



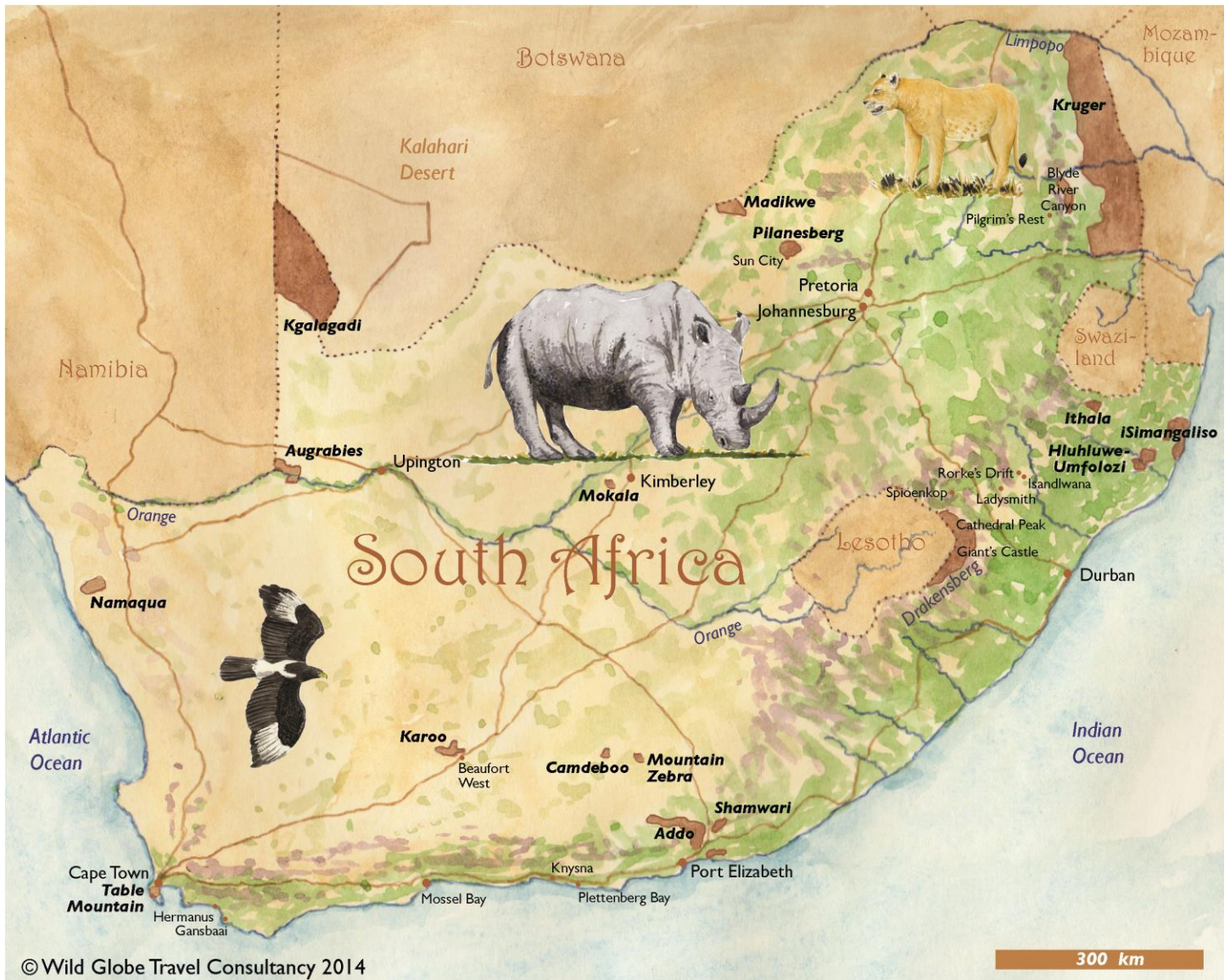
# Wild Globe Travel Consultancy

*Tailored Wildlife, Wilderness and Adventure Travel Across the Globe.*

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300 km

## The Great South Africa Road Trip - 75 Days

### Major Destinations

Cape Town - Table Mountain National Park - Robben Island - Hout Bay - False Bay - Hermanus - Gansbaai - Mossel Bay - Knysna - Plettenberg Bay - Addo Elephant National Park - Private Reserve - Shamwari Game Reserve - Port Elizabeth - Durban - Drakensberg Mountains - Giant's Castle - Cathedral Peak - Spioenkop - Ladysmith - Rorke's Drift - Isandlwana - Hluhluwe-Umfolozi - iSimangaliso Wetland Park - Mkhuzi Game Reserve - Ithala Game Reserve - Swaziland - Kruger National Park - Blyde River Canyon - Pilgrim's Rest - Pretoria - Ann van Dyk Cheetah Centre - Sun City - Pilanesberg National Park - Madikwe Game Reserve - Kalahari Private Reserve - Kgalagadi Transfrontier Park - Upington - Cape Town





## **Tour Highlights and Activities**

In terms of an all-round African holiday destination, South Africa is probably the ideal choice for many people, particularly first time visitors to the region and families, as there are more activities available here than anywhere else on the continent, the infrastructure is excellent and the wildlife viewing remains extraordinary in many areas. It is the variety of magnificent animals, dramatic landscapes and stimulating activities that make this tour so appealing, as no two days need be alike and there are not many places in the world where you can combine cage-diving with great white sharks and tracking a black rhino on foot, with a thrilling sky-dive and a balloon flight over an incredible mountain range. From the very beginning at Cape Town and our first view of Table Mountain, this trip includes all of the highlights of an extraordinary country and there is also time to explore beyond South Africa, with a short but fascinating tour of Swaziland and brief excursions within Lesotho and Botswana. Given the many different ecosystems and habitats that this journey encompasses, we can easily expect to observe at least seventy distinct mammal species, as well as a vast number of absorbing birds and reptiles. Memorable encounters with the elusive aardvark are all but guaranteed and we have a realistic chance of seeing all seven of the cats that occur in the region, lion, leopard, cheetah, caracal, serval, African wild cat and black-footed cat, as well as all eight species of dog and hyena, African wild dog, black-backed jackal, side-striped jackal, cape fox, bat-eared fox, brown hyena, spotted hyena and aardwolf. As the tour has been designed as an introduction to all aspects of the country, a number of days have been devoted to the spectacular scenery of certain areas and there is plenty of leisure time to relax and enjoy the fabulous lodge facilities and innumerable diverting pursuits.

## **Day 1 - Cape Town**

Arrive in Cape Town and meet our local guide for the first section of our epic trip. After a short transfer to our hotel, we have the afternoon free to explore part of the city, one of the few that I do not attempt to escape from as soon as I arrive, as no visit to South Africa is complete without experiencing at least some of the highlights that Cape Town and the surrounding areas have to offer. The instantly recognisable landmark Table Mountain dominates the city skyline and our V&A Waterfront hotel, situated within the heart of Cape Town harbour, affords splendid views of this towering behemoth, as well as an opportunity to take a short boat tour around the harbour to see the cape fur seals. The impressive aquarium is another possibility this afternoon and the lively waterfront area, full of engaging street entertainers, craft markets and bustling restaurants, is a perfect location for our first evening in this wonderful country.

## **Days 2 to 4 - Cape Town**

We have three full days to discover the very best of this vibrant city and will start with one of the continent's most iconic images, Table Mountain. Whether we walk to the top, and there are dozens of scenic routes to choose from, or take the exciting cable car ride, the dazzling view of the city, Table Bay and Atlantic Ocean is worth any amount of effort. Table Bay is another significant destination for us, as sitting within it is Robben Island, a tiny and seemingly insignificant speck of land which held the world's gaze for the best part of the eighteen years that Nelson Mandela, as well as many other political opponents of South Africa's apartheid system, was imprisoned on it. Now a UNESCO World Heritage Site, a tour of Robben Island would appear to be a fairly sombre prospect, but in fact the opposite is the case and a story of struggle and hope is revealed. Greatly assisted by the fact that former inmates are employed



on the island as guides and are available to answer questions, our visit to Robben Island will be a genuinely uplifting and rewarding experience. Several private game reserves aside, Cape Town also provides a number of excellent wildlife viewing opportunities, including, not surprisingly given its location, wonderful marine life. We will take boat trips to the seal colonies at Hout Bay on the

western side of the Cape Peninsular and False Bay on the eastern side, both of which are home to thousands of cape fur seals and a huge variety of marine birds. Depending on the time of year that we visit, False Bay is also a great location to observe a variety of whales, including southern right, humpback and orca, and is one of two reliable destinations along this stretch of coast at which you can see a great white shark from the comfort of a boat, the other being Gansbaai and the famous Dyer Island seal colony about 160km to the east. Again on the eastern side of the peninsular, Boulders Bay is the somewhat unusual setting for a colony of African penguins and we will combine a tour to see these entertaining creatures with an afternoon trip to the Cape of Good Hope section of Table Mountain National Park, a sprawling



reserve covering much of the peninsular and beyond, which protects, among many other species, a population of cape mountain zebra, one of two subspecies of the mountain zebra. Given that the best views of this beautiful city and the surrounding Atlantic and Indian Oceans are undoubtedly from the air, we also have the option of exhilarating microlight or helicopter flights and, if it appeals, of a thrilling tandem sky-dive, which combines an amazing panoramic flight along the coast and the opportunity to delight in up to 40 seconds 'flying' time before your qualified instructor opens the parachute at around 5000ft for a gentle glide back to earth. All three of these aerial adventures are highly recommended and other interesting Cape Town experiences include a township tour, for a chance to interact with local communities and to learn a little about life far-removed from the prosperous city suburbs, and a visit to the world-renowned Kirstenbosch National Botanical Garden, a magnificent combination of formal gardens and wild mountainside forest, which protects over 7000 plant species and many birds and mammals.



### **Day 5 - Cape Town to Gansbaai**

We leave Cape Town this morning and drive east along the coast to Hermanus, a first short step of a massive journey, circumnavigating almost the entire country. The innumerable and endearing rock hyraxes aside, which are often observed darting into the rubbish bins along the cliff top, Hermanus, and in particular the coastal path overlooking Walker Bay, is famous as one of the best locations to quietly sit and enjoy the rather special sight of southern right whales swimming and breaching close to the shore. As humpback whales also visit these waters and bryde's whales are often encountered slightly further out to sea, we will take a boat trip this afternoon to look for all three species, as well as the common bottlenose dolphin, short-beaked common dolphin and

heaviside's dolphin. Although we are only permitted to approach within 50m of the whales, in order not to disturb them, these majestic, gentle creatures are highly inquisitive and it is not unusual for one or more to swim alongside the boat. From Hermanus we have another short drive east to Gansbaai and the charming guesthouse from which we will prepare to cage-dive with one of the planet's premier hunters, the great white shark.

### **Day 6 - Gansbaai to De Hoop Nature Reserve**

Regardless of whether you actually enter the water with the sharks, and you can do so with a snorkel if you do not have a scuba diving certificate, this morning's encounter with these apex predators is sure to be one of the most memorable of the trip, as great whites are surface feeders and the view from the boat is probably even better than from the water, albeit slightly less chilling. Although there is nothing quite like watching these menacing shadows glide gracefully from the gloom to investigate the cage, the practice of attracting sharks with food remains controversial. Whilst feeding an animal is certainly never ideal, we are long past that point in terms of wildlife conservation and this is one of the rare occasions where I personally consider that more good than harm is being done, as thousands of sharks are slaughtered unnecessarily every year and, as with the groups of habituated mountain gorillas in East Africa, their continued survival may depend on sufficient numbers of people being prepared to pay to see them in a natural environment. Not



ideal by any means, but I prefer to introduce guests to the reality of these supreme predators, as opposed to the rather grotesque myth, and the company that I use donate a percentage of all profits to shark research and conservation, including to the eradication of the horrendous practice of shark finning, which has now been outlawed in seventeen countries. The great whites at Gansbaai are naturally attracted to the area by the permanent colonies of around 40,000 cape fur seals at Dyer Island and Geyser Rock and our chances of seeing them here are extremely high, as we will concentrate our efforts around 'Shark Alley' their main feeding ground. After lunch and an opportunity to reflect upon a momentous day, we drive further east to the De Hoop Nature Reserve, a large protected expanse of wild scrubland or fynbos in the Cape Floral Kingdom, which also conserves a marine area extending 5km out to sea.

### **Day 7 - De Hoop Nature Reserve**

The De Hoop Reserve is regarded as even better than Hermanus in terms of seeing whales from the shore and at the right time of year it is occasionally possible to watch dozens of southern right whales from the rugged limestone cliffs and towering white sand dunes, some of which reach heights of up to 90m. We will split our two days here between productive game driving circuits, snorkelling in the large, pristine rock pools and several moderate hikes, both along the perfect sandy beaches and further inland among the stunning flowers of the fynbos. The reserve is home to a number of interesting antelope species, including eland, greater kudu and the less commonly observed bontebok and grey rhebok, as well as cape mountain zebra, marsh and yellow mongoose, cape clawless otter and chacma baboon. One of our hikes will include the permanent wetland along the western confines of the reserve, which supports an abundance of waterbirds, and the dry grasslands provide nesting sites for the striking blue crane, or the paradise crane as it is aptly known, the national bird of South Africa.

### **Day 8 - De Hoop Nature Reserve to Mossel Bay**

After a final night in our delightful rustic chalet, we will continue to explore the unspoilt wilderness of De Hoop until late afternoon, at which point we will cut inland for the short drive east to Mossel Bay, the starting point for another of the country's major tourist attractions, the incredibly picturesque and much publicised Garden Route, a serene coastal drive of around 200km from Mossel Bay to Storms River Mouth.



### **Day 9 - Mossel Bay to Knysna**

Following a hearty breakfast overlooking the Indian Ocean from the terrace of our elegant guest house, we divert north for a few hours today to visit Congo Caves, a labyrinth of subterranean limestone passages and cavernous chambers, decorated in a magical array of beautifully coloured stalactites and stalagmites. There are two very different guided tours available to us, but the longer one, although far more difficult, is much more fun, as we descend into the depths of the intricate tunnels and have to begin crawling through tiny gaps in order to reach the exit. After lunch and a commanding view of the eye-catching Congo Valley, we return to the Garden Route and one of my favourite destinations, the Knysna Elephant Park, where we have the opportunity to interact with and ride elephants in a wonderfully natural setting. Riding elephants might not initially appear to be the most ethical wildlife encounter, but the majority of the elephants at Knysna are orphans of various culling operations and have been adopted at the sanctuary in order to fund a much needed rehabilitation centre near Port Elizabeth, where no visitors are allowed and where injured or orphaned



elephants are given the time and space needed to recover from whatever traumatic experience they have suffered. In an area where large herds of elephants were once able to roam freely, the trustees at Knysna also operate an important education and conservation programme and are responsible for returning rehabilitated elephants to suitable wild reserves. We will spend three very special nights at the orphanage, sleeping in a lodge integrated within the elephant's beautiful boma, and of all the numerous 'first-hand' wildlife experiences available to us, this is certainly one of the most intimate and most heartening. As we will arrive in the late afternoon, we can savour a spectacular sunset walk with the elephants before returning to the traditional lapa for a delicious evening meal overlooking a surviving section of the ancient hardwood forest that once covered the entire region.

### **Days 10 to 11 - Knysna and Plettenberg Bay**

The Knysna Elephant Park is actually situated closer to Plettenberg Bay than it is to Knysna, but the driving distances between the two are minimal and over the next two and a half days we will participate in some of the numerous activities available in the area, including an early morning boat trip from Plettenberg Bay to look for southern right and humpback whales, common bottlenose and short-beaked common dolphins, cape fur seals and even southern elephant seals, which are common further south, but are being seen in these waters far more regularly. We will also take one of the extended walking trails in the lush Diepwalle Forest and whilst it is rumoured that a handful of the fabled wild Knysna elephants endure here, it is unfortunately improbable and we are more likely to encounter bushbuck, blue duiker and vervet monkey amidst the dense foliage and huge yellowwood trees. Horse rides are an immensely enjoyable way of exploring the local forests and the Keurbooms River is the idyllic setting for a tranquil cruise and the chance to cool down in the refreshing water from the side of our rented boat. Kayaking on the pretty Knysna Lagoon is another option and, if these pursuits are slightly too moderate for you, far more demanding possibilities include abseiling, paragliding, mountain biking and bungee jumping. Whichever activities you ultimately decide upon, we will be able to devote a morning to the captivating giants of the Knysna Elephant Park, as they take us for an enchanting ride through their sanctuary home.



### **Day 12 - Knysna/Plettenberg Bay to Addo Elephant National Park**

This morning we will visit two important wildlife sanctuaries within close proximity of each other on the outskirts of Plettenberg Bay, Monkeyland and Birds of Eden. As the name suggests, Monkeyland provides a natural forest home for fifteen primate species from all



over the globe, some of which are critically endangered. Described as being the world's first multispecies free-roaming primate refuge, all of the monkeys protected here were rescued from captivity and we can walk with the majority of them on a guided forest tour, which includes a 128m canopy walkway. Three of the fifteen species actually live within the Birds of Eden aviary, the largest on the planet and an incredibly rich setting for thousands of previously caged birds, all of which have once again been given an opportunity to fly. The main aviary is a real wonder, with an elaborate mist system simulating an authentic rainforest, a constantly recycling river and waterfall and an impressive network of elevated walkways through the indigenous forest. The animals are of course not truly wild, but

they have all been rescued from appalling conditions and now enjoy an excellent quality of life in a stimulating natural environment. Both projects are run on a non-profit basis in conjunction with the local community and our visit will support the encouraging conservation efforts being made here. We will stop for lunch at either of the two centres before we drive east past the final destination on the Garden Route at Storms River Mouth and on to Addo Elephant National Park, which has greatly expanded in recent years and is now the third largest national park in South Africa.



## Days 13 to 15 - Addo Elephant National Park

Given its size, we will split our four nights at Addo between one of the rest camps in the main section of the park and a private concession operating in the Darlington Dam area. The majority of game drives will be in our own 4x4 vehicle, but we will also spotlight at night in the lodge vehicles. The animals that we are likely to encounter will vary according to the different habitats of each region and the main park supports healthy populations of African buffalo and black rhino, as well as the more obvious elephants. Lion and spotted hyena were reintroduced in 2003 and, as there are plans to expand the park even further, cheetah and hunting dog will follow. In keeping with the model of only returning indigenous animals to their former range, there are no giraffe, white rhino or



impala, but plains zebra do occur and the fairly easily spotted antelope species include greater kudu, common eland, bushbuck and the red hartebeest subspecies. Warthog and black-backed jackal are abundant and both yellow mongoose and meerkat, known locally as the suricate, are relatively common. Although the lions are also regularly observed, the elephants are undoubtedly the main attraction and Addo's rolling hills and dense green shrubs provide an attractive backdrop for the 500 or so that thrive here. As we move further west to the Darlington Dam section of the park, the woodland thickets gradually give way to the semi-desert of the Great Karoo and here we can expect to encounter oryx or gemsbok, springbok and black wildebeest.

## Day 16 - Addo Elephant National Park to Private Game Reserve

After a final game drive as the first rays of sunlight illuminate the sparkling waters of the dam, we will make the short transfer north to continue our exploration of the Great Karoo at one of the most alluring private game reserves in the country. Set among the endless



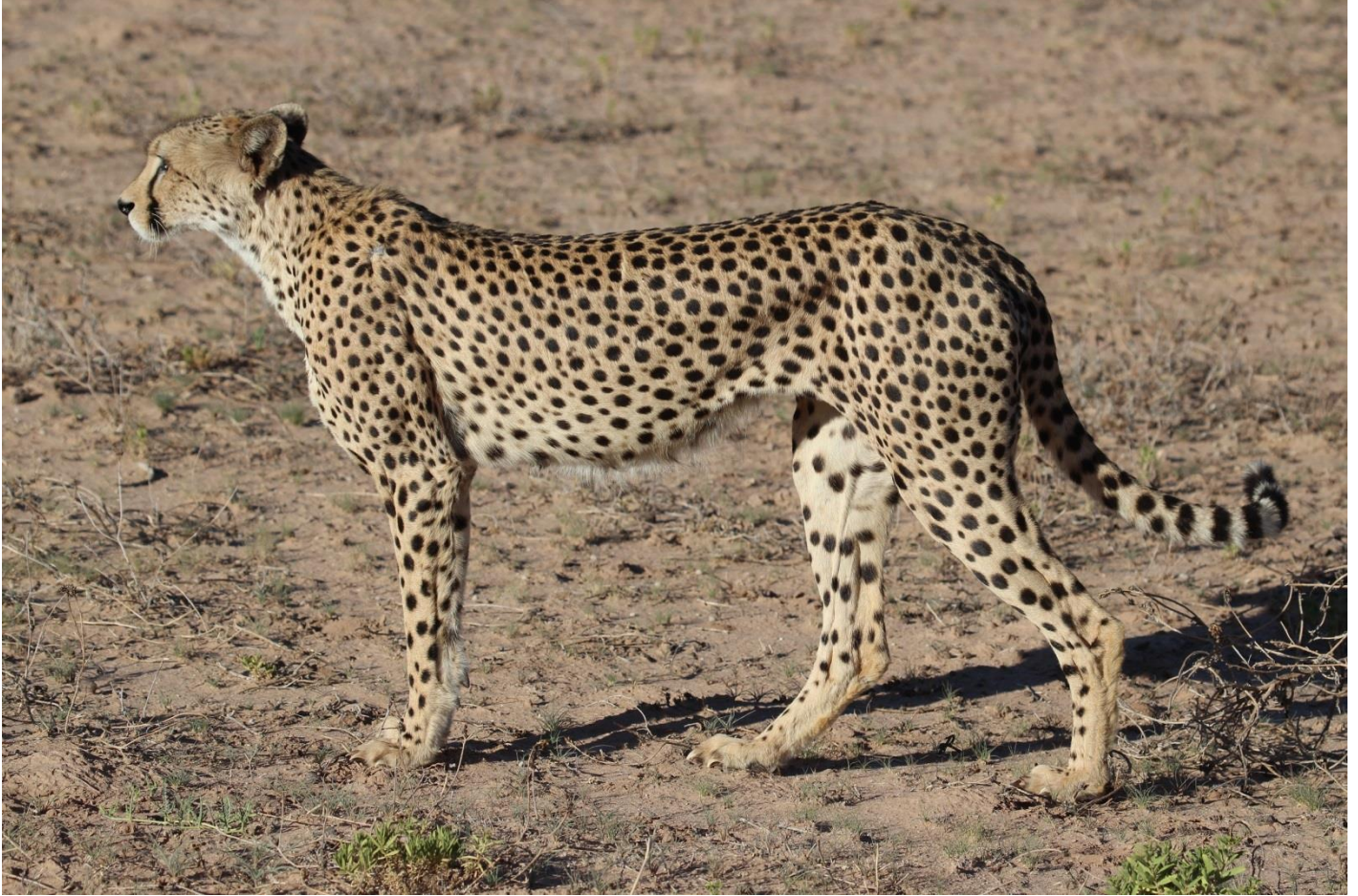
plains and vast blue skies of the Karoo, and supporting a large variety of rare wildlife, this reserve is at the forefront of cheetah conservation, as these delicate cats struggle to compete against more aggressive predators and lion and spotted hyena are not therefore kept on the reserve. As a result the cheetahs are breeding successfully and a number have been swapped with other reserves to ensure that the gene pool remains robust. We will certainly see these graceful animals during our stay, as well as the blesbok subspecies of the bontebok antelope and the aardvark, which are generally highly elusive, but are encountered on a regular basis here. The reserve is simply one of the finest I have visited, not only in terms of the gorgeous

wilderness setting or first class lodge facilities, but also in terms of the harmonious atmosphere and a perfect natural balance within the magnificent Karoo landscape. We will experience some of that balance this afternoon when we take our first game drive and after a delicious evening meal we will begin our search for the nocturnal creatures that flourish within this bountiful ecosystem.



### **Days 17 to 19 - Private Game Reserve**

To complement our game drives, and to experience a different perspective of the breathtaking surroundings, knowledgeable guides will accompany us on enthralling bush walks, explaining the local flora and identifying the tracks of various animals and the calls of a few of the 200 different birds that have been recorded here. Among the fourteen resident antelope species, nyala, black wildebeest,



mountain reedbuck and grey rhebok are the ones less frequently encountered elsewhere and other potential sightings include caracal, aardwolf, wild cat, brown hyena, black-footed cat, bushpig, cape fox, bat-eared fox, zorilla, African clawless otter, cape porcupine, hewitt's red rock hare and common genet. Two species of zebra also occur, plains and cape mountain, as well as white rhino, chacma baboon and giraffe. When we are not in the field we can relax within the peaceful grounds of our lodge and occasionally migrate towards the enticing swimming pool in the heat of the afternoon sun.



### **Day 20 - Private Game Reserve to Mountain Zebra National Park**

Following another morning game drive and a leisurely breakfast, we transfer east to Mountain Zebra National Park, a reserve specifically created to conserve the endemic zebra after which it is named. The park has a number of interesting hiking trails and safari loops, some of which are only suitable for a 4x4 vehicle, and the comfortable camp cottages afford tremendous views of the



imposing Bankberg Mountains and escarpment grasslands. We will explore in our own vehicle this afternoon and have the option of an evening spotlighting drive in one of the park vehicles to look for brown hyena, aardwolf, cape fox, aardvark, common genet, springhare, zorilla and African striped weasel, all of which are predominantly nocturnal.

### **Days 21 to 22 - Mountain Zebra National Park**

On the verge of extinction when the park was proclaimed in 1937, the cape mountain zebra population has increased to over 300 in this one sanctuary and other animals have been introduced as the reserve has gradually expanded with the purchase of adjacent farmland, most notably black rhino, African buffalo and cheetah. Other smaller mammals are also flourishing in the absence of competing predators and caracal, black-footed cat and wild cat can all be found here, albeit with the mandatory element of good fortune. Partly as a result of the remote location, and probably also due in some degree to the lack of big cats, Mountain Zebra National Park does not receive as many visitors as some of the more renowned reserves in the country and we will therefore be able to enjoy our game activities relatively undisturbed. The hikes along the rocky slopes and through the deep fertile valleys are particularly rewarding and we can combine at least two of these with our day and evening game drives.



### **Day 23 - Mountain Zebra National Park to Shamwari Game Reserve**

We return south this morning for Shamwari Game Reserve, a private reserve situated about 30km east of Addo Elephant National Park. Shamwari has a reputation for luxury and although this is well deserved in terms of the various plush lodges within the large reserve, this private enterprise has also played an important role in terms of rejuvenating the area, as the Eastern Cape was at one time considered to be among the most abundant wildlife regions in the whole of Africa. By the mid 1850s this was no longer the case, as hunters and farmers wiped out most of the indigenous animals and flora to make way for crops and domestic livestock. In 1919, sixty years after the last rhinos and lions were eradicated, the few surviving buffalos were also exterminated and when Addo was established in 1931 only sixteen elephants remained of the huge herds that once roamed the region. This trend is fortunately now being reversed to some degree and vast areas of farmland are being reclaimed and devoted to the reintroduction of the animals that formerly ranged here. Although there is no doubt that some of these 'converts' have simply realised that there are greater profits to be made from ecotourism than farming, several, for example, have crudely switched from farming to the despicable practice of canned hunting, the trend in general is a positive one and now several areas of the Eastern Cape once again teem with the captivating creatures of a bygone age. Our specific accommodation here will depend on the number of people in our group, as there are several different options, all of which are situated in stunning locations that we will get an opportunity to discover this afternoon when we take either our first game drive or guided walk.

### **Days 24 to 25 - Shamwari Game Reserve**

In addition to their own major conservation initiative, Shamwari is also the base for two Born Free Foundation sanctuaries, which provide permanent natural homes for lions and leopards that have been rescued from horrific captive conditions and cannot be returned to the wild. As Born Free is one of the charities supported by Wild Globe, I always offer guests the opportunity to visit both sanctuaries in order to provide them with a first-hand introduction to this essential work and to highlight the conservation efforts that they are directly supporting by using my services. However, although our visit is partly intended to support the vital role played by



Born Free, viewing these supreme big cats at close quarters is also a tremendous experience and the Shamwari reserve is a premier wildlife destination in its own right. While they are also resident at Addo, our game drives at Shamwari will represent our best chance to see a wild leopard to date and lion, cheetah, both rhino species, hippo, elephant and African buffalo are all spotted on a regular basis. During our game walks we are likely to encounter many of the sixteen types of resident antelope and serval, caracal, brown hyena, bat-eared fox and black-backed jackal also make their home here.



### **Day 26 - Shamwari Game Reserve to Giant's Castle (Drakensberg Mountains)**

We will have plenty of time for a final game drive at Shamwari before we depart for the short drive to Port Elizabeth and the early afternoon flight to Durban, where we will meet our new guide for the KwaZulu-Natal section of our trip and transfer north to Giant's Castle, within the central berg section of the dramatic Drakensberg mountains. Known as the Barrier of Spears in the Zulu tongue and as the Dragon Mountains to the Afrikaners, the Drakensberg is an extraordinarily beautiful mountain range which acts as a natural border between South Africa and Lesotho. The apparently endless, almost unrivalled mountain views are impossible to do justice to in this format, but, suffice to say, the scenic helicopter flights that are popular in the area, do not come much more scenic than this. Set against the natural amphitheatre of the mountains, our home for the next five nights will be a magical guesthouse, full of wonderful finishing touches, delightfully handcrafted by our extremely friendly hosts.

### **Days 27 to 30 - Giant's Castle**

Considering that the majority of travellers visit the Drakensberg in search of a little tranquillity and solitude, there is a great deal to see and do in the vicinity and the myriad activities available to us include balloon and microlight flights, some of the best horse riding in the country, intense white water rafting, 175m-high forest canopy tours, game viewing, quad bike trails, archery, abseiling and a





hike to one of the many San rock art sites in the region. However, for all the artificial diversions, the mountains themselves are the real attraction and people from all over the world visit just to walk the timeless mountain paths and ancient valleys. With almost every conceivable walk or climb available, hikers of all abilities are catered for and one of the most impressive moderate walks is World's View and the spectacular 360 degree vantage point at the end of the trail. Perhaps the only comparable view is from either the hot air balloon or the microlight and it is so difficult to choose between these unforgettable experiences that it probably makes sense to do both. Depending on the time of year and the corresponding water levels, the white water rafting on the Tugela River is another must, as the grade three, four and five rapids are as thrilling as they are challenging. The horse riding can be as hard and fast as we like along endless mountain paths and the canopy tours are also a great deal of fun, as we speed between treetop platforms on steel wires, up to 175m above the forest floor. Game viewing at the Weenen Game Reserve is a rather more sedate option and the small reserve supports a large number of relatively easy to spot animals in a picturesque valley setting. Eland, greater kudu, red hartebeest, bushbuck, common duiker, steenbok, common and mountain reedbuck are among the antelope species and there is an opportunity to track and photograph both black and white rhino on foot with a local guide. Another guided walk will take us to Shelter Cave at Kamberg and some of the finest examples of San or Bushmen rock art in Southern Africa. The walk itself is pleasant, but the dynamic illustrations, mainly elands depicted in vivid hues of red, are simply superb and provide a unique insight into the culture of a people who have lived in harmony with their environment for at least 30,000 years. As the largest antelope species, eland were particularly significant to the San and we will routinely encounter these splendid creatures as we traverse the local mountain trails at Giant's Castle, as well as the more diminutive klipspringer antelope, supremely adapted to life within the rocky outcrops and jagged mountain slopes. Neighbouring Lesotho can be visited via the remarkable Sani Pass 4x4 track, which climbs and twists through some of the most heavenly scenery imaginable. At the top is an excellent site to observe spotted-necked otter and a short distance away stands the mighty Thabana Ntlenyana, 'pretty little mountain' in the local Sesotho language, the highest mountain in Southern Africa at almost 3500m. With a little planning and our passports to cross into Lesotho, it is possible to hike to the top if this appeals and the summit can also be reached on horseback.

### **Day 31 - Giant's Castle to Cathedral Peak**

Although we leave our enchanting guesthouse today, we have only one activity planned and can therefore delay our departure until after lunch if preferred. Fortunately our next destination is just as glorious, as we move further north to the magnificent landscapes of Cathedral Peak and an opportunity to view them from a totally different perspective during an extended helicopter flight. Weather permitting, we will approach both Cathkin Peak and Champagne Castle, before descending low into the valley for an exhilarating sortie along the river and a scheduled stop on the summit of either Cathedral Peak or Vulture's Retreat, a feeding site and nesting ground for the bearded vulture. After a customary glass of champagne and an opportunity to savour the majestic mountain scenery, our journey will end with a return flight to our hotel and a chance to relax and prepare for our next adventure.

### **Day 32 - Cathedral Peak**

Today is our last full day on the dragon's spine and has been reserved for one of the most memorable hikes anywhere in the world, the Amphitheatre trail in the northern berg. Not only is the setting jaw-droppingly beautiful, but the ascent, which is completed with the assistance of two infamous chain ladders, takes you to the top of Tugela Falls, the second tallest waterfall on the planet at 948m. Located within the Royal Natal National Park, this is the only hiking trail from which it is possible to reach the summit of the Drakensberg escarpment in a single day and the stirring views of the Amphitheatre massif, a sheer 5km-long wall of volcanic rock, are rivalled only by the spellbinding silence at the top. With eagles and vultures for company, we will rest a while and savour the glory of our surroundings before descending to a perfect spot to watch the golden rays of a final Drakensberg sunset illuminate this slumbering giant, as the weather here is too changeable and the chain ladders too steep, to risk returning in the dark.

### **Day 33 - Cathedral Peak to Ladysmith**

After a relaxing final morning at our hotel, we leave the mountains today and drive north east to begin the next short section of our trip, a tour of the most significant battlefields in a region that has witnessed more than its share of conflict over the years. These tours



are extremely popular in KwaZulu-Natal and we will use a knowledgeable local guide to explain in detail the bloody struggles of the Boer and Zulu wars. Rorke's Drift, where just over 150 British and colonial soldiers heroically defended the small mission station against an overwhelming force of several thousand Zulu warriors, is the most requested destination, but the lion-shaped hill and white funeral cairns at Isandlwana, scene of a ferocious battle and famous Zulu victory the day before Rorke's Drift, are truly haunting and



the guides do an excellent job explaining both the intricacies and intensity of the many battles that took place across this blood-soaked region. After meeting our guide, who will prepare us with some background information regarding the various conflicts, our first stop will be the steep hill of Spioenkop, where the British army suffered a heavy defeat at the hands of the Boers in January 1900. Rather remarkably, three of the leading figures of the 20th century converged in a single moment at this one battle, as Louis Botha, who went on to become the first prime minister of South Africa, led the Boer troops and Winston Churchill, who probably does not need any introduction, reported on the unfolding carnage as war correspondent for the Morning Post. The last of this unlikely triumvirate was Mohandas Gandhi, later to become Mahatma Gandhi, who was a stretcher-bearer in the Indian Ambulance Corps and who began his policy of non-violent civil disobedience in South Africa, before leading India to independence in 1947. The battle of Spioenkop, one of the most futile in British military history, was fought in an attempt to relieve the prolonged Boer siege of Ladysmith, which will be our final destination of the day. After learning about the events leading to the siege and the ensuing consequences, we will visit the informative museum in town before making the short transfer to our lovely period hotel.

### **Day 34 - Ladysmith to Hluhluwe-Umfolozi Game Reserve**

Our battlefield tour continues this morning, as we visit Talana near Dundee, where the opening shots of the Boer War were fired in 1899 and British soldiers wore khaki for the first time. From Talana we continue east to Blood River, which witnessed the Voortrekker, or Afrikaner, slaughter of 3000 Zulu warriors in 1838, as a vast horde of Zulus repeatedly attempted to break the defensive laager, a protective formation of ox wagons, garrisoned by several hundred well-armed Afrikaners. When the battle was eventually lost and the Zulus fled, they were pursued and cut down by the mounted Voortrekkers and the Ncome River was turned red with the blood of the fallen. In part due to the fact that by now the Zulus were armed with short stabbing spears, as opposed to the longer throwing spears they previously favoured, and in part due to the tactical use of the laager, not one Afrikaner was killed in the battle and a monument of 64 brass wagons and two cannons was later erected to commemorate the victory. The last three sites of our tour all relate to the Anglo Zulu War of 1879, namely Rorke's Drift, Isandlwana and Fugitive's Drift, a less well known site on the Buffalo River where two British Officers were cut down attempting to save the Queen's colours after Lord Chelmsford's entire central column had been annihilated at Isandlwana; a crushing reversal that was disregarded to some degree following the astonishingly courageous defence of Rorke's Drift, which saw eleven Victoria Crosses awarded, the most ever in a single action by one regiment. From the poignant history of the last two days, we change both pace and mood as we drive south east to one of my favourite wildlife destinations in South Africa, Hluhluwe-Umfolozi Game Reserve, a wild, fertile kingdom, full of forested hills and breathtaking views, in the heart of KwaZulu-Natal. Once a hunting ground for Shaka and other Zulu kings, Hluhluwe was established as a protected area in 1895 and is the oldest park in all of Africa. It is also one of the most beautiful and boat trips on the Hluhluwe Dam are a highlight of any visit here, as are trips to the viewing hides, which overlook well populated waterholes and are perfect for observing a wide variety of animals at close quarters. Famed for its ground-breaking white rhino conservation, Hluhluwe now protects over 2000 white and black rhinos, more than any other reserve in Africa. Predictably, the sightings of both species here are exceptional and the same is fast becoming the case for the endangered African wild dog, which have established themselves in recent years and are breeding successfully. The main rest camp, with splendid views of the surrounding green hills and valleys, is one of the nicest in the country and will be our first stop when we enter the park, as well as our base for the next four nights.





### Days 35 to 37 - Hluhluwe-Umfolozi Game Reserve

The jewel in the crown of the KwaZulu-Natal game reserves, Hluhluwe-Umfolozi is really one tract of land divided into two sections by a road. We will explore both areas, but will concentrate our efforts more on the Umfolozi section to the south, as sightings here are far more reliable, particularly of lion and wild dog. In either section we will routinely encounter black and white rhino, elephant, African buffalo, plains zebra, giraffe, greater kudu, eland, waterbuck, steenbok, impala, common or blue wildebeest, nyala, a large antelope which many people at first mistake for kudu, spotted hyena, warthog, bushbuck and black-backed jackal. In fact, of all the major animals for which we will be searching, only leopard and cheetah are difficult to locate and leopard are seen reasonably regularly on the night game drives, which can also be productive in terms of spotted hyena, cape porcupine, white-tailed mongoose, African civet, common genet, thick-tailed greater galago, side-striped jackal, bushpig, springhare, marsh mongoose, honey badger, serval and zorilla, a member of the weasel family with a skunk-like appearance. Wild cat, caracal, sykes or blue monkey, cape clawless otter and ground pangolin are a few of the more elusive creatures occasionally spotted and the less frequently observed antelopes include common and red duiker, southern and mountain reedbuck, tsessebe, oribi and suni, a tiny, elegant antelope that has been eradicated from much of its former range in South Africa as a result of habitat loss and poaching. The birdlife is outstanding in both sections of the park and the viewing hides are particularly good for large monitor lizards and rock pythons. Instructive walking safaris are conducted under the supervision of experienced field rangers and KwaZulu-Natal Wildlife also operate pioneering wilderness trails, usually spread over four nights in the Umfolozi section, which provide a wonderful opportunity to explore large areas of unspoilt African bush and can easily be integrated within this tour. Various options include a camping trail, where you sleep in tents each night, and the Primitive Trail, which involves washing in rivers, sleeping under the stars and taking turns to keep watch at night by the camp fire.



### Day 38 - Hluhluwe-Umfolozi Game Reserve to iSimangaliso Wetland Park

Possibly depending on how successful we have been here, we have the option of spending most of the day at Hluhluwe or of departing after our morning game drive for the short transfer east to another of the country's natural masterpieces, the iSimangaliso Wetland Park. Formerly known as the Greater St Lucia Wetland Park, iSimangaliso is a unique habitat, where an almost unparalleled



group of eight different ecosystems, grasslands, woodlands, swamps, lakes, wetlands, coastal forests, beaches and coral reefs converge to protect an astonishing diversity of plant, animal, bird and marine life. The area supports more than 500 bird species, 220km of alluring beaches provide nesting grounds for loggerhead and leatherback turtles and the lakes team with a huge number of crocodiles and hippos. The clear, warm waters of the Indian Ocean, perfect for diving and snorkelling, are home to almost 100 types of coral and 1200 species of fish decorate long stretches of pristine reef. Humpback whale and dolphin can be observed from the beach and further inland black and white rhino, elephant, buffalo, giraffe, plains zebra and a variety of antelope are fairly easily spotted at Mkhuze Game

Reserve, which also supports leopard, cheetah and spotted hyena, as well as occasional packs of African wild dog, which migrate in and out of the reserve. Night game drives are excellent on the Eastern Shores, particularly in terms of some of the smaller mammals, chameleon and a wide variety of snakes. As all of the best attractions are reasonably close, we will spend four nights at one attractive and ideally situated lodge on the banks of Lake St Lucia.

### Days 39 to 41 - iSimangaliso Wetland Park

As we are deep within the heart of Zululand and will have already discovered a little regarding the brave Zulu warriors and their military exploits, we will take time to visit a neighbouring Zulu village, where a local guide will teach us about the Zulu way of life, from their disciplined social structure, to the way in which they have strived to retain their identity and culture in a rapidly changing world. By spending time with the villagers and visiting their schools and churches, we will learn a great deal regarding their enduring customs and how they are expressed in their vibrant costumes, songs and dance. Our guide will explain the courtship and marriage rituals, the compensation paid to a father when his daughter is married and the fascinating language of the fabled Zulu beadwork,



where the colours and patterns of a single creation can weave an elaborate message of love or tragedy. Although these cultural trips can never be 100% authentic, just by our mere presence, this one is certainly better than most and all proceeds of our visit are used to help fund the village children's education and medical care. Depending on the time of year, as the female turtles only return to their nesting sites during a particular season, we will certainly take the opportunity to look for either loggerhead or leatherback turtles laying their eggs on the beach, as this is a magical experience and is combined with an exciting night game drive as we make our way to the nesting area. We may even be fortunate enough to see the hatchlings emerge from their nest, as they make a first desperate life or death journey across the sandy beach to the relative sanctuary of the sea. Given that this will be our last encounter with the Indian Ocean, a lot of our activities will be marine based and will include the chance to dive and snorkel among the dazzling, rainbow reefs of Sodwana Bay, which is rated as one of the top ten dive destinations in the world.



The pristine beaches are another enticing attraction at Sodwana, as they are at Cape Vidal where first-class snorkelling is also guaranteed at low tide. If our trip coincides with their annual migration, when they journey from their feeding grounds of the Antarctic to breed in the warmer, tropical waters further north, we will have one final opportunity to look for humpback whales and whale sharks are also regular visitors to this specific stretch of coastline. One of our days will be retained for Mkhuze Game Reserve, with the heartening prospect of seeing African wild dog, and the local nocturnal game drives are exceptional in terms of the unusual species often encountered. Side-striped jackal, honey badger, cape porcupine, common genet, thick-tailed greater galago, bushpig, serval, spotted hyena and leopard are all represented, as well as the mandatory hippos, happily grazing out of the water. Sykes monkey, red bush squirrel, red duiker, nyala and the largest population of southern reedbuck in the country, can all be found on the Eastern Shores during the day. Kayaking on Lake St Lucia is a great way to get close to the aquatic wildlife, including a number of huge crocodiles, and a languid sundowner cruise will provide us with a wonderful opportunity to photograph the vast array of waterbirds on display along the riverbank. Horse safaris can be arranged at the False Bay Nature Reserve, where we can canter across the sandy plains and are likely to be able to ride within a few metres of white rhino, African buffalo and giraffe.





## **Day 42 - iSimangaliso Wetland Park to Ithala Game Reserve**

As there is so much to do at iSimangaliso, we have the option of enjoying another activity this morning and travelling on to Ithala Game Reserve after lunch. Situated on the border of Swaziland, Ithala is generally overlooked by most visitors to KwaZulu-Natal, principally because there are no lions and the leopards are very difficult to locate. Although this ensures that the park is never overcrowded and that it can be explored in reflective seclusion, it is also a shame in some respects, as what Ithala lacks in predator sightings, it more than compensates for in terms of sublime scenery and is undoubtedly one of the most alluring wildlife destinations in the country. The Ngotshe escarpment provides a striking backdrop to the easily observed animals and the entire reserve consists of a series of sweeping panoramic vistas across expansive rolling hills and undulating valleys. Several hides and viewing platforms enhance the experience and the extremely comfortable main rest camp is visited by a great deal of wildlife, including the giraffes that the reserve is noted for.

## **Days 43 to 44 - Ithala Game Reserve**

The absence of certain large predators actually works in our favour to some degree at Ithala, as it allows us to take a number of walks without a guide and to explore the African bush in total freedom. Given that we will be walking in an area populated by leopard, buffalo, rhino and elephant, this is a rare privilege and adds another stimulating dimension to the rather unique atmosphere of the reserve. Ithala is also home to far more species than is generally realised and supports healthy populations of both black and white rhino, spotted and brown hyena, serval, wild cat and herds of tsessebe antelope in what is the most southerly extreme of their range. The sightings can also be different here, as the plains animals are not under constant pressure from a host of predators and are consequently far more relaxed as we attempt to get closer for a better view or photograph. As with all the reserves in KwaZulu-Natal, night game drives are available in a park vehicle and walks can be arranged with a local guide if you are more comfortable being accompanied.

## **Day 45 - Ithala Game Reserve to Mkhaya Game Reserve**

We will probably change guides again today and will leave both Ithala and South Africa for an early drive north into Swaziland. Our short tour of this tiny but engaging country will start at Mkhaya Game Reserve, which was originally conceived purely to preserve the genetic purity of the Nguni cattle, but which also protects elephant, buffalo, leopard, rhino and roan and sable antelope. We will leave our new guide and vehicle for the next 24 hours, as all activities are conducted in park jeeps as part of the highly successful anti-poaching policy administered by the local community and funded entirely by the revenue generated by visitors. We will participate in game drives and walks during our brief stay and our one night will be spent in the idyllic setting of Stone Camp, a serene rest camp with open air cottages sympathetically crafted from the local dolerite rock. Most of the animals are fairly easy to see at Mkhaya and the friendly rangers make an extra effort to ensure that no guests leave without having encountered at least one black rhino. White rhino are abundant, as are crocodile, hippo and yellow-billed stork at the main pool, and dozens of crested guinea fowl cluster inquisitively around the rest camp.



## **Day 46 - Mkhaya Game Reserve to Mlilwane Wildlife Sanctuary**

Following a final game drive and transfer back to our vehicle, our next destination is the Great Usutu River and some of the best white water rafting this side of Victoria Falls. When the water levels are high the rapids are graded between four and five, but the difference is that on the Usutu we will be tackling them in two-person inflatable rafts with no guide. Consequently the ride is fast and fierce and



we have far more chance of capsizing than in the standard large rafts manned by a qualified instructor. Certainly comparable to many of the best rafting rivers in the world, both in terms of difficulty and thrills, we will have between 14km and 21km of river to navigate and there are guides available in support boats should we require any assistance. Including some scenic stretches either side of lunch, the rafting will take most of the day and at the conclusion we will head west to Mlilwane Wildlife Sanctuary, Swaziland's oldest conservation area. Situated in the southern section of the lovely Ezulwini Valley, Mlilwane supports almost 50 mammal species, including cape clawless and spotted-necked otter, cape fox, side-striped jackal, wild cat, serval, caracal and slender mongoose. Although these and other small carnivores are traditionally difficult to find, a large number of the fifteen antelope species are more easily observed and nyala, bushbuck and ostrich routinely wander around the main rest camp. The hippo pool is noted for its crocodile activity and it is not unusual to observe several large crocodiles competing for the remains of an antelope taken at the water's edge. If we arrive in time we will drive up to Execution Rock to enjoy the sweeping sunset view from the highest point in the sanctuary and in the evening Swazi dancers will perform some of their traditional dances and enchanting songs.

### **Day 47 - Mlilwane Wildlife Sanctuary**

Today will be split between three progressively more demanding activities, beginning with a gentle horse safari to get close to the resident zebra and giraffe that roam unmolested within this largely predator-free environment. Following a late breakfast and a chance to visit the crocodiles, or flatdogs as they are locally known, we will tackle the self-guided walking trail to Execution Rock, a reasonably challenging hike that affords some of the prettiest vistas in the sanctuary. After an opportunity to catch our breath, we leave Mlilwane briefly for our final endeavour of the day, an evening caving adventure at the Gobholo Cave, a few kilometres to the north. Although no previous caving experience is required, the 800m circular trail is as strenuous as it is stimulating, with around 200m of treacherous, more or less vertical ascents and descents. Team work is the key in this confined subterranean world, as we scramble across slippery boulders and squeeze through almost impossibly narrow gaps. At the end of a tiring but incredibly satisfying day, we can soak away any aching muscles in the popular Cuddle Puddle hot springs, a delightfully warm outdoor pool surrounded by lush tropical garden, before returning to Mlilwane for a good night's rest.



### **Day 48 - Mlilwane Wildlife Sanctuary to Kruger National Park**

After the previous days efforts we have an easy morning, with a short drive north to Phophonyane Nature Reserve. En route we will visit the Mantenga Craft Centre, where a number of genuinely talented local artisans display a wide range of sophisticated artwork and decorative Swazi crafts. We will be welcomed into the workshops to watch some of the items being created, including colourful carved masks, delicately sculptured glass and intricately woven wall hangings. At Phophonyane we can walk to see the waterfall and swim in the invigorating waters of the natural rock pool overlooking the gorgeous valley. After a delicious lunch in the gardens of the local lodge, our tour of this most hospitable of all African countries will sadly come to an end and we will drive north to Kruger National Park, one of the largest and most famous wildlife reserves in the world. If you can look beyond the visitor numbers and the tarmac roads, and it is very possible to escape both in such an expansive environment, in most respects Kruger lives up to its massive reputation and can be as rewarding as any of the continent's signature national parks. The wildlife is as diverse here as anywhere in Africa and the beauty of Kruger, and of the other national reserves in South Africa, is the affordable accommodation provided at the



various rest camps throughout the park. Although this policy obviously contributes to the large crowds, it is probably a price worth paying in some areas, given how expensive and exclusive other national parks have become across much of Africa. Kruger still has a host of expensive private reserves, and South Africa in general has hundreds, but at least these low cost camps allow ordinary people, including a massive number of local residents, the opportunity to enjoy wonderful wildlife experiences that might otherwise be beyond them. Although you will ultimately decide what works best for you, I generally advise guests to split their time between two or three rest camps within the main park and a private reserve in one of the concession areas to the west. This tour is being illustrated in that way, with four nights in rest camps and the final four nights at one of the best private lodges in the region.

### **Days 49 to 51 - Kruger National Park (Rest Camps)**

Whilst we can reasonably expect, given sufficient time and a little good fortune, to see every major animal at Kruger, this famous reserve is particularly renowned for all of the highly prized predators and the inevitable conflict between them. Hunts and kills are common and it is not unusual to see lion, hyena, jackal and vulture all competing over the result of a successful hunt by a solitary cheetah or leopard, which often have no option but to abandon their meal. Lion and buffalo interaction is also regularly observed and what quickly becomes apparent at Kruger, is that you can see almost anything at any location and at any time, from a solitary wild dog within ten minutes of entering the Crocodile Bridge gate to a female cheetah eating an impala a minute from exiting at the Phabeni gate. Elephant and both rhino species are numerous and the night game drives here can also be highly productive, as there are far fewer vehicles after dark and a host of nocturnal creatures are routinely spotted. The main rest camps are all comfortable with swimming pools and several great vantage points, including the platforms at Lower Sabie overlooking the Sabie River, where I have often spent time watching lions and leopards drinking from one of the few permanent rivers within the park. We can explore all of the best wildlife areas as far north as Letaba or even Mopani, before we transfer west to a private reserve on our final afternoon.



### **Days 52 to 55 - Kruger National Park (Private Lodge)**

Having spent the previous few days discovering the many wonders of Kruger in our own vehicle, we will now take a rather more laidback approach, as our adept lodge guides introduce us to one of the premium private game reserves in the country and some of the



most memorable leopard encounters outside of South Luangwa National Park in Zambia. It is not only the number of leopard sightings that this reserve is famous for, as these gorgeous cats are observed more or less on a daily basis and barely a guest leaves without seeing at least one, but also the quality of the sightings, as the leopards here are undisturbed by people and are consequently far easier to spend time with and to photograph during the day. It is not uncommon to find two or three leopards in a single day or to watch one sprawled serenely along the branches of a strangler fig tree or another effortlessly dragging the carcass of an antelope into a tree and beyond the reach of the hyenas and lions that are also easily spotted at the reserve. In addition to the remarkable leopard activity, packs of wild dog are regular visitors and the most effective of all major African predators can often be seen running down prey or eating together at the conclusion of a successful hunt. Although cheetah, serval and wild cat are similarly well established, this part of Kruger only attracts such large numbers of predators due to the healthy populations of prey species and we will also see an abundance of plains animals, as well as rhino and herds of elephant and buffalo. Between game drives guests can enjoy the sumptuous lodge facilities and indulge in a number of different therapeutic treatments at



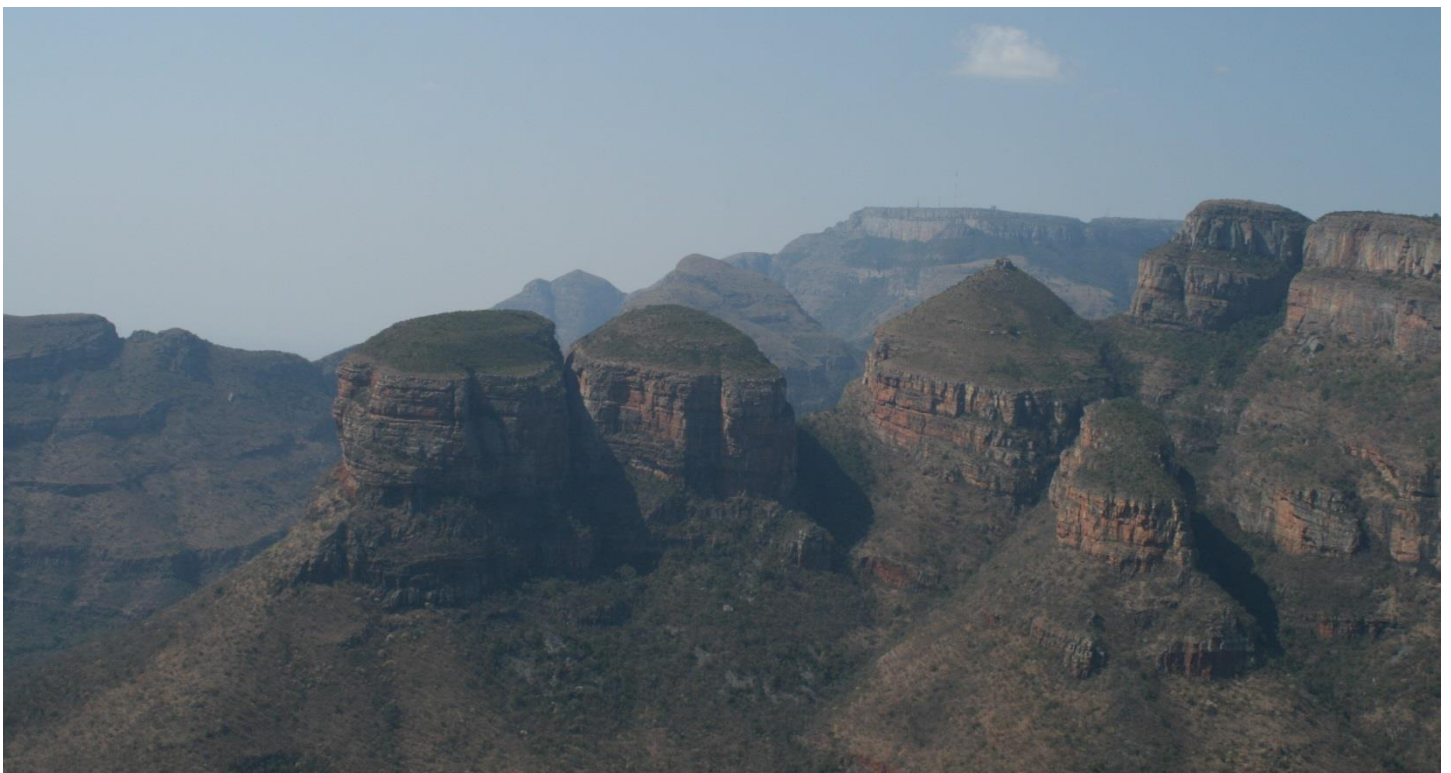
the luxury spa or simply relax beside the marvellous swimming pool or on the elevated viewing decks overlooking the waterhole. Escorted game walks and night drives are also available and the bush dinners are transformed into a truly evocative event by the haunting, melodic voices of the local Shangaan singers, who enchant the candlelit evening with their traditional acapella songs.

### **Day 56 - Kruger National Park to Pilgrims Rest**

We depart Kruger after a final dawn safari for a day of sightseeing along the natural wonders of the Panorama Route, including magnificent views of Blyde River Canyon, one of the largest canyons on the planet, the Pinnacle, a huge column of rock rising sheer



from the densely forested gorge and the Three Rondavels, hut-shaped peaks towering hundreds of metres above the meandering Blyde River. We will stop at Bourke's Luck Potholes, where grit and pebbles driven by the river have eroded the rock into a series of smooth, fantastically contorted and multi-coloured sculptures, as well as at God's Window, situated on the northern Drakensberg Escarpment some 700m above the lush green carpet of the stunning lowveld ravine. There are so many waterfalls in the area that it is possible to take a full day tour of them all and we will visit a few of the most impressive, namely Lisbon, Berlin and MacMac Falls. Finally, we will retire for a night at Pilgrim's Rest, a restored mining town and historic monument that dates back to the first South African gold rush in 1873, some thirteen years before the Witwatersrand gold rush would change the country forever. Our hotel is one of the town's original buildings and has been restored with all the charm and elegance of the late Victorian era.





## Day 57 - Pilgrim's Rest to Ann van Dyk Cheetah Centre

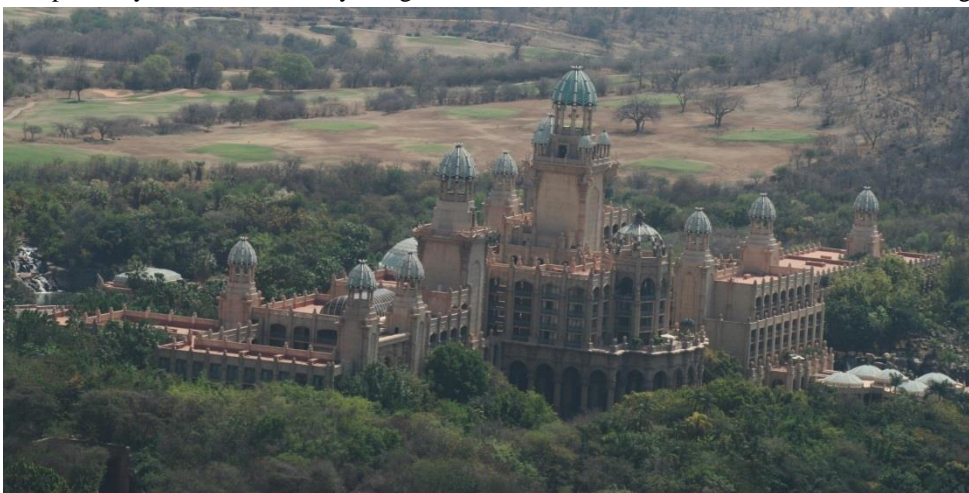
We will have breakfast among the atmospheric Victoriana of our period hotel before we transfer west to Pretoria for lunch and a short tour of the administrative capital of the country, including Church Square, Pretoria City Hall, the Transvaal Museum and the splendid terraced gardens of the Union Buildings. If we visit at the right time of year, we will witness the spectacle of more than 70,000



flowering jacarandas trees, which decorate the streets and parks in a brilliant sea of blue and purple. In the late afternoon we will take a short drive just west of Pretoria to the Ann van Dyk Cheetah Centre, a non-profit breeding and reintroduction centre for endangered animals, most notably cheetah and wild dog. Formerly known as De Wildt, the Ann van Dyk Centre is another of the conservation initiatives supported by Wild Globe and their cheetah breeding programme has been an unqualified success since its inception in 1971. They now have a second site in the foothills of the Waterberg Mountains, where injured animals can recover in a totally natural setting until they are well enough to be released, and both centres feature stylish lodges in attractive and relaxing grounds.

## Day 58 - Ann van Dyk Cheetah Centre to Sun City and Pilansberg National Park

We will tour the centre this morning, meeting many of the resident cheetahs, wild dogs, brown hyenas and caracals, as well as an exceptionally charismatic honey badger, and will also learn how the innovative breeding programme works and why it has been so



successful. There will be excellent photographic opportunities throughout and also a very special close encounter with one of the centre's tame 'ambassador' cheetahs, which are used to raise essential funds for the foundation and to promote the serious plight of cheetahs in the wild, as there are now believed to be less than 1000 remaining in the entire country. After lunch at the centre we have a short drive north west to Sun City and Pilansberg National Park, one of two reserves in the north west province, Madikwe being the other, that exist purely as a result of a mass reintroduction of wildlife on

reclaimed farmland. Pilansberg often gets overlooked as a serious wildlife destination, mainly because it forms part of the exclusive playground at Sun City, a resort more famous for its luxury hotels, casinos, golf courses and themed waterpark, than its wildlife. Although it is certainly true that some of the guests view a game drive in the park as little more than an extension of the other competing entertainments, and unfortunately the standard of guiding occasionally reflects this, the park actually has a great deal to offer, both in terms of the attractive setting within an extinct volcanic crater, and the wildlife, which has flourished since Operation Genesis saw the release of some 6000 animals in the early 1980's. During the day we will game drive in our own vehicle here and this



afternoon we have the choice of a first excursion into the park or of enjoying one or more of the many activities available at our extravagantly themed hotel, which has been designed in the style of an ancient lost palace, complete with rope bridges and secret trails through lush gardens, trickling streams and tumbling waterfalls and a swimming pool straight out of a movie set. The various recreation complexes feature world class golf courses, casinos, cinemas, nightclubs, a theatre and even a massive arena, which hosts major sporting events and concerts.



### Days 59 to 61 - Sun City and Pilansberg National Park

Although we cannot game drive beyond dusk in our own vehicle, the private night game drives are recommended, as Pilansberg is as diverse as any other major reserve and is home to a number of habitually elusive nocturnal creatures. Brown hyena are very much a speciality of the park, caracal are encountered reasonably regularly and in recent times it is also becoming more common to see both



aardwolf and armadillo. During the day we will concentrate our efforts around a number of dams or waterholes, the majority of which have well-positioned hides from where we can unobtrusively observe large concentrations of plains animals, including mixed herds of springbok and impala, which do not generally occur in the same region. Mankwe Dam sits in the heart of the crater and is the largest body of water in the reserve. As such it attracts a regular stream of visitors throughout the day and is one of the best places to sit and watch elephants and rhinos drinking. Lion and leopard are abundant, but whilst the larger predators openly traverse their territories during the day, the more easily intimidated leopards are very secretive and are mainly seen on the night game drives. The Lenong viewpoint provides

the best panorama of the reserve and is one of several points at which it is possible to leave our vehicle and relax as we scan the horizon. When we are not searching for animals there are plenty of other diverting options and the Valley of the Waves is a fabulous waterpark playground for the young and the not quite so young. Approached via the Bridge of Time, which 'erupts' and shakes periodically in a simulated frenzy of volcanic activity, the 'Lost World' theme continues throughout the park, with huge mock temples and flooded mines hiding thrilling flumes and waterslides. The tranquillity of the massive lagoon area is shattered every 90 seconds by powerful 1.2m high waves, but it is possible to escape the chaos, with peaceful walks through the elaborately designed forests and botanical garden or a leisurely float around the laziest of lazy rivers. The water-based activities continue with water skiing, wind surfing, parasailing and jet skiing on the massive man-made lake and other recreations around the resort include hot air balloon flights over Pilansberg, actually one of the best ways to spot the highly visible lions, quad biking, archery, clay pigeon shooting, elephant safaris, paintball combat, zip slides, golf, horse riding and mountain biking.

### Day 62 - Sun City to Madikwe National Park

We have the choice this morning of another sunrise drive into Pilansberg or a final exciting activity before we transfer north west to Madikwe Game Reserve, the beneficiary of the largest reintroduction of animals anywhere in Africa. Under the auspices of Operation



Phoenix, between 1991 and 1997, 8000 large mammals were released into 75,000 hectares of reclaimed farmland, including rhino, buffalo, lion, cheetah, wild dog and entire breeding herds of elephant. Only animals that occur naturally in the area were returned and more than a decade on the reserve is well established as one of South Africa's finest. On the edge of the Kalahari Basin, and directly on the border of Botswana, Madikwe is regarded as one of the optimum areas to see wild dog and the solitary brown hyena, indeed I saw my first one here, and the absence of day visitors, you can only access the reserve if you stay at one of the many lodges, ensures that this remote wilderness never becomes overcrowded. Given the restriction on private vehicles, we will be collected at the entrance gates around midday and escorted to one of the nicest and best situated lodges in the country. After lunch we will have a full game drive and all of the afternoon safaris continue into the evening to allow us to take in the fabled Madikwe bush sunsets and to search for nocturnal wildlife after dark with spotlights.

### **Days 63 to 65 - Madikwe National Park**

Over the next three days we are likely to encounter most of the apex predators, but the difference at Madikwe is the way that they will be viewed, as only three vehicles are permitted to stay at any one sighting to ensure that the animals are not disturbed and that the experience remains a natural one. The guides are extremely well trained and have a superb understanding of the rhythms of the wildlife and where exactly they are likely to encounter different species, from the den of a huge spotted hyena clan to the favourite tree of a southern lesser galago or a South African large spotted genet. Guided walking safaris will bring us into close contact with a great deal of the resident wildlife and during our free time we have the unique opportunity to participate in a game ranger course, which will teach us the basics of animal tracking and how different spoors are used to identify and locate specific animals. When we are not actively searching for animals, we can relax and admire a wide variety of them from the splendid viewing deck of our lodge, which overlooks a large area of savannah and a well-populated waterhole. We should in particular make the most of our elephant sightings at Madikwe, as they will be our last of the trip.



### **Day 66 - Madikwe National Park to Private Game Reserve**

Having spent the previous few days discovering the Kalahari Basin region at Madikwe, the final two destinations of our amazing tour are both situated within the actual Kalahari Desert, an untamed area of breathtaking beauty and epic wilderness stretching as far north as the Okavango Delta in Botswana and covering much of Namibia to the east. Despite the name, the Kalahari is not a true desert and the semi-arid savannah and sandy plains support a huge concentration of plants and animals superbly adapted to life in this harsh, dry environment. The lions, with dark black 'desert' manes, are much larger here than in other parts of Africa and this is probably the best location on the continent to view cheetah in a completely natural setting. Black-footed cat, brown hyena, aardwolf, wild cat, meerkat, honey badger, pangolin, armadillo, southern African hedgehog, bat-eared fox, cape fox, caracal, springbok, eland and oryx are just a few of the species that can be observed within this highly specialised ecosystem and leopard, wild dog and south-central black rhino, a subspecies of the black rhino, are also represented. The first of our two Kalahari destinations is another of the premier private reserves in the country, not only regarding the outstanding facilities and tranquil atmosphere of our lodge, but also in terms of the varied wildlife that can be photographed against one of the most spectacular backdrops imaginable. Depending on when we leave Madikwe, we should arrive towards the end of the afternoon and can head out more or less immediately to begin exploring this immense and compelling landscape.



## Days 67 to 69 - Private Game Reserve

As at Madikwe, the quality of the guides and game viewing here is exceptional and, unless our guide is notified of a particularly rare sighting by radio, it is very unlikely that we will see another vehicle during our entire stay. Unlike many other reserves, we will not be limited to the standard morning and afternoon safari slots and can instead look for animals when and where we want, as there are no roads to restrict us and our private guide can drive more or less anywhere if he feels that it is appropriate to do so and that the animal



we are following is unlikely to be disturbed. The reserve has a well deserved reputation as one of the best places in Africa to view

aardvark and the notoriously elusive pangolin, and aardwolf, brown hyena, cape fox, wild cat, caracal and bat-eared fox are all commonly observed. Although this is not an area in which they would naturally occur, roan and sable antelope have been introduced as a conservation measure and cheetah, lion, white rhino and buffalo are seen on almost a daily basis. In a tour full of exceptional wildlife experiences, we will also have the opportunity to participate in another unique encounter and track the south-central or 'desert' black rhino on foot, as these imposing creatures leave highly distinctive footprints in the deep red Kalahari sand and we will be able to trace their movements for several kilometres until we come face to face with this mighty but highly persecuted animal. Our view of the local meerkats will be just as good, as two colonies are being studied at the reserve and are by now almost oblivious to our presence. The wildlife apart, the Kalahari itself is the main attraction at this reserve, as the huge blue skies and wide open spaces are reminiscent of Africa in a former age, when it was still possible to experience the total



isolation and natural harmony that remain such a feature of this wild region. An unforgettable balloon flight will provide the perfect opportunity to discover both the magnitude and solitude of the Kalahari, as well as a unique view of the many animals protected here.



## Day 70 - Private Game Reserve to Kgalagadi Transfrontier Park

There will be time for one final activity this morning and perhaps a last chance to observe rhino, as there are no rhino, buffalo or elephant at our final destination, the Kgalagadi Transfrontier Park. Occupying a remote and incredibly beautiful region within the Kalahari Desert, the Kgalagadi Transfrontier Park is a joint venture between South Africa and Botswana combining the two formerly



independent national parks in each country to form a vast 3.6 million hectare reserve. The two sections of the park provide starkly contrasting experiences, as all the facilities are within the South African border, which consequently attracts far more visitors. On the Botswana side mobile safaris use the designated camp sites and have to be totally self-sufficient, which only adds to the sense of adventure. The epic, arid landscapes, spattered with sparse scrub and red sand dunes shimmering in the extraordinary desert light, are equally stunning in either country and the light here is so exceptional that this is easily one of the best locations for both wildlife and landscape photography in the world. The sunsets really do have to be seen to be believed and the characteristically dark-maned lions patiently survey large herds of oryx,

springbok, blue wildebeest, red hartebeest and eland. The scattered acacia, or camelthorn trees, provide respite for some in the intense afternoon sun, as well as vantage points for leopard and the many raptors for which the area is also famous. As the main Nossob and Auob Rivers are almost permanently dry, so the water dependent grazers are inextricably drawn to the artificial waterholes and the inevitable predators. In addition to lion and leopard, cheetah, spotted hyena and brown hyena are commonly encountered and cape fox, meerkat, honey badger, southern African ground squirrel, yellow mongoose, caracal, wild cat, black-backed jackal, pangolin, aardwolf and bat-eared fox all thrive in this highly challenging, but intoxicating region. Given the size of the area that we will cover, our five nights will be divided between the three comfortable rest camps within the South African section of the park, all of which include a swimming pool and the option of night game drives and guided bush walks.



## Days 71 to 74 - Kgalagadi Transfrontier Park

Although we will have already observed many of the same animals and savoured some of the most dramatic scenery imaginable, the Kalahari landscapes and desert wildlife are completely unique and this will be a fitting final destination of a very special journey.

We will have the opportunity of spending a day game driving across the border in Botswana if that appeals and will also make good use of the floodlit waterholes at the rest camps, as these always attract a great variety of creatures, including the lions that we will hear roaring across the desert at night. The high density of predators and sparse vegetation combine for some of the most compelling



wildlife viewing anywhere in the world and it is not just about what we see at Kgalagadi, as every encounter is vividly framed against an alluring desert backdrop and the sightings are often more emotive and natural than elsewhere. During the day we will explore the dry riverbeds and artificial pans for all forms of life, as lizards and snakes abound and approximately 280 bird species have been recorded here, an astonishing number given the unforgiving conditions and terrain. On our last night, after a hearty farewell meal and a chance to swap stories and recall treasured memories, we will once again head out into the night, partly to search for one last elusive animal and also to sit quietly and take in the dazzling beauty of an African starlit sky and the unmistakable calls of the African bush after dark, a sound that we will all have become so accustomed to over the previous weeks.



### **Day 75 - Kgalagadi Transfrontier Park to Cape Town**

We will ensure that the previous night is spent at the Twee Rivieren rest camp, as this morning we leave early to drive approximately 265km south to Upington for the late morning flight to Cape Town, where our magical tour finally comes to an end. We will arrive in Cape Town in the early afternoon and overnight accommodation and airport transfers can be arranged, depending on the time of your international connection.





## Additional Options

Although this tour has been written as if I were leading it for a large group with the assistance of local guides, it can easily be taken as a self-drive option for either a couple or family with children. The routes are all simple and if you are driving a standard car it is possible to use local guides and vehicles in most of the areas that require a 4x4. This trip, or at least a variation of it given the long periods in the field, is also ideal for children, as there is so much for them to do and a number of the private game reserves organise extra activities around the lodge to keep youngsters entertained. Additional destinations can also be added, including Ratanga

Junction, a theme park in Cape Town with a number of thrilling rides, and uShaka Marine World in Durban, a great aquarium and waterpark which features several exciting waterslides and an excellent introduction to snorkelling in the authentic lagoon. Long stretches of sandy, swimming beaches can be added for young or old alike and whilst I have mainly concentrated on the natural wonders that this incredibly diverse country has to offer, there are a host of activities and tours that can be combined with visits to any of the country's natural attractions. On the western cape 'wineland' tours are much in demand, partly due to the quality of the wine at a succession of first-class vineyards, and also because the area is one of the most beautiful in the country and the tours



are always conducted against sweeping landscapes of green rolling hills and towering mountains. A wine producing region since the 17th century, Paarl Valley, Franschhoek and Stellenbosch are three of the premier destinations, but there are many options and relaxing tours of several days, including some of the most luxurious accommodation in South Africa, are becoming increasingly popular. Namaqualand in the Northern Cape is another popular, albeit more seasonal destination, as a dazzling array of multi-coloured flowers bloom almost overnight during the spring months, transforming the rather austere landscape into a vivid sea of extraordinary colour. Walking tours can be organised here and South Africa is famous for the quantity and quality of its hiking possibilities, from the superb five-day Whale Trail in the De Hoop Nature Reserve to countless hikes of various lengths and difficulty in the Drakensberg and beyond. Of some of the other wildlife destinations, the gorgeous Waterberg region of Limpopo, to the extreme north-east of the country, features the impressive Marakele National Park and a large colony of threatened cape vultures. Karoo National Park, which occupies a small portion of the harsh, unforgiving Great Karoo ecosystem, offers some of the easiest game viewing imaginable, primarily as a result of the extremely sparse vegetation, and West Coast National Park is recognised as an outstanding location to observe cape grysbok antelope, caracal and cape fox. Considering that I have barely touched upon entire regions, and have also omitted a large number of national parks, significant wilderness areas and many cultural highlights, it is easy to see why visitors flock to South Africa in such numbers. It is not only a country of majestic landscapes, magnificent wildlife, rich culture and incredibly diverse people, but also one of endless possibilities, as you will no doubt discover as soon as you decide to visit and start planning exactly what to include in your special trip.







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