded us of how important it is to preserve these astonishingly beautiful wilderness tracts, and I feel grateful for Singita's 30-year conservation success and, that, in a small way, our stay will contribute to the preservation for many generations to come.

Singita's 100-year conservation purpose is founded on an interdependent relationship between sustainability (ecotourism), conservation of biodiversity and working with communities to ensure the protection of wilderness areas across four African countries. For more information, please visit www.singita.com.

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