

Wild at HEART

YYW's Hannah Davies visits a luxe South African safari lodge, plus six unique options for animal encounters



Sit back and take in the views



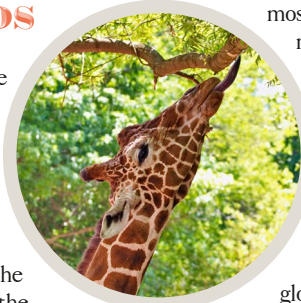
The hotel's boma restaurant

Adventure

Kruger National Park, rangers are allowed to drive off road at Sabi Sands, giving us the chance to really get up close and personal with the wildlife. We do two drives per day: one at dawn to catch the animals before they retreat from the heat of the day, and another in the hours right before dusk. On one morning drive, we find ourselves mere metres away from a herd of elephants bathing in the river. The baby elephants splash and play, while the elders calmly spray themselves with water. One curious elephant – a teenager, our ranger explains – notices us and wanders over. He fusses a bit, flapping his ears and stepping towards us, then stopping. We look nervously at Jonty and David, but they're unworried, and sure enough, the youngster soon gets bored and returns to the serious business of thwacking his playmates with his trunk.

LUXE SURROUNDS

You'd think our accommodation would struggle to live up to these daily doses of natural beauty. But andBeyond Tengile River Lodge was designed to work in harmony with the landscape, using natural and reclaimed materials, and with river views from each suite, as well as from the main lodge. The result is one of the most beautiful places I have ever stayed. My suite, one of nine, is spacious and chic – a relaxing place to wake up in, and a soothing retreat after several hours out in the bush. There's a particularly inviting living area that leads to a sunken deck with private pool. The bedroom and bathroom are full of light, and



there are thoughtful touches everywhere, from the warm wrap to take on game drives (those early-morning starts can be chilly) to the mosquito spray and sun cream. The mini bar is an actual bar, with drinks included in the room rate, so I confidently predict that if you come here on honeymoon, you'll build into your daily routine a just-the-two-of-us sundowner on the private deck, taking in those magical views as the sun glows golden over the bush land.

On a more prosaic note, laundry is also included. I send my dust-encrusted safari clothes to be laundered each morning, only to have them appear, beautifully scented and pressed, on my bed later that day. This makes me feel like actual royalty – a feeling that's heightened when I have a heavenly body massage in the spa.

FOODIE HEAVEN

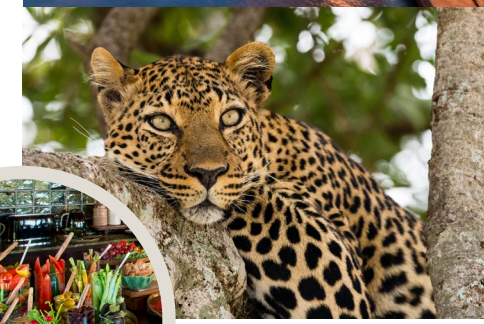
It's amazing how much of an appetite I work up sitting in a safari Jeep looking at wildlife and being pampered, so it's fortunate that the food is plentiful and delicious. I generally just have a coffee before the morning game drives, with a snack and hot chocolate prepared by Jonty and David partway through, which means I'm ready to devour the breakfast buffet when we return. Lunch is a spread of hearty but healthy salads, falafel and dips, and there's always freshly prepared cake before the afternoon drive, which wouldn't be out of place at the chickest of London patisseries. But my favourite foodie experience here is the boma dinner we have one evening. In the lodge's circular, roofless structure, we tuck into an outrageously good feast of meats, salads and breads. As a nightcap, I have a G&T served in a glass approximately the size of my head, made from craft gin. I am as happy and content as a leopard peeling a zebra.

The sun is sparkling off the water, and there's barely any sound apart from the splashing and grunting of the elephants and the hum of insects. It's idyllic – many of our animal encounters are. On one drive, we watch two hippos slumber; on another, we see a pair of lions dozing in the middle of the track, magnificent manes trembling in the breeze. At some point during almost every drive, we round a corner to come across a giraffe or three, ponderously stripping leaves from the trees. If I wasn't such a terrible photographer, my Instagram feed would look amazing right now.

NATURAL BEAUTY

There are adrenalin-rush encounters, too. Due to some skilful manoeuvring by David and Jonty, we end up perfectly placed to watch a female leopard stalking a herd of impala. The sweet-faced antelope graze obliviously as she creeps closer and closer. No one in the Jeep moves a muscle; it's as addictive as the latest

Hold on tight as we race through scrub, night air fresh in our faces. A report has come in on the radio: a male leopard has been spotted in one of the forested areas of Sabi Sands Game Reserve. That's where we're headed, to try to get in on the action – things can move quickly out here, hence the rapid pace of our Jeep. Our tracker, David, says something to our ranger that makes him swing the truck to the right, cut the engine and angle a torch towards one of the trees. And then there, right in front of us, ambling along, is a leopard. He barely even glances our way – in the Jeep we're too big to be prey, but presumably, too odd-looking to be taken seriously as a predator. As we watch, he scales another tree, roots around, then emerges with a mouth full of baby zebra. Jonty the ranger tells us that the leopard must have stored this stripy snack up there to keep it safe from hyenas, who can't climb trees. He then moves the torch to show a hyena staring up at the



leopard, who now appears to be peeling his zebra. He looks profoundly at ease (the leopard, not the zebra).

It's like stepping into every David Attenborough documentary I watched, jaw dropped, as a child.

GETTING UP CLOSE

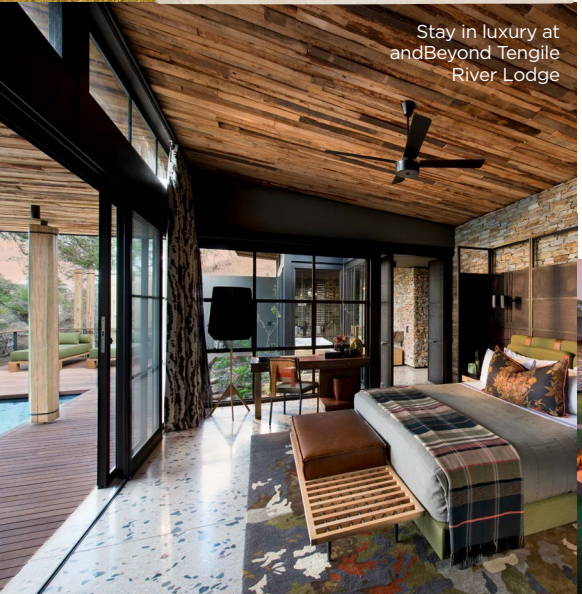
OK, I realise that hearing the noise a leopard makes as it rips into a zebra may not sound romantic. However, I can honestly say that my trip to andBeyond Tengile River Lodge in South Africa has convinced me that a safari is the perfect way to spend your honeymoon. Seeing magnificent animals in their natural habitat – and this leopard is only the start on our trip – is truly awe-inspiring. What better way to start married life than sharing a series of spectacular experiences? Unlike neighbouring



Get creative in the interactive kitchen



Stay in luxury at andBeyond Tengile River Lodge

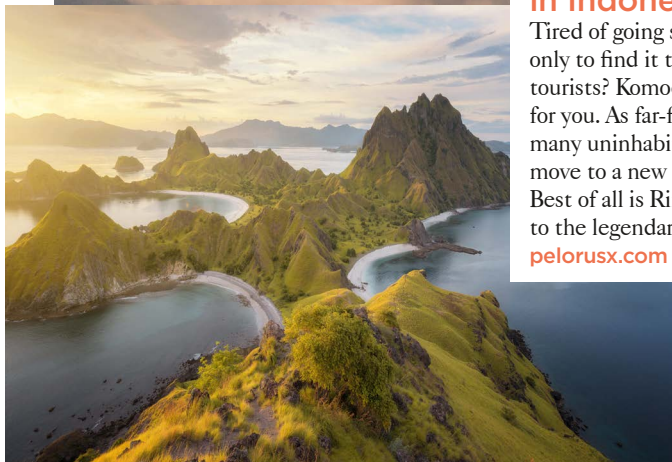


Enjoy a sundowner in the grounds

Go there
Africa Odyssey (africaodyssey.com); 020 8704 1216; info@africaodyssey.com) offers three nights at andBeyond Tengile River Lodge from £4,800 per person including internal and international flights. Hannah was a guest of andBeyond.



Adventure



Komodo dragons in Indonesia

Tired of going somewhere “remote” only to find it teeming with tourists? Komodo National Park is for you. As far-flung as it gets, with many uninhabited islands, you’ll move to a new location each day. Best of all is Rinca Island, home to the legendary Komodo dragon, pelorusx.com

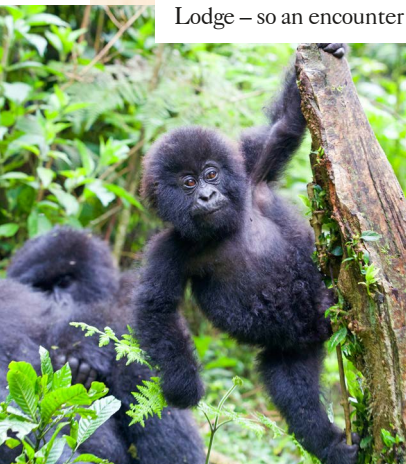


Tigers in India

Step straight into the real-life version of *The Jungle Book* on this epic adventure, where you’ll track the rare Royal Bengal tiger in its natural habitat. With two morning and two afternoon game drives to find India’s most famous feline resident, this is an experience friends back home will actually want to see pictures of, yonder.co.uk

Gorilla trekking in Rwanda

Not for the adventure shy, if you want to come face to face with gorillas in the wild it can mean up to a day’s trek, but we can vouch for the fact that’s it’s worth the effort. One third of the world’s mountain gorillas live in Volcanoes National Park – home to Singita Kwitonda Lodge – so an encounter is highly likely, singita.com



Six other unique HONEYMOON WILDLIFE EXPERIENCES

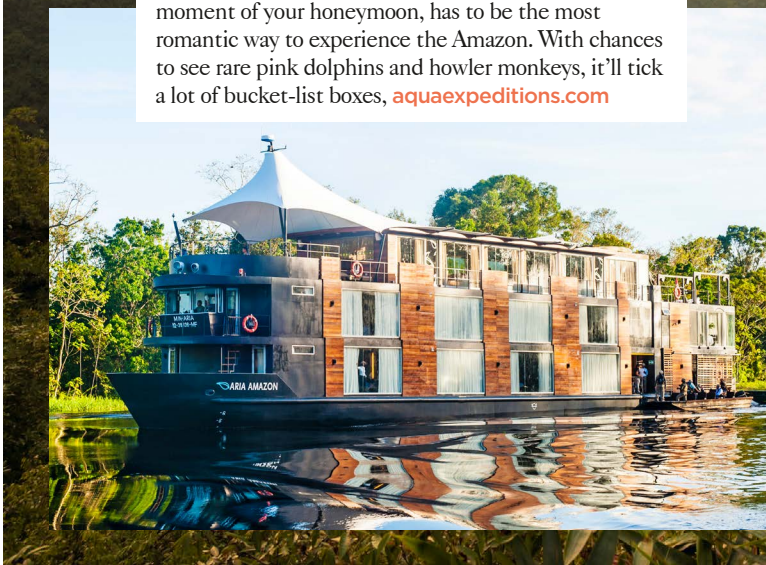
Glamping in Galapagos

Can’t decide whether you want to experience wildlife or natural wonders on honeymoon? Do both with a one-night-only glamping at sea experience. By day, spot flamingos in the hypersaline lagoon and turtles on Tortuga Bay, then at night you can lie under a blanket of stars in your own cabana on the top deck, celebritycruises.co.uk/galapagos



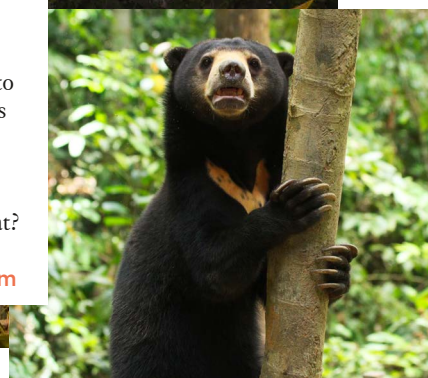
Pink dolphins in the Amazon

Staying on board the *Aria Amazon* floating hotel, with floor-to-ceiling windows inviting the view into every moment of your honeymoon, has to be the most romantic way to experience the Amazon. With chances to see rare pink dolphins and howler monkeys, it’ll tick a lot of bucket-list boxes, aquaexpeditions.com



Sun bears in Borneo

If you crave wildlife but like your luxury, this trip takes you deep into the heart of Borneo, but with stays at some of the finest hotels. Stopping to meet orangutans and sun bears, you’ll also spot monitor lizards and crocodiles. After all that? Enjoy a candlelit dinner in the rainforest, wildfrontierstravel.com



WORDS BY SAMANTHA DE HAAS