



Ulusaba: Where to experience the ultimate safari Where Branson goes to discover the Big Five

Leo Bear gets up close to the giraffes and rhinos at the billionaire's African retreat

SO much for telling stories around a campfire while on safari. For my merry gang, the tales of adventure started in the transfer lounge at Johannesburg as we waited to board a 12-seater plane bound for Ulusaba, Richard Branson's lodge just north of Kruger. The chitchat went something like this:

"Did you hear about the lion who mauled the tourist in the shower?"

"It was the second lion attack that month apparently..."

"Ouch. You'd be vulnerable in the shower, wouldn't you?"

"What about the guy who woke to find his wife had gone and a baboon had taken her place?"

This being my first safari, the anxiety set in. What do you do if a lion scrambles over the wall of your outdoor shower, or you come face to face with an amorous baboon? Worst of all, I'd ignored the advice on Twitter and hadn't packed a fleece.

Silly me for worrying. At Ulusaba, there is nothing to be afraid of. No predators in showers and certainly no need for a fleece - I visited in October and it was a scorching 38C. I first discovered Ulusaba on a trans-Atlantic Virgin flight when I flicked on a short film made by Christian Slater - a diary of a safari he'd taken with his son. Not only was it a glimpse into the holidaying habits of an A-lister, it showcased the bare beauty of the African savannah, a luxurious safari lodge staffed by friendly, well-educated rangers, and above all, the abundance of wildlife in the area.

SABI SANDS
Ulusaba is situated on 13,500 hectares on the north-eastern border of Kruger National Park in a region called Sabi Sands. The excellence of this location is twofold. Firstly, it's on privately owned land, so there are no strict rules about staying in vehicles or sticking to the tarmac like you get in regulated national parks. You can get really close to the animals at Ulusaba - close enough to smell them and hear them breathing.

Secondly, because the land directly borders Kruger (and there are no fences), there's plenty of traffic. And by plenty, I mean within 24 hours, I'd spotted all of the big five - lions, leopards, rhinos, elephants and buffalo. It was like safari bingo and I'd got a full house. The only downside to Sabi Sands is the concentration of lodges in the region - there are about 25 in total, so a trip here is a far cry from the soul-enriching isolation of camping out in the bush in a 1920s-style canvas tent. For this, you'll need

to book elsewhere. Accommodation is divided between two lodges: 11 rooms at Rock Lodge, all carved out of a mountain with uninterrupted views to Mozambique on a clear day, and 10 rooms at Safari Lodge, which sit 15 minutes away on the bank of a dry river bed. Both offer laid-back living, ornamental furniture and a hint of tribal flair.

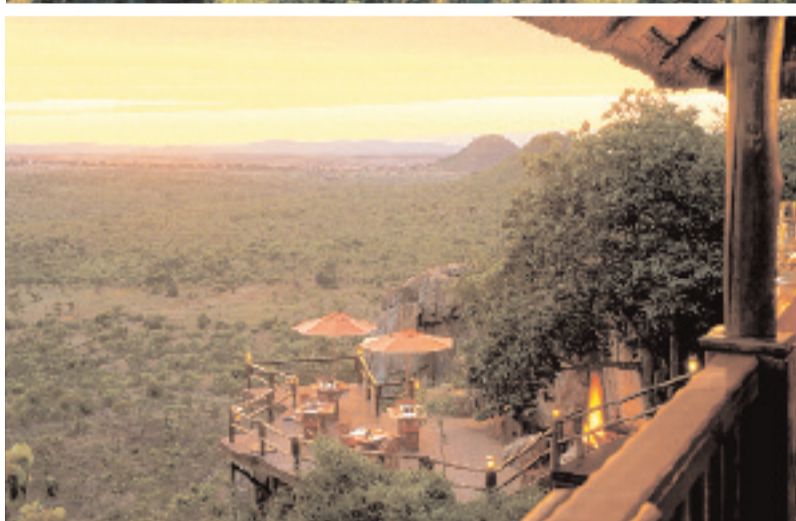
The Makwela suites at Rock Lodge are spacious with plunge pools, but for ultimate privacy, book the Treehouse suite at Safari Lodge. Here, access is via a chain of rope bridges (forget high heels) but the trek from the lobby is worth it. You'll wake up to the yawns of 38 hippos wallowing in a watering hole below your deck.

None of the staff wear name badges or uniforms, it's shorts and T-shirts all the way, and if you fancy a tippie, one of the rangers will happily swing their legs over the bar and mix you something strong.

Richard Langdon, who runs Ulusaba with his wife Llané, speaks fondly of Richard Branson, who owns the place and often visits.



The accommodation and wildlife at Ulusaba are each as captivating as the other.



Within 15 minutes of my first game drive, we came face to face with a handsome cheetah tucking into a baby impala at the foot of a Marula tree.

"He comes up with crazy ideas: we often have to reign him in. He originally wanted a zip line from Rock Lodge down to Safari Lodge," reveals Karl. Sadly Branson was swayed against this, but no one could talk him out of his most recent concept: a five-storey luxury villa carved out of the rock face behind Rock Lodge.

The new addition, which Branson shares with family and friends when on the premises, was completed last year and christened Cliff Lodge. It is a remarkable feat of architecture offering two ultra-luxe glass-fronted suites plus its own gym, pool and private butler. Locate the James Bond-style swivel closet where Branson stashes his pith helmet and you can leave him a note.

GAME DRIVES
Game drives are taken twice daily, at 5.30am and 4.30pm. Don't worry if you're not an early riser (neither is Branson's wife), there's plenty to see on the evening drives plus you're handed a stiff gin and tonic and some spicy biltong along the rounds.

Within 15 minutes of my first drive, we came face to face with a handsome cheetah tucking into a baby impala at the foot of a Marula

tree. His lunch choice was all the more pertinent when we returned to the lodge to find "impala in pita" on the menu.

During said drive, we also spotted white rhino, lions, buffalo, warthogs and chameleons, then dodged a deadly black mamba on the sandy road home. Gently bumping about in one of Ulusaba's open-sided Land Rover Pumas, with the hiss of crickets and the warm sun on the back of your head, has to be one of life's ultimate pleasures.

During subsequent drives, sightings included a herd of at least 700 buffalo, 20 or so elephants sheltering their babies from the rain, zebras, hippos, warthogs, wildebeest, zebu, hyenas, a steely-eyed leopard, lions calling for their mates (this was earth-trembling and deafening - and continued long into the night), and my absolute favourite, a journey of giraffes who appeared out of nowhere while we sipped our morning coffee and stretched our legs at the bonnet of our jeep.

The giraffes were completely unfazed by us, nodding from tree to tree like giant stoned hippies, pausing only to nibble leaves from branches out of reach from all others. I could

have watched them for hours. There's also plenty of smaller game to enjoy such as leopard tortoises, chameleons, scorpions, dung beetles (strangely fascinating), frogs that make sounds like alien ring tones and black and gold butterflies whose intricate patterns resemble something you might see on a velvety Vivienne Westwood creation.

BONFIRE

Twice a week, lavish al fresco dinners are set up in the bush for guests at both lodges. It's hard to describe the atmosphere at one of these events without using the word "magical". But sipping champagne under a glowing crimson moon next to a raging bonfire, all dusty and bronzed after a day spent watching some of the most vivid wildlife on our planet go about their usual business, is a true privilege.

We dined, by the light of flaming torches, candles and lanterns on kudu steaks, steamed yellowtail fish, moussaka and mealy pup, all expertly prepared and laid out on linen-clad trestle tables. And as if that wasn't exquisite enough, in an explosion of drum noise, an athletic band of tribal dancers leapt to the scene with spears, re-enacting a hunt and shaking their mohair-clad calves. It was savage and spontaneous, just how the bush ought to be.

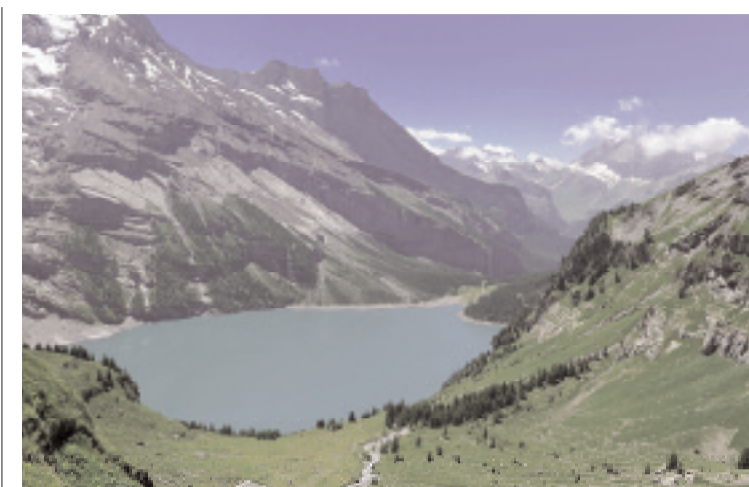
Later on that evening, under a starlit sky, we got to sit around a campfire and swap a few stories, too.

TRAVEL DETAILS

Rates start at £439 per person per night at Ulusaba including food, drinks and twice daily game drives. Call 0208 600 0430 or visit www.ulusabavirgin.com.

Leo flew to Johannesburg with Virgin Atlantic. Economy flights to Johannesburg start from £483 (plus tax). Transfers from Johannesburg to Ulusaba's private airstrip cost around £400 with Federal Air. www.virgin-atlantic.com

TRAVEL NOTES | by Timothy Barber



ALPINE PICNICS IN ST MORITZ

Badrutt's Palace, the spectacular St Moritz hotel that perches like a fairy tale castle overlooking the crystalline lake in the valley below, is the place where winter Alpine tourism pretty much began, when Victorian-era entrepreneur Caspar Badrutt invited his English friends to try out spending the winter there. But it's also a fabulous place to experience the full glories of the Alpine summer. And if you're out exploring all that, you may as well take a picnic. Thankfully, this summer Badrutt's Palace is supplying guests with an over-flowing champagne hamper packed with Swiss goodies.

A two night "Escape the Heat" package starts from CHF 1,440 per room, including set dinners, a spa treatment and transfers from the Corviglia mountain railway. www.badruttspalace.com

LEGO FUN FOR KIDS IN PROVENCE

Luxury hotels used to be largely child-free zones but the boom in high-end travel over the past decade has seen provision for kids become ever more important.



The latest innovation is at the Four Seasons Resort Provence at Terre Blanche, in the south of France, where Four Seasons has collaborated with toy giant Lego on its "Kids for all seasons centre". This includes two Lego playrooms and a giant splash pool which comes with a slide, pirate boat and water shooting dinosaurs.

There are also educational activities like pony treks, cookery lessons, painting classes and lessons in Petanque to get stuck into. Room rates start from £475 per room per night, on a bed and breakfast basis. www.fourseasons.com/provence

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MATUMI GAME LODGE 3*
Guernsey Road | Klaserie | Po Box 334 | Hoedspruit | 1380

Immerse yourself in South African wildlife at wonderful Matumi Game Lodge. Located in Kruger National Park it's the perfect gateway to a fun and memorable safari adventure. And with its gorgeous swimming pool it's the ideal place to relax too. Oh, and don't be surprised to see the resident Impala and Warthog around the place, or monkeys and baboons in the trees above!

MANYATTA ROCK CAMP 4*
Strydomblok Road | Hectorspruit | 1330

For a really special safari stay, check out Manyatta Rock Camp. We love the unique dome-like huts you stay in, which - funnily enough - look just like rocks to blend into the surroundings. Each one has a private wooded deck with stunning views across the bush, plus an outdoor shower to help you really get back to nature. Fabulous dining, a swimming pool and spa complete the experience.

RADISSON BLU HOTEL SANDTON 5*
Corner of Rivonia Rd & Daisy Street | Benmore | Johannesburg | 2196

It's all about style and luxury at the Johannesburg Radisson Blu. Standing tall in the heart of the Sandton business district, you can seriously indulge in this funky yet sophisticated hotel. The Amari African Spa is the place for pure pampering whilst top marks go to the outdoor swimming pool and sun deck up on the 8th floor - the ideal spot to bask in the South African sun.

To book your stay at any of these fabulous hotels, or to discover a whole world of other accommodation possibilities, visit LateRooms.com or call 0161 831 3894.