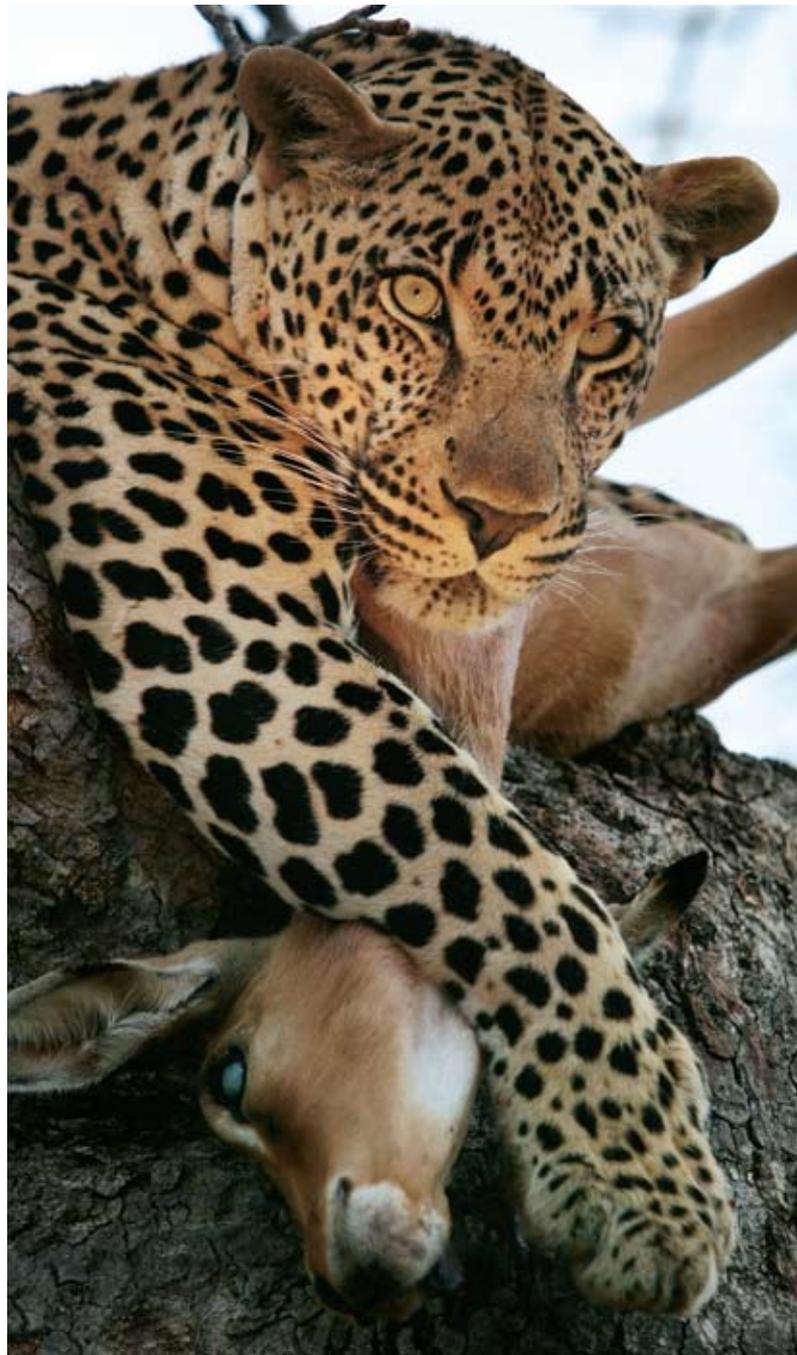




Follow the Big Five

On safari in South Africa's premier wildlife reserve... Get ready for a natural adrenaline rush, the Sabi Sands way.

TEXT & PHOTOGRAPHS **STEPHEN CUNLIFFE**



The Sabi Sands is undoubtedly South Africa's most prestigious and well-known wildlife reserve: a world-renowned haven for nature enthusiasts who like to get up close and personal with the Big Five: lion, leopard, elephant, buffalo and rhino.

The Big Five is actually a term stolen from the hunting fraternity – the five animals most desired by trophy hunters – but ever since the wildlife tourism marketing machine latched onto this phrase and made it their own, there has been no looking back. Today, if a wildlife reserve or national

park cannot deliver the Big Five, it is automatically relegated to B-grade status. As a result, nearly every park and reserve throughout southern and east Africa strives to portray itself as a Big Five destination. While many lay a dubious claim, at best, to the Big Five title, there is one reserve where this accolade actually fails to do justice to the place.

The Sabi Sands Game Reserve is home to an astounding diversity of wildlife, including the Big Five, but it is the unrivalled quality and consistency of charismatic mammal sightings that truly blows

Above: A male leopard jealously guards his impala dinner from a thieving hyaena circling below the tree.

Facing page: A pair of two-tonne white rhinos make for an impressive and imposing road block when on safari.



visitors away. Wildlife tourism and private luxury safaris were pioneered in this area many decades ago and consequently there is now a thriving ecosystem boasting high concentrations of some of the most habituated wild animals in Africa – don't be confused; these animals are not tame, they are just very relaxed in the presence of open-top safari vehicles. Dynamite is said to come in small packages and the 650-sq km Sabi Sands Reserve, although small by African standards, packs a real punch. With only a few days in the Sands you are all but guaranteed seeing the Big Five. As you trundle around the reserve in the capable hands of a knowledgeable ranger and highly-skilled Shangaan (an African tribe) tracker, you will be treated to wildlife experiences beyond your wildest expectations.

Left: The quintessential Sabi Sands sunset signals the time to stop the vehicle and enjoy a well-earned sundowner.

Below: Two sub-adult lions enjoy some boisterous play, while the younger cubs observe their antics with undisguised fascination.





Certainly every time I visit, regardless of the season, the Sabi Sands enthralls me not only with the frequency of large mammal sightings, but also the nonchalant attitude of the animals as they go about their daily business: they behave and interact as if the tourists ogling them didn't exist. I pinch myself on a regular basis, just to convince myself I'm not dreaming. The Sands has that rare ability to make you feel like you've somehow been thrust onto the movie set for a National Geographic wildlife documentary. However, over and above the mind-boggling abundance of lion, leopard, elephant, rhino and buffalo that lurk around every second corner, there is another Big Five lying in wait for the discerning Sabi Sands visitor. While a top quality wildlife experience is ostensibly the prime tourist draw card, choosing the right lodge will significantly enhance your overall Sabi Sands experience. Here are a few gems to consider when planning a visit; these are the Big Five lodges of the Sabi Sands.

DJUMA VUYATELA

Located in the northeastern sector of the Sabi Sands, Djuma traverses the least crowded part of the reserve. This area, adjacent to the unfenced Kruger National Park boundary, is my personal favourite. It's a wild Eden where wildlife is plentiful and vehicles scarce: the ideal combination for any nature safari.

Eight opulent suites with private verandahs and plunge pools overlook a large dam, allowing lucky visitors to view wallowing wildlife from the comfort of their deck chairs. With its funky fusion of colourful modern décor and local South African architecture, where luxurious designer furnishings rub shoulders with traditional mosaics and wall murals painted by local Shangaan artists, Vuyatela has shunned the traditional look of more typical



African game lodges. However, if you are intrigued by its unique combination of modern luxury and authentic African culture, then you will be drawn to this extraordinary lodge in much the same way the buffalo herds are attracted to the watery expanse it overlooks. Vuyatela means 'come back and visit again' and, indeed, most tourists do. After all, this is a very special place in an incredibly special part of the park.

LONDOLOZI TREE CAMP

When hunting safaris gave way to photographic safaris 35 years ago, the old hunting camp was rechristened Londolozi: a name derived from the Zulu word meaning 'to protect'. It was a pioneering concept ahead of its time, but, decades later, visitors to Londolozi reap the rewards of this far-sighted partnership between wildlife and people. Today, Londolozi is renowned as probably the best place in the world to get up close and personal with the elusive leopard.

The rangers and trackers at Londolozi have an incredible knowledge and passion for the area. This was exemplified by the guiding duo of James Kydd and Freddy Ngobeni who shared their 16,000-hectare 'office' with me when I visited.

Clockwise from above: After a long night hunting, a young female leopard yawns sleepily atop a termite mound; A Burchell's zebra; Flocks of red-billed oxpeckers are drawn to Cape buffalo where they rid them of ticks and other parasites.



African elephants have considerably larger ears than their Indian cousins and a thirsty bull like this one will consume around 150 litres of water in a day!

One day, while enjoying a lazy afternoon siesta on my secluded riverside deck, I was awoken by the magical sound of elephants cavorting in the water below.

Later, as I strolled along the aerial walkway towards the main lodge, James intercepted me and signalled that I should freeze. Mere metres away, a large male leopard carefully stashed his dinner up a tall leadwood tree in the middle of the camp before melting back into the bush from whence he came. Comprising six private suites (with rooms 5 and 6 being the most spectacular), Londolozi's Tree Camp combines elegance and simplicity in an exclusive camp that exudes African excellence from its lofty vantage point overlooking the Sand River. It is a rare place dominated by leopards, lanterns, leadwoods and luxury.

RATTRAY'S ON MALAMALA

If your visit to Africa is motivated primarily by a desire to track down the Big Five, then MalaMala is the place for you. This long-standing operation prides itself on being able to deliver consistently reliable sightings of the much-desired large charismatic mammals. During the last 15 years the Big Five have been viewed every day with a staggering 96 per cent success rate.

This phenomenal statistic can be attributed to MalaMala having exclusive access to a large tract of prime wildlife-viewing terrain adjoining the Kruger Park. Vehicles drive off-road and scour the area in their never-ending quest for as many sightings of the legendary Big Five as possible. So, if it's big mammals you're after, look no further than a few nights at Rattray's on MalaMala.

With a distinctly 'Out of Africa' feel to the place, Rattray's on MalaMala offers a glimpse into an era long past. The camp exudes a regal colonial-style ambience, while providing a fortunate few with an exclusive safari of style and comfort. The eight suites boast lavish his-and-hers bathrooms, secluded outdoor showers and private heated plunge pools. Not a bad place to rest your weary head after a long day Big Fiving in the Sabi Sands!

SINGITA BOULDERS

Singita has a well-deserved reputation for being the leader in Sabi Sands safari excellence. Located in a superlative region of the park that is well known for its diversity and formidable concentration of wildlife, Singita adopts a more holistic approach to the bush experience; not just concentrating on checking-off the Big Five, but teaching you about the ecology of the area as a whole.

Today, if a wildlife reserve or national park cannot deliver the Big Five, it is automatically relegated to B-grade status.

In the process of tracking down more than our fair share of lions and leopards, our expert guiding team shared their exceptional knowledge and passion for the bush. The Singita approach was as refreshing as it was inspirational. So, if you are a regular safari-goer who is looking for a complete nature experience, but still want to see plenty of big game, then Singita Boulders is the place for you.

Boulders Lodge towers above the surrounding landscape offering the discerning wildlife enthusiast an opportunity to enjoy rare solitude and the ultimate in safari luxury. The lodge, infused with glamour and elegance, is aptly named after an enormous boulder that dominates its impressive wine cellar. The suites boast gigantic bathrooms, outside showers, private heated swimming pools, lounges, double-sided fireplaces and private verandahs. The tranquillity of Boulders allows guests to enjoy wrap-around views from the natural stone lodge, while the vast look-out deck offers a perfect spot from which to observe animals slaking their thirst in the Sand River below.

ULUSABA ROCK LODGE

Ulusaba, Sir Richard Branson's exclusive game lodge located in the western Sabi Sands, is part of Virgin Limited Edition: a portfolio of unique retreats. Guests, accompanied by experienced ranger-guides and trackers, take game drives in open-top Land Rovers. After tenaciously tracking down the Big Five, five-star hospitality, style and luxury await you at Ulusaba Rock Lodge.

Rock Lodge, perched near the summit of a koppie, enjoys sensational views over the vast Lowveld towards the distant Drakensberg Mountains. The 10 rooms are individually designed with striking colours that represent different African tribes and regions. The Makwela suites with their private infinity plunge pools and mesmerising views are nothing short of spectacular; however, Cliff Lodge steals the show. The lavish suites offer guests the ultimate in safari extravagance and decadent luxury with a private pool and Jacuzzi enjoying breathtaking views over the bushy savannah below. This is the ideal retreat for connoisseurs of big landscapes, wide vistas and spacious wilderness. ■

Always in search of the next meal, two young leopards keep an attentive eye on potential prey.



QUICK FACTS

BEST TIME TO VISIT

Although wildlife sightings are at their absolute best during the late dry season (August to early November), Sabi Sands safaris are available and recommended throughout the year.

GETTING THERE

Jet Airways operates daily non-stop flights between Mumbai and Johannesburg. The Sabi Sands Game Reserve is a scenic six-hour drive from the international airport.

WHAT TO EXPECT

The premier attraction is twice-daily game drives to view the Big Five and other spectacular and relaxed wildlife. For the more adventurous, guided walks allow energetic visitors to track and view wild animals on foot.

WHAT TO BRING

Binoculars, camera, sun hat, sunglasses, sunscreen and neutral coloured clothing for walking safaris.

ACCOMMODATION

Further information and rates for the five abovementioned premier safari lodges can be found at: Djuma Vuyatela – www.djuma.com; Londolozzi – www.londolozzi.com; MalaMala – www.malamala.com; Singita – www.singita.com; Ulusaba – www.ulusaba.virgin.com.

These five lodges comprise only a small sample of what is on offer in the Sabi Sands. Please refer to www.sabisandslodges.co.za or www.sabisands.co.za for a more comprehensive list of the camps and lodges located within the Sabi Sands.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

www.southafrica.net