



# Heaven on Earth

Whatever the weather, iconic venue **delivers wildlife wonders** for its guests

**It's certainly different.** A dome-shaped concrete mound covering a meandering downward-sloping brick path yields the entrance to Sabi Sabi Earth Lodge. It is almost 40°C outside and new arrivals revel in the shade of the covered hallway, gratefully accepting cool hand towels and sorbet-like welcome drinks.

The main area is a model for Sabi Sabi's vision for eco-tourism. It is simply unlike any safari lodge.

It is lunchtime and, after checking in, guests are invited to take a seat in the partially open restaurant that offers magnificent views across the Sabi Sabi bushveld. The menu is also quite different to most other lodges.

Comprising a diverse à la carte menu, there is an extremely wide variety of appetisers, salads and mains to choose from, including dishes from every corner of the world. A serving of just-baked, still-warm slices of ciabatta bread is served before the first course, along with a beautiful spread of plated dips.



It's a great start to what is to become a fantastic gastronomic bush experience.

Upon opening the heavy door to the suite, there is a round table with a bottle of bubbly on ice, along with some snacks. The suite itself is an ultra-spacious, opulent extravaganza of contemporary luxury design that offers everything and more that a guest might need.

A large wooden cupboard reveals a fully stocked bar fridge filled to the brim with cool drinks, still and sparkling water plus a selection of wine – two different reds, a Sauvignon, Chenin and Chardonnay, a bottle of rosé and a trio of full-size, high-quality spirit options.

Tucked behind the living-cum-bedroom area is a massive bathroom. There are his and hers basins, lots of pristinely white fluffy towels, a sunken bath with a metal tablet stand stretched across the width

of the tub and a shower. The floor-to-ceiling glass sliding door provides access to an outside shower and a comfortably furnished covered sitting area, wooden deck with umbrella and an unusually large swimming pool. Naturally, there are sweeping views across the bush.

### Wilderness up close

Heading out after a cup of tea and a pastry, guide Jamiel Malherbe and Louis Mkansi, the gold-rated tracker, we find ourselves immersed in the spectacular undulating landscape of the Sabi Sabi wilderness. We encounter two male lions and, sometime later, a massive herd of buffalo.

Getting dropped off at the lodge just before sundown, glowing paraffin lamps atop iron stakes are already alight.

Near the vehicle, three very relaxed waterbuck are eyeing incoming guests.

Alongside the sandy path to the suite is a dainty bushbuck nibbling on grassy shoots. Earth Lodge is completely unfenced, which is made all the more evident when, at first light the following morning, on the way back to the main area, there is a very big heap of fairly fresh elephant dung piled up in the middle of the footpath.

Following the extreme heat of the previous day, the next morning is overcast and chilly. For the animals, it brings respite. A pack of wild dogs is actively playing and jittering about and, a short time later, Malherbe is alerted over the radio to a sighting of a beautiful territorial female leopard. We find and follow her through the bush for a considerable amount of time



until she emerges in a clearing and jumps onto a fallen tree branch that she uses to sharpen her claws. It is a magnificent sighting.

Later that same day, there is another incredible experience as a huge elephant comes casually strolling past the restaurant during lunch. The bull pauses from time to time to feed before continuing on alongside the open dining area, stopping off close to where guests are seated. Raising his trunk high to strip the leaves of a nearby tree, he is completely at ease and unperturbed by everyone taking lots of photos with their cellphones.

### Fortune and felines

With more cloudy weather the following day, Malherbe is leisurely driving along a bend in the road when we are surprised by a lioness sitting with her roughly seven-month-old cub straight ahead of us. Another two lionesses appear a few minutes later from the nearby thickets with their two cubs. It is the South pride, Malherbe informs us. The lions are very active and incredibly playful, chasing one another and pouncing on their indulgent mothers' backs.

After an evening of fine dining among a glittering spectacle of glimmering lights and candles, there is another drive. Malherbe is headed north, following up on a radio sighting of a leopard when, suddenly, Mkansi raises his stick and points to the right. "Cheetah!"

Sure enough, there is a female cheetah, feeding on a new-born impala fawn. Approaching slowly, Malherbe moves closer and switches off, allowing observation of the sleek spotted cat. Continuously surveying her immediate environment nervously to check that she is safe from marauding predators, she flops down to feed in a controlled frenzy. Cheetahs are fairly rare to

see – this is amazing luck. And the day improves further when, a short time later, the leopard that has been reported turns out to be the same stunning female as the day before.

You can't really ask for more.

Text and photography | **Fransje van Riel**

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



### How to get there

Airlink connects you from Cape Town and Johannesburg to Skukuza.

For flight schedules, go to page 113.

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

