



# Sophistication in solitude

Luxury lodge offers extravagance, but  
also a deep connection with nature

**Dulini Leadwood is one of the most intimate** and secluded spots in the Sabi Sand. Seated at a table for two, aloft on an elevated deck and overlooking the gentle course of the Sand River, flowing across partially submerged clusters of small boulders, I see two large buffalo resting contently on a sandy bank. One of these 'dagga boys' has a nasty gash on his shoulder, but the old beast doesn't seem too perturbed by it.

Head chef Lamek Mnisi is at the gastronomic helm of the three Dulini properties in the Sabi Sand reserve – Leadwood, River and Moya – and, stopping by my table, he goes through the various lunch options, assuring me that, as long as the ingredients are available, he is flexible to adjust to any personal preference. Soon, lunch is served: a variety of delectable tapas, sundried tomato relish, grilled artichokes dressed in a flavoursome, light vinaigrette, fresh citrus salad with watermelon and colourful veggies.

Other than the manager and my private butler (yes!), there is no one else around. Last night's guests have departed, new guests have not yet arrived and, with just four resplendent suites, I savour the oasis-like tranquillity of being all alone in what feels like paradise.

Having adventurously and extravagantly jetted in on a Bell Long Ranger helicopter jet operated by Mpumalanga Helicopters from Skukuza Airport only three hours earlier, I have now settled into my villa at the far end of the lodge.

The suites all offer wonderful views over the Sand River through floor-to-ceiling panels of glass framed by wood. There is a lounge area, a spacious separate bedroom and a wardrobe section that leads

into the luxurious bathroom with magnificent large freestanding bath, and in- and outside showers. The decor is a mixture of all the natural elements – glass, wood and magnificent drystone walls. The ambiance is lavishly reminiscent of the golden days of the classic safari style, but with a modern twist.

Yet, amongst all the refinement, this is still a very wild place. Nyala and their young are browsing beside the boardwalk as I make my way back to my suite. And I find a scattering of impala standing in the shade behind my bathroom.

## Life's a beach

My first game drive is due to depart at 4pm and, with field guide Patrick Mthabane at the wheel and Observe Mhlaba in the tracker seat on the bonnet, we pull away from the driveway. Coaxing the open 4x4 vehicle down a steep narrow track toward a flowing section of the Sand River, we find ourselves traversing a broad stretch of dry river sand that is aptly referred to as 'The Beach'. Here, close to the flowing water, we find a single lioness with two sub-adult cubs. It's an unusual sight – apparently the lioness broke away from another pride a few years ago. Her sister and cubs didn't make it.





#### How to get there

Airlink connects  
Johannesburg and  
Cape Town with  
Skukuza Airport.  
For schedules, go  
to page 113.

[www.flyairlink.com/  
flightschedule](http://www.flyairlink.com/flightschedule)



The low afternoon light casts a beautiful golden glow over the lions and the exquisite riverine environment. With the cubs playing boisterously, it is photographer's dream.

We eventually leave the lions and, with dusk spreading its crepuscular mantle across the bush, Patrick and Observe invite us to stretch our legs at a pretty spot while busying themselves setting up a table for sundowners and snacks.

We've barely left when Euphorbia, one of Dulini's magnificent resident male leopards, comes padding down the road in front of us. He is intently focused on patrolling his territory; we can't believe our luck at this incredible encounter.

#### Survival of the fittest

Early the following morning, there is the reverberating racket of fighting hippos. Their squabble continues unabated right up until we head out on our morning drive. It's chilly. Patrick distributes hot water bottles that every guest gratefully accepts and, huddling beneath thick blankets, we watch a crimson sunrise penetrate a stand of riverine trees. We are not the

only ones to enjoy the first rays of the new day. Two magnificent lions, known as the Plains Camp Males, are slumbering close to two lionesses in the fragile sunlight.

When one of the males raises his head and looks in our direction – his broad nose battle scarred and severely puckered – the raw brutality of lion life suddenly hits home. I am merely an observer in a short moment of time. For these animals, this is their world, their home, where survival isn't a given, but an enduring day-to-day battle.

When, later that morning, we watch with bated breath as a blue-eyed leopard cub comes out of hiding from the rocky boulders under the watchful eyes of his mother, we can barely contain our excitement. The cub is playfully swatting at his indulgent mother's tail and, as she gets up, he bounds after her across the rocky boulders, until the two leopards vanish from sight amongst the thick foliage.

Surely it doesn't get better than this.

Text and photography | **Fransje van Riel**

For more information or to book a stay, go to [dulini.com](http://dulini.com).