



# bush adventure

A father and son safari on a family-friendly game reserve in KwaZulu-Natal presents exciting discoveries for the intrepid pair.

By ANGUS BEGG

I first visited Phinda Resource Reserve in 1992 as a young radio journalist in love with nature. Wildlife and wilderness were my passion. In my youthful enthusiasm I was happy to see the world of wildlife, conservation and game rangers as a place of relative innocence. I was there to cover the Phinda story with its version of commercial ecotourism that it believed could change the way rural communities relate to wildlife and game reserves – and thus work to protect and restore our natural heritage.

Twenty-three years on, the reserve in KwaZulu-Natal has blossomed into one of South Africa's most compelling wildlife destinations, with seven eco-zones and wildlife viewing as varied and good as it gets: cheetah, rhino, lion, chameleons and birding specials such as narina trogon and Pels fishing owl.

PHOTOGRAPHS: ANGUS BEGG

This was the world to which I took my four-year-old son, Fynn, on our second big safari adventure. It was a little over two years since we'd visited the lowveld, with its scary night-sounds and leopards. His love for planes hadn't dissipated since our last trip. In fact, we still have to run out of the house every time a helicopter or airplane is heard outside. "Quick, Daddy, c'mon!" he'll say.

We met his aunt there who was coming along with us and set off in a rental car down the pine and eucalyptus-lined N2. Exotic, indigenous, Fynn took it all in. We stopped for litchis, a KwaZulu-Natal classic, simply so he could experience them. Living between two households with vastly different eating habits, this was a chance for variety, to let him loose on the diversity of tastes and



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### adventure underway

The flight from Cape Town to Durban is always more interesting than the Joburg route, with a largely green and mountainous landscape replacing the brown of the Karoo and Free State. But Fynn wasn't bothered about such trivialities, as he could barely see out the window let alone to the earth far below. He was just happy to be flying.

Landing at King Shaka airport was made different to the Joburg flight by sheer virtue of its name. "Tambo" just didn't compare to "Shaka" – the sheer sound of the name rang with excitement. And for the next while, he couldn't stop repeating it.

flavours put before him. While Fynn's initial reaction to "different" foods can well be the standard "I don't like it" without having touched it, we have a loose understanding that he should at least *try* something new. If he doesn't like it, then "*patooyey*", he can spit it out.

### new discoveries

Phinda was brand-new too and hungrily consumed by all of us. Knowing the reserve and the quality game-viewing, I was eager to share it. With all the fine touches that go with a top lodge, I think his green-fingered aunt was a little in awe. The lush green vegetation, the umbrella thorn acacias and the nyala grazing amongst the bushes ►



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### I thrilled at his enthusiasm; the sheer enjoyment of discovery.

next to the pathways at Mountain Lodge is an almost typical introduction to Zululand.

Fynn immediately focused on the details. The outside shower at the rear of our chalet took his fancy – in particular, the frog trying to burrow through the wall, desperate to avoid the looming, almost four-year-old curiosity.

The bushbuck browsing outside with that slightly on-edge gaze must have slotted somewhere in between a cat and a dog in his little mind. That's how quickly the curiosity faded – until we went to look together, and singled out the horns for discussion. But even that was fleeting.

He preferred running from our chalet to peek-a-boo with his aunt in the adjoining chalet, thriving on the curiosity and everything new. I thrilled at his enthusiasm; the sheer enjoyment of discovery.

His enjoyment followed us onto the game drive. It was just us in the vehicle, and we didn't look for the big game. We saw what we saw, with gorgeous butterflies and impala and a white rhino in the distance being about as hairy as it got. That's what JP, our guide at Mountain Lodge, felt comfortable with, obviously directed by company policy.

While that sort of term may sit awkwardly in "the bush", all lodges have their own rules. Group-owned establishments are generally strict; owner-run establishments generally operate with more leeway, judging the responsibility of guests for themselves.

While the butterflies kept us all attentive and Fynn asked about every bird we saw – he knows his doves, black eagles,

sunbirds and redwing starlings – the big winner for him was the puddles. In fact, Alex took him on a few "puddle" drives. Bevan, at the more exclusive Forest Lodge, also accommodated Fynn's enthusiasm on a few puddle adventures, with water pouring over the bonnet, much to his boyish delight.

Forest Lodge is built in a sand forest, one of seven ecosystems packed into Phinda's relatively small size (it's about 40km long), and with Zululand having been drenched by October rains, everything was soaked and green – a change from the mountain thornveld we'd just come from. The bigger the puddle the better, and the louder the roar from his little throat.

#### bush royalty

The more pricey lodges today have the resources to dedicate to ensuring that children are properly entertained. Not just occupied, but taught about the bush and animals through games and activities. Phinda does it well, following on from a trend that started post 9/11, when the global slump in air travel meant that every lodge in the bush or on the beach – wherever in the world – was desperate to attract guests.

Once generally *persona non grata* at certain game lodges, economics catapulted children below 12 years old almost overnight into bush royalty. Seeing the playroom downstairs at Mountain Lodge, or watching a troop of toddlers baking cookies in the lodge kitchen, you could well believe it. But such "innovations" have



been around for over a decade. One child-friendly establishment that immediately comes to mind is Jaci's Safari Lodge, a pioneer of the little-ones-on-safari idea. They offer "jungle drives" for children, either alone with a guide or with Mom and Dad accompanying junior.

Sanbona Game Reserve in the Little Karoo has also cottoned onto the family-friendly idea. One of its lodges, Gondwana, is a dedicated family establishment, the likes of which I've yet to come across. Children may not be allowed on game drives, but they can run relatively free in the dining room and lounge without having childless guests hissing like Egyptian geese behind the ubiquitous laminated antique maps of Africa.

I was seriously disappointed Fynn couldn't join us on a drive, but the alternatives were appreciated. They have a functional playroom with a childminder and nannies are also on offer.

#### homeward bound

Back at Phinda, far north of the Karoo in grass painted lush green by weeks of rain, I go on game drives with and without Fynn. I see black and white rhino, an imperious, big-maned lion, deep-grunting hippos and a pair of cheetah. Superbly striped zebra and squabbling vultures on a long-dead giraffe are framed by the delicious subtropical soundtrack of a thousand wet and happy birds.

"There's another monkey, Daddy, look!" Fynn shouts at 5.30am on our day of departure as he jumps off the bed, making for the cocksure furry face on the other side of the window. "Naughty monkey!"

The Forest Lodge chalets are built of glass into the leaf-covered sand floor, and the Vervet monkeys have come to see what's on offer, as they do every day at the same time when the guests go out on game drives. But not this day; we were packing to leave. ☐



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