

# a toddler in the wild

ANGUS BEGG and his two-year-old son,  
Fynn, go on a memorable father and son  
adventure in the Lowveld.

The noise outside our reed-walled hut is deafening, wild and encroaching. My two-and-a-half year-old Fynn has never heard anything like it, and wraps his little arms around my leg. A short, sharp intake of breath illustrates his unease.

In his mind something horrible and large is out there beyond the thin walls of our thatched hut. And it's getting closer.

In adult reality it is no more threatening than hundreds of *Bubbling Kassina* frogs, those of small body and loud voice. There must be a thousand of them outside, and the three-quarter reed wall does little to soften their song. "Frogs", repeats Fynn after me in a conspiratorial whisper.

If you had to ask most tourists to the African bush why they go on safari, whether from Joburg or London, you would find the answer surprisingly simple. As clichéd as it is obvious, most are seeking to replace the unforgiving pace of modern city life with a brief return to nature.

To breathe in her scents, take in her landscapes and to witness her wildlife.

While time and increasing wealth have proved there is indeed a place for raspberry jus, Indian cotton sheets spun of a gazillion threads and massage spas in the bush, they have until recently never before been part of "the bush" and the sense of escape that belongs with it. And when it comes to little ones, this is perhaps even more so, for the sounds, textures and almost otherworldliness are so much more important than aircon, sherry in the carafe and 24/7 attention to designer detail.

It is this absence of "puffery", the adherence to bushveld basics, that distinguishes Umlani Bushcamp, one of the many lodges and self-catering camps – deep in South Africa's Timbavati Game Reserve – from most of the bushveld pack. And it's at night that the difference is felt most clearly.

By design, our experience is one of complete immersion. Crickets, frogs,

PHOTOGRAPHS / ILLUSTRATIONS: ANGUS BEGG / SHUTTERSTOCK.COM



badgers, nightjars and owls rustle and tweet themselves awake. Without aircon and bricks 'n mortar to seal out the bush, the imagination is left to run wild – especially when that heavy breathing of the leopard saws its way through the subconscious.

Which is pretty much what happened to us. Instead of imagining a third-person world of dry river-beds and knob-thorn acacias, my mind began plotting a hypothetical escape route, just in case the absurd took hold of the situation and the feline leapt into our (outside) bathroom. I was wishing Fynn was awake to hear primeval at play.

But he wasn't, and we woke to a beautiful morning, with scary frogs replaced by panicking Francolins and weavers busy about their nests. Rising with the bushveld in autumn is an awesome bloody privilege – and I don't use the word lightly.

The game-drive was leaving at 05h30, and I'd resolved to miss it if Fynn wasn't awake. Being so little, I know how

important it is – for my own sanity as much as the other guests – that he gets his full quota of sleep. I also wanted to witness his waking to this brand new world. Thankfully David, the camp manager, had arranged a separate drive for us.

The game-drive is good. Just as the faintest drizzle begins to tickle, we spot a leopard – Ginger, our guide, and the tracker had been looking for him. Remarkably, he has four kills in a tree; three steenbok and an impala. In between dodging the drops and clutching firmly on to my inquisitive son – ensuring that he stays in the vehicle – I get the odd shot.

The average game-drive is three to four hours, and although I've brought along juice, rusks and a couple of apples, by the time we find our next leopard I realise that rather than hungry, he's bored.

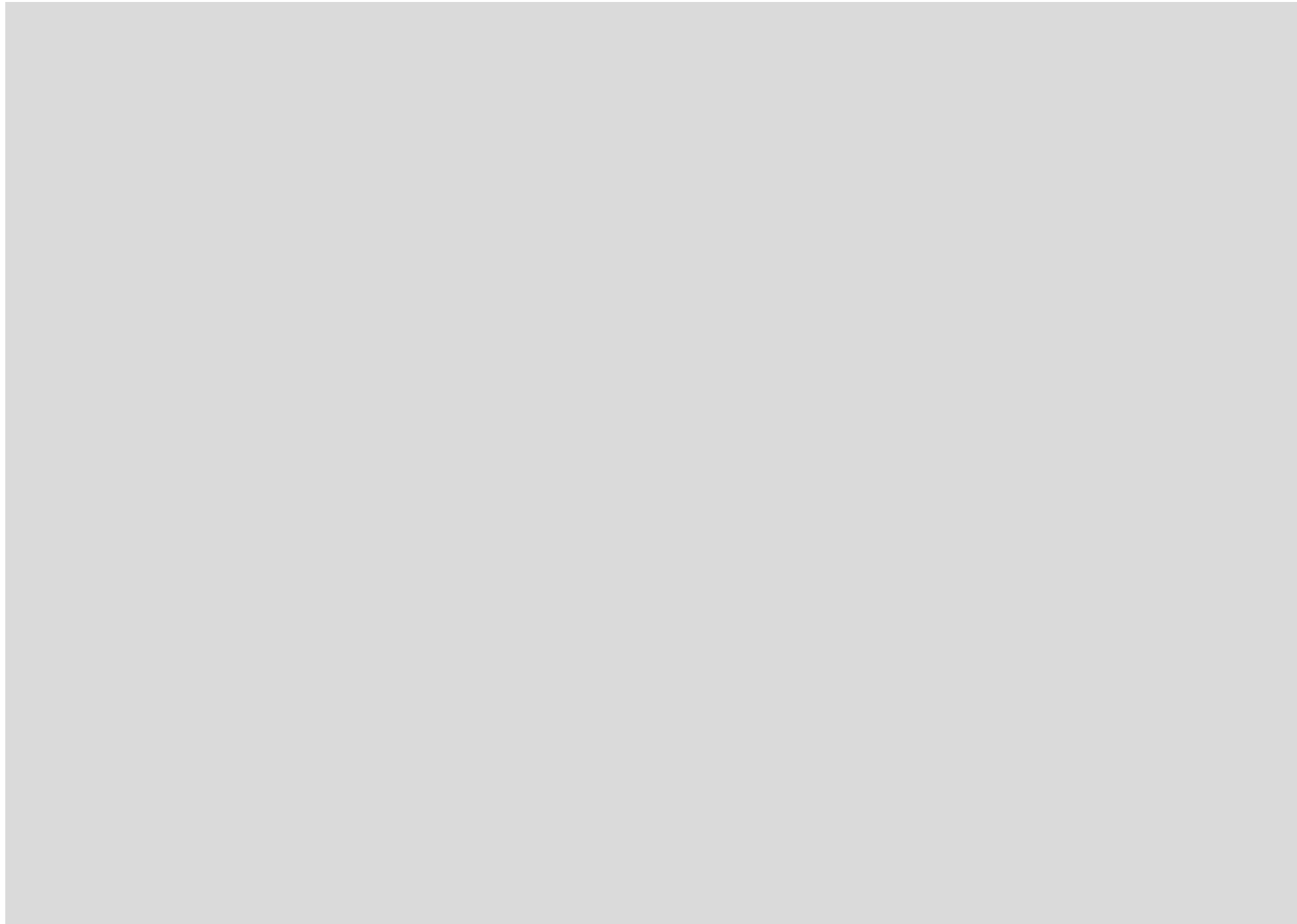
By now we'd found another leopard, and are well-positioned to watch a male on a kill beneath an imposing Jackalberry tree, alongside a dry riverbed. This ►



XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX XXXXX XXXXXXXXXXXX XXXXX



XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX XXXXX XXXXXXXXXXXX XXXXX





is when Fynn decides he wants to exit the vehicle. He howls on being restrained. I mutter serious thanks that we are alone.

Back at camp, all he wants is egg – sod the veggies, home-made bread and crème brûlée. Usually a brilliant eater, his eating – a bit like his routine – has been all over the place. That’s travelling with children. On our way back to our hut and the anticipated nap, David asks in that exquisitely polite manner that only the English can pull off, how we’re doing.

David is a curious fish. You can tell he’s super-competent and efficient just by the way he moves – I could swear there’s a touch of Sandhurst\* military in him. But at first meeting he does seem allergic to children.

He tells me (in a wonderfully candid manner) that the closest he’s been to children is his nephew, “and that’s close enough”. Which admittedly leaves me a little on edge as to what to expect. I have a vision of spending the next 24 hours walking on egg-shells

On our exploration of the camp after his nap, we had meanwhile found a drum in the boma – with the proverbial fireplace in the middle. Naturally it demanded to be thumped. Not entirely without rhythm, but a little noisy and possibly over-enthusiastic – I’d imagine not ideal for some guests’ idea of a bushveld breakaway. The pots in the kitchen also demanded his attention, so one of the cooks, Leeneth – who took a particular shine to Fynn – moved the drum to the kitchen.

And this is where Africa stands a world apart. My experience has shown that the local staff can’t seem to get enough of babies, toddlers and preschoolers – and Fynn is welcomed into the kitchen. The staff love him, as others have done since he visited his first lodge when aged just a tiny six

months, and his ease with people first became evident.

With that in mind, I’ve given myself the luxury of a babysitter for the afternoon-drive. Leeneth will be with Fynn. He’s happy when she takes over.

But it doesn’t go entirely to plan. The further out we drive, responding to sightings reported by fellow driver-guides around the Timbavati, the more guilt sets in, and I curse myself. Forget the eagle-owl or lioness and cubs, I’m missing my boy, and sharing every waking experience with him. I’m wishing I was back in camp.

Apparently the feeling wasn’t mutual. Fynn is beaming on my return – he’d been living the social highlife in the staff village, with drums at his disposal and playing with Leeneth.

And when it wasn’t Leeneth, it was the guides – Elvis or Ginger – always showing an interest in little Fynn. That’s something many forget when travelling this simultaneously luscious and dusty continent – its capacity for human connection. It wouldn’t be what it is without its people.

Fynn is almost two years older now, at the grand old age of four and a half. In that time I have endeavoured to introduce him to a heritage he wouldn’t have on any other continent. We’ve been lucky to visit different lodges in different provinces, and more recently went camping with a crèche friend and his dad (that is a tale for another time) in the Cederberg. And each time he asks more questions – as all readers of this magazine will know – starting with the ubiquitous “Daddy, why?”

*\*That establishment where the male offspring of the royals go to prepare themselves for their forthcoming obligatory duties, like Prince Andrew in the Falklands and his nephew Harry in Afghanistan... [C]*



XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX X  
XXXX XXXXXXXXXXXX XXXXX



### things to know

**Where** The Timbavati Reserve, in Limpopo province, forms part of the Greater Kruger National Park and lies nestled between the Kruger National Park in the east, the Klaserie and Umbabat Private Nature Reserves in the north and the Thornybush Private Nature Reserve in the west. As there are no fences between the Kruger National Park and Timbavati, the reserve enjoys a wide variety of game, including the big five.

**When** The Timbavati gets about 550mm to 600mm rain per annum, with the wet season occurring from November to March. Summers are hot with a maximum temperature of 38°C in the months of January to April. Because of the summer rainfall, the bush comes alive, but the thicker foliage restricts game viewing. The best time of year to visit is winter, for better game viewing and mild day temperatures, though nights and early mornings are cold.

**Famous for** Timbavati is best known for its white lion population, which was discovered in the 1970s. These white coats are not because of albinism, but from a condition called "leucism", in which the pelt is white but the eyes and skin are pigmented.

**Malaria** Since malaria does occur in the Timbavati region, particularly in the summer months, visitors are advised to take prophylactics (speak to your healthcare professional first). However, there are a few simple precautions for protection against mosquito bites. Apply mosquito repellent, especially around sunset, and particularly on the feet and ankles. In the evenings the arms and ankles should be covered by wearing socks and shoes and a light, cotton long-sleeve shirt. Mosquitoes are mostly active at night, so the use of mosquito repellent is essential. Mosquitoes also find it difficult to settle in a breeze, so leaving the ceiling fan on at night keeps them away.

