

# LOOKING FOR LEOPARDS

## A Rejuvenating Return to Nature at Singita Ebony

It is a Sunday morning; we have just checked out of our beautiful suite at Singita Boulders Lodge and are now on the way to stay at Singita Ebony. Boulders is going to be hard to beat.

Text by Fransje van Riel / Photography © Singita Boulders Lodge | Fransje van Riel

**W**e make an en-route stop at the Boutique & Gallery, which is stylishly tucked away in the bush and out of sight from the two sister lodges. As it turns out, the venue is quite extraordinary; apart from offering classic souvenirs and authentic collectables, the gallery boasts an expertly curated portfolio of contemporary African art, highlighting the creativity of the continent through established and emerging artists. A percentage of the proceeds supports Singita's NGO partner, the Singita Lowveld Trust, which is aligned to Singita's 100-year conservation purpose.

It is here, at Ebony Lodge, where Singita's long term commitment to conservation truly began. One of the pioneers of luxury ecotourism in the Sabi Sand, Ebony Lodge opened in 1993, the first of now fifteen award-winning lodges strewn across four African countries. Each Singita property functions as a restorative wilderness sanctuary that rests on an interdependent model of hospitality, conservation and community; an enduring synergy that ensures the long-term preservation of biodiversity while helping the neighbouring communities to thrive economically.

Ebony Lodge looms majestically over the banks of the Sand River, offering magnificent views over the Sabi Sand bushveld. Exuding timeless safari chic, the interior, with contemporary artefacts, and African artworks, reflects the romance of a classic safari camp, while retaining a modern feel.

Our glass fronted suite, more like a villa really, is very different to the one we have just left at Boulders, but equally bedazzling and classically luxurious. From the downstairs study area, which hosts a coffee station and complimentary mini bar, sliding doors allow access to a private deck with uninterrupted views over the Sand River. The outside lounge is replete with a plush sitting area, a heated plunge pool, outdoor shower and ample space to make use of the yoga mat; it's a wonderful way to truly absorb the serenity and solitude, while enhancing the powerful sense of connection I feel with the environment.

After a five-star vegetarian lunch, with emphasis on locally sourced, healthy food, we relax before making our way back to the Copper Bar in the main lodge, where drinks and beautifully prepared finger food is served. Soon afterwards,







we head out for the afternoon game drive with senior field guide, Marc Eschenlohr and Musa Mayindi, as the expert in the tracker seat. Driving toward a wide-flowing point of the Sand River, Marc manoeuvres the vehicle across a narrow, submerged causeway and takes us into the water; it is a spectacular experience.

Our plan is to look for Nkuwa, a lovely female leopard that we very unexpectedly came across earlier that morning. She had seemed quite alert and appeared to be hunting.

We are in luck and find her again, this time standing in the fork of a Marula tree. She still seems vigilant and is looking at something in the distance. It is a wonderful sighting, particularly when she eventually jumps down and walks past the back of our vehicle while we hold our breath, privileged to have this moment to ourselves.

Just as we think it couldn't get any better, we are afforded a third and most incredible encounter the following morning. Nkuwa is resting, ensconced in the branches of a jackalberry tree. Her tummy is very bloated, indicating that she has successfully hunted, perhaps in the early hours.

Fabulously concealed by the thick canopy, right at the top of the tree and almost impossible to see, is her three-month-old cub.

Suddenly, Nkuwa is on high alert, and we gasp as a large male lion comes into view, carrying the remains of an impala. It is likely her kill, stolen from her, but better that, than her cub. We watch as the lion marches triumphantly past with his prize and disappears into the long grass. The leopards are safe.

We realise how lucky we are to observe these big cats displaying their natural behaviour in this pristine private concession, considering that many of Africa's big cats have become critically endangered.

We, reluctantly, pull away to leave Nkuwa and her cub to their slumber; it is our last morning at Singita and, after stopping for coffee, we return to the lodge to pack up. Before we leave, we sit down to one last lunch prepared by head chef, Xavier Francis, and his talented team. It is another exquisite vegetarian feast prepared just for us; ciabatta bread, seed crackers and dips, a stunning burrata and tomato salad with fresh basil, freshly picked from the kitchen garden, a stunning heirloom beetroot salad almost too beautiful to eat, marinated tofu plus a cheese board with preserves and pickles. With bubbly from the Ebony wine cellar on ice, it is a spectacular way to end our stay.

We've just learnt that in Shangaan Singita means 'Place of Miracles.' We could not agree more.

