

Summer safari....

Pictures taken by the author during this journey

“Fantastic sighting!” I whispered.

I was not referring to the magnificent female leopard that we tracked earlier while she growled and streaked her scent all over her territory to chase away a contender. The focus of our attention was a bird of somewhat distorted dimensions perched on a tree with a sizeable locust in its huge beak. The latter is so large in relation to its body that nature fuses the bird’s upper two neck vertebrae as a precautionary measure to prevent it from having to seek medical advice and undergo surgery later in life as some unfortunate humans have to.

We were looking at a male Red-billed Hornbill ready to deposit food through a narrow slit in a tree trunk where his spouse was nesting. We stayed long enough to put him at ease and to follow him as he made his delivery and took off for another catch.

When ready to lay her eggs the female hornbill settles in a tree trunk cavity and seals herself off with a mixture of her own feces, mud and fruit pulp—leaving an opening just large enough for the food transfer. She moults until naked to provide a soft surface before laying an average of three eggs. Incubation takes about three weeks and the female breaks out of the nest when her growing offspring crowds her out. She reseals the nest and assists her partner with the feeding until the chicks are able to spread their wings and leave.



During February my wife Ruth and I went on safari in three private game reserves bordering South Africa's famous Kruger National Park. We started at Singita's Boulders Lodge in the Sabi region and worked our way up to Ngala in Timbavati, ending up at Shumbalala in Thornybush. As to be expected, the accommodations and the food in all three were top class. The field or nature guides performed a sterling job—the term ranger is nowadays reserved for officials who patrol parks. After the ample summer rains the tall grass and lush foliage made it quite difficult to spot animals and required considerable tracking skills.

Somehow I detected a sigh of relief when the guides asked us at the outset what our specific interests were and we simply answered: "Everything from the smallest to the biggest. Whatever nature brings."

The pressure was off and they could relax and share with us sights like the Red-billed Hornbill and numerous other fascinating little creatures and critters instead of hurrying around to tally up the Big Five—elephant, lion, leopard, buffalo and rhino.

Originally these five were supposed to have been picked by hunters as the most dangerous creatures in the African bush. Subsequently promoters pounced on

the idea to push the concept to lure visitors to areas where all five were present.

Even though we did encounter the Big Five it would have mattered little to me if we missed out on one or two of them, considering the total experience.

By the way, I am a strong proponent of including several lodges and locations on a single safari. This spreads the odds. While one can usually rely on the expertise and local knowledge of field guides to track animals, nature does not always play along. One person's excellent viewing today at one location is often someone else's disappointment tomorrow. Animals move on. It is not a zoo and there is no set routine.

The golden rule is, of course, to be patient. We were spending time with field guide Marc and tracker George watching several cheetah lying in the tall grass at Singita. They were hardly visible. Another two vehicles came, stayed a short while and departed—most probably under pressure from guests who wanted to go to the next "sighting." First one, then two, and eventually four giraffes appeared, awakening the cheetahs out of their slumber and prompting them to rise and walk past our vehicle. There was my picture: Four periscope-like heads staring at a cheetah!



Back for a moment to the leopard that kicked up the fuss as she chased another female out of her territory. The target of her ire happened to be another leopard who had secured her three cubs under the thatch-roof overhang in the chalet next-door to ours at Singita's Boulders Lodge and ventured into the bush in search of prey. At the camp her presence posed another serious territorial problem: The chalet which she "occupied" was needed as Boulders was fully booked for the weekend. As we left, the management and guides were still considering options. Being familiar with Singita's and most other safari operators' approach towards nature I had little doubt that the leopard would receive preferential treatment over any guest.

This was confirmed afterwards in an e-mail from Singita's Mark Broodryk: "We were fortunate enough to be able to shuffle rooms around and thus managed to leave the leopard in 'her' room for about 2 weeks (Talk about an expensive nursery school, but I trust she will reciprocate over time with fantastic leopard viewing in the future. So all worth it.) She has subsequently taken the cubs away from the lodge into one of the rocky outcrops about a kilometer from Boulders lodge into a more "natural" environment. She is an extremely good mother and keeping them very well hidden."

Our next stop, Ngala Safari Lodge in the Timbavati Game Reserve, happened to be place where I first introduced Ruth to safari life some thirty years ago, shortly after we got married. Since then I have taken her all over Southern and East Africa to share my addiction for wildlife. In the meantime Ngala, as we discovered after our arrival, upgraded quite a few notches to compete in the luxury market.

"Remember," Ruth remarked as our light aircraft swooped over the runway to make sure that there were no animals on the airstrip, "years ago we encountered a big pride of lions just as we approached the lodge."

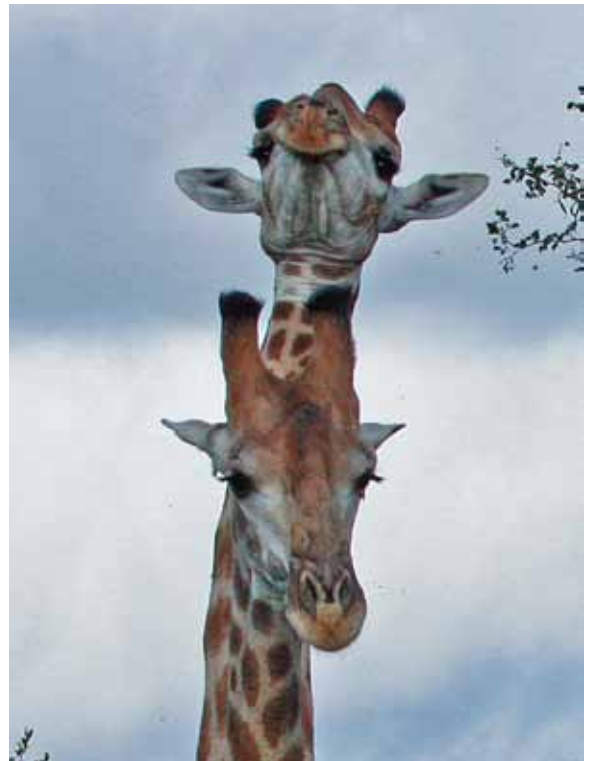
This time there were no lions but we did see the familiar warthogs grazing on the lawn around the lodge and our chalet.

After the appearance in the 1970s of *The White Lions of Timbavati* by American author Chris McBride many a visitor came this way to see those "albinos." Fact is, they are not albinos and they are rarely to be seen nowadays. In the end we did not encounter any



lions at Ngala despite sterling efforts on the part of our very knowledgeable and industrious field guide Lyson. But we had numerous other magnificent sightings that more than compensated.

We had to wait for our first clear sighting of lions until the last afternoon game drive at our final stop, Shumbalala Lodge in Thornybush Game Reserve. It came after hours of tracking by field guide Luke and tracker Herman. Imagine a needle in a very large haystack—or in this case four needles. (Three females and a young male lion). Following the *spoor* or track of wild animals is both an art and a science—with a dash of luck thrown in. Guests are mercifully left in the safety of the vehicle while the guide and tracker get out at times to track on foot. Finally, as we were just about ready to give up and call it a day the two men returned to the vehicle visibly excited. They found the lions in the thick growth along the riverbed. To get



the vehicle close required considerable maneuvering through and around thorny bushes, lush trees and tall grass, nurtured to the fullest by recent heavy summer rains. At first we could barely discern a few faces, legs and tails in the tall grass. Another vehicle joined us with its guests. They stayed a little while and left. We persisted and about a half hour later the lions decided to make their move. As they sauntered past our vehicle, we marveled at their size and magnificent condition. I could now also understand why Luke and Herman looked a little stressed when they returned to our vehicle after their close encounter on foot with these ferocious-looking creatures.

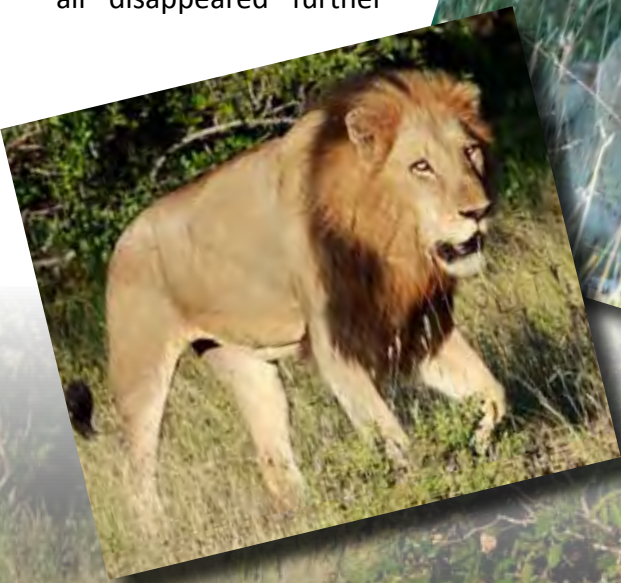
We witnessed the male sniffing a female's urine and depositing his own. Somehow this young fellow was picturing himself as the next leader of the pride. They all disappeared further

along the riverbed and we decided it was time to have our "sundowner" to celebrate the sighting.

Luke drove a few kilometers further to an open plain where he set up a table next to the vehicle with snacks and wines. It is a process that takes time as everything has to be just right for the guests—replete with table cloth and decorations. He was just about ready to pour the wine when he looked up and whispered: "Get back into the vehicle."

As we clambered onto the Land Rover I saw the first female lion making a grand entrance from the thick growth surrounding the plain, followed by the other two and, ultimately, the male. They took up a position barely thirty paces away staring intently at us. It reminded me of a cartoon that I saw

in the *New Yorker* magazine of a lion on an easy chair in his trophy room with human heads mounted on the





wall, enjoying a drink and a cigar. Might they go for the food and the drinks on the table at the other side of the vehicle as well, I mused.

The young male, positioned a few yards away from the three females, got up and approached them. Suddenly all hell broke loose as they attacked him. He retreated and fell back on the grass licking his bleeding scratches.

“This young male is still trying to establish dominance but he has some way to go,” explained Luke as he stepped off the vehicle in gingerly fashion and started depositing the contents of our table into the vehicle.

The next stop was much further away but I could not resist looking around while sipping my wine as the fiery sun sunk into a red blur on the horizon. “My very first interrupted cocktail hour in the bush,” I commented. “Mine too,” Luke said. “What an experience!” Ruth exclaimed. We all nodded in agreement.

The best time to go on safari in Southern and East Africa is during our summer which happens to be winter in those areas—from late May until September. You are less likely to encounter rain, foliage is sparse and animals can be spotted more easily. It is cooler and more comfortable. But, as we have discovered once again during our most recent safari, summer has its advantages as well. It is a time of renewal and breeding. While it is more difficult to spot animals and to track them, it adds to the excitement and anticipation. For photographers the green backdrop adds immensely to the richness of their pictures as opposed to sepia-like surroundings during winter. Also, for those who plan to combine a safari in South



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Africa with a visit to Cape Town, summer is the answer. The Cape area during winter is wet, cold and unpleasant.

Our trip started out in the Winelands where we enjoyed—at the suggestion of our good friend Nicky Fitzgerald of AndBeyond fame—a place called Babylonstoren. This magnificent farm, dating back to 1690, gives easy access to numerous leading wineries in the area. Media mogul Koos Bekker and his accomplished decorator wife Karen Roos spared no money or effort to restore this unique estate to its original glory. World-renowned French architect and landscaper Patrice Taravella designed an expansive and expensive garden, taking inspiration from the original Cape Town Company Vegetable Gardens of the 17th century. Accommodation is in old-fashioned cottages with a blend of modern decor and comfort.

When you are ready to combine the Cape Winelands with a Summer Safari I would certainly like to make your experience a special one.

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