



# Toddler on safari

With the sun setting behind the big jackalberry tree, and the first nightjar welcoming the onset of night, Fynn ran as fast as his sturdy legs of 31 months could take him. 'Hiding', he giggled, as he rounded the Landrover, approaching a speed wobble.

BY ANGUS BEGG

It was the most unusual sundowner stop I'd ever had on 15 years of game-drives.

The game-drive has long been one of my few pleasures, allowing me to get miles away from what can easily become life's daily drivel, a place where I can drive demons hence, breathe in the scent of wild sage and wake to the sound of birds. But life changes, and there's no change bigger than a little one.

Alison, Fynn's Mom, was away for three weeks, and circumstances dictated that I had no domestic help for that period. It was



me Fynn and I, 24/7 alone at home in Cape Town - and all thoughts of my television work, in fact any work that demanded concentration in child-free zones, had to stop.

Fynn enjoys the natural world, with the call of the hadida ibis the first recognisable sound to come from his cot when he turned one, almost two years ago.

So it was that Fynn and I set off for the bush, his introduction to a world I can only hope he learns to respect and love as much as I do.

Without Ali, the pressure was on. I'm very comfortable with caring for him solo, but I suppose it was the responsibility 'while on the road', for ensuring that I had every little detail attached to his energetic bundle of life covered.

More than ensuring I had the nappies and wet-wipes packed, it was a list of never-ending questions; did I have enough bibs in case he drooled his shirt wet on the plane; his teddy, Baloo; a spare shirt...malaria spray? As the baby-bag is too big, all of this I had to include in my laptop bag, which - yes - had work in it.

Getting to the lowveld, the real bush, from Cape Town was a challenge. We flew British Airways and I booked an Avis car because three of the company CEOs I've had the pleasure of meeting are all serious environmentalists, responsible for Avis' current drive (pun unintended) in that direction.

From Joburg to the lowveld we flew in a Beechcraft with FedAir, because, well, they fly where we needed to get to.

At the FedAir hangars, Fynn was - as Ali would say - out of his skin with excitement. And as our German fellow-passengers would attest, very well behaved. We stopped twice, dropping off passengers at Mala Mala and Singita before finally landing at Ulusaba - from where it was still an hour's drive through the reserve to our destination. We had come from Cape Town - a lot of travelling for a toddler.

The lodge was of the luxurious sort, called Vuyatela, in the northern part of the Greater Kruger Park. Owned by one of the founders of the once iconic website Africam in the late 90s, I remember it as one of the first upmarket lodges to adopt contemporary African design.

While Vuyotela doesn't strictly speaking invite toddlers, our stay proved how well it can work.

Granted, there are limitations, one being that you'd have to have a game-drive vehicle to yourself so as not to irritate the other guests. And if your child has boundless energy, someone has to help him spend it, because usually there will be neither playground nor little friends. Luckily this continent has amongst the most child-friendly people and natural mothers on the planet, and babysitters are always available at such establishments.

So it was that Agnes became his first



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nanny on the trip. We are fortunate in that Fynn is gregarious and loves people, especially young women.

A very busy boy, his general behavior would've suited more eminent locations. While he did ask a number of people to lift him up to the fish-tank in the dining-room - and then to keep holding him - his only relative indiscretion was asking the English woman sitting next to him if he could share her breakfast: 'more.... egg?'. She took it very well, and he made many fans of the guests in our two nights there.

Umlani Bushcamp, 90 minute's drive north towards Hoedspruit, in the Timbavati Game Reserve was different. Also part of the Greater Kruger, Umlani is beautifully rustic and simple, with paraffin lights and no electricity - hence no electric fence, however thin, to deter the elephant.

Here Fynn encountered his first leopard, a female with four kills hanging in the same tree. Here he heard his first nocturnal, loud symphony of frogs, which caused him to cling to me in terror. He also encountered jackal (he does a great imitation call), buffalo, and Europeans entirely indifferent to his presence, which - as we sat with them at the table - meant I had to be even more alert. Once I had removed the cutlery and the plate, we were pretty much okay, although any thought of conversation with

the curious Hungarians or bombastic Hollanders was out of the question.

As at Vuyatela, I stole a game-drive, with a babysitter named Leeneth coming to the rescue. She played bongo drums with him, and in our short time there he became a fixture in the kitchen. I'm not sure how David - the highly-efficient 40-something English GM who claims to have no desire to have children of his own - felt about Fynn in the kitchen, but acknowledged him and made us very welcome.

The attitude of the staff at lodges is crucial if such a trip is to be undertaken. Eugene at Vuyatela took him to see the abandoned week-old bush babies he was nursing. Elvis, the senior ranger at Umlani and a father himself took the insistent young man on a short drive when Fynn showed in toddler-speak just how much it meant to him.

The thought of missing a game drive when in a game reserve used to verge on sacrilege, primarily because those few bushveld hours were so precious. But taking your toddler along doesn't mean your enjoyment is no more. Waiting for my little man to wake, and take in this new world, with its sub-tropical birds and insects, leopards - and even frogs - was a magical treat. Like discovering my favourite place all over again, through new, untainted eyes. ●

## Lodge and transport details

**Vuyatela** is luxury, self-catered (its neighbouring sister lodge, Galago is four stars).

- Two TV's in each chalet - large and small screen
- WIFI
- Private guide, tracker and vehicle
- Chef
- Gym
- Internet library
- Skeleton Museum (animals!)

**\*Rate:** R13 500 for the lodge - which accommodates ten people.

Tel: + 27 (0)82 895 3670  
jurie@djuma.co.za

### Umlani

- Family units - sleep four
- Separate game-drives for parents and children (two years and older)
- Walks for children over 10 years
- Special meals on request
- Air-rifle shooting in the riverbed
- Tracking exercise
- Drawing competitions
- Family sleep-out in tree-house
- Swimming pool

**\*Rate:** R2995 pp all inclusive (in season) - under 12 years pay 50%

\*R1996 ditto (out season)

Three-night special - 15% discount plus transfer from Hoedspruit airport  
Tel: +27 (0)83 468 2041 info@umlani.com

### BA/Comair details:

British Airways Contact Centre:  
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\*Rates valid at time of going to print.

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