

Are you game for a drive at Lion Sands River Lodge?

 By [Rod Baker](#)

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If you want to get up close and personal with our abundant wildlife, you'll look a long way before you can better Lion Sands River Lodge, on the banks of the Sabie River. *(All images: Rod Baker)*



Surveying my domain.

After our flight into Nelspruit it was into the private transfer and an hour and a bit later, we arrived at Lion Sands River Lodge, where we were introduced to Sophia, Lodge Manager, and Kenneth and George, our ranger and tracker respectively (they would stay with us when we went on to Tinga; this is pretty unique. Usually you will be handed over to a new ranger and tracker, but staying with Kenneth and George ensured we enjoyed really personal attention.

Both lodges (Lion Sands and Tinga) are part of the Lion Sands Game Reserve and part of [More South Africa](#), owned and managed by the More family and an incredible family of staff who take great pride in ensuring guests will have an experience filled with passion and personality. The company has created a unique collection of incredible special properties in Cape Town, Kruger National Park, Sabi Sand and the Madikwe and when staying at any one of these, the staff set out to do their utmost to ensure that you will experience something unique and inspiring, leaving you with incredible memories.

With little time other than to drop off our bags, freshen up and head back to the main lodge, we were off on our first afternoon/evening game drive.

The one thing we here in SA all understand is that animals do not make appointments... well, on that day the wildlife, perhaps, hadn't heard that because we had barely left the lodge's main gate when we were greeted with impala rams doing what we men folk do best - fight for dominance and to attract the best female.



A not-so-gentle warning.

[click to enlarge](#)

From there on, it was a slow (seldom out of first or second gear) ride through the late afternoon and early evening, spotting a hyena on the trot, black rhino and more impala and elephants up until we got a tip via the radio that a leopard female and her cub had been spotted.

It's time to fly

Both were up a tree, the mother alternately looking a little disgruntled and cheesed off as she had made a kill only to have a hyena come along and grab it. So while the latter chomped on her hard work, the cub generally did what cubs do, played and climbed around the tree.



The cause of all the agro - the hyena that had driven her off her kill and was now treating it as a takeaway.

Hyenas have the strongest jaws around, and to hear them crushing bones confirmed that.

Then we got airborne...

I mentioned slow and easy on the drive, well that was until other rangers called in with a report of a hunting pack of wild dogs.

With an aside from Kenneth along the lines of "Hang on, we need to catch up with them and pass them," we were off.

Game park roads are not really designed for this, so Heather, my wife, and I (and the other guests on board) spent pretty much of the following 10 minutes or so airborne, especially us as we were on the very back seats of the vehicle. But it was great fun and at no time was our safety compromised. Kenneth took great care to check with everyone every so often, so it was a case of "You alright?" followed by "Yeah..." THUD..."Oofff... Great!" To cut a very speedy story short, after a relatively brief but very exhilarating ride, we spotted the wild dogs.

Bear in mind that along with the leopard, the wild dog is somewhat of the "holy grail" of wildlife spotting, and we had managed to spot the former, with a cub, and the latter - hunting - in barely an hour.

'What the... I'm getting out of here!'

What also saw the wild dogs was a jackal, minding his own business and waiting for a meal to come along, only to discover that the hunting pack thought he/she would do very nicely as a snack. I have never seen anything move as suddenly and as quickly - and he/she got away.

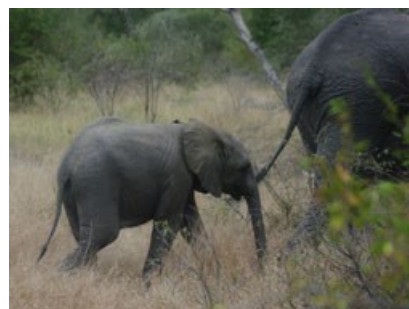
After that, we needed a drink, so Kenneth stopped for sundowners, and he and George did the necessary.

We were accompanied by an American father and son, and if ever you feel like being blasé about what we have here in this country, stop for a while and listen to how tourists rave about our wildlife.

They had just started out on their first trip here to SA, and their first "safari" - and already they were both planning their return trip next year - this time with wife and the rest of the family.



Our suite was luxurious, with acres of room in the bed - and great pillows.



Just following mother - and hanging on so I don't get left behind.

The game drives take about three hours or so (1500 to around 1800-1830), and we returned to the lodge and our suite to freshen up for evening drinks and then dinner.

Making a trunk call?

At Lion Sands, like at most parks I think, you DO NOT go walk-about by yourself after dark. When going between your suite and the main lodge, you have an escort... I found a good reason why the next morning... an elephant had left some very fresh evidence of a visit right next to the walkway to the next suite after ours.

The food, as one would expect, was great. Well presented, tasty and filling and way too much. I reckon at the end of our trip we both had surely gained a kilo or two!

The accommodation was excellent and we were very happy with our very comfortable suite. We put a lot of stock in having a comfortable bed, and pillows, and all I can say is that they hit the jackpot with everything, but the beds are so big... Rather than a case of a quick roll over to present a peck and a, "Night, night Love," it was more a case of, "Where the hell are you? Ahh, forget it... Bye love, see you in the morning."

Then came the wake-up call for first game drive of the day - at six the next morning, and it is not an automated call; this was a real live person who would continue to ring until you answered. Bleary eyed, we got up, had a very quick shower and were back to the lodge to set off by 0630.

I would suggest that if you are going around autumn/winter/early spring, have a beanie, warm jacket and gloves. A blanket and hot-water bottle are ready on the vehicles seats when you board - and there is nothing quite like a lovely warm bum in the morning.



Closing in to take a closer look at this weird bloke wearing a beanie.

That morning we were treated to rhino, waterbuck and elephants of course, and much else as well.

A sunrise coffee and snacks kept us fortified until we returned to the lodge again by about 0900-0930 and after a quick freshen-up, it was breakfast time.



That's close enough, thank you!

I would suggest the Ranger breakfast... it keeps you going for ages, as the name suggests.

'Man, we're comin' back'

By this time, we were on first-name terms with our fellow guests... from the UK, US and Down Under. [River Lodge can handle 40 guests](#), but there were fewer than that during our stay, so you pretty much get to meet everyone over a stay of a couple of

days.

Every single one of them raved on about what they had seen. Name and email addresses were swapped for the exchange of pictures and heartfelt, "When you're in... Give us a call," abounded.

Not once did we hear anything about having better back home... for all of them, bar none, this was an unbeatable experience and every one of them, from how they were raving, I reckon returned to their home countries as brand ambassadors for us.

Speaking to Kenneth later on, he said that by and large overseas tourists understand that wildlife does its own thing, so nothing is guaranteed, but generally whatever they see, they are over the moon.

On one morning drive, however, we did have a somewhat strange experience... we were trundling along in second when we were assailed by what I can only describe a stench from hell... a heady mix of decomposition and "something else".

Kenneth stopped the vehicle, picked up the rifle and he and George started down the road... and then stopped a couple of metres ahead, looked at the ground, had a brief chat, smiled at each other, and returned to the vehicle.



Along with leopards, wild dogs are apparently rare sightings - and to see them on a hunt is particularly enjoyable - not that the jackal would agree, of course.

Dinner under the stars

The culprit was not a dead rhino, decaying elephant or similar, but a hyena that had had the "urge to go" and had parked a load of about half a cupful in the middle of the road. Talk about dynamite in small packages. It could have been weaponised! That comes from an all-meat diet that is sometimes less than fresh.

We stayed at River Lodge for two days and then it was off to Tinga, this time we would be exclusive, or they'd be exclusive to us... Kenneth and George.

I must mention, however, the night before we transferred to Tinga, the staff set up a dinner under the stars for everyone; it can only be described as magical, and I am sure had more than one overseas visitor making the bookings for next year. Expecting to return to the lodge for dinner we took a detour and rounding the corner were greeted with vehicles and guests ("Wow!"s and "Oh my God"s abounded from every direction, and lanterns flickered here, there and everywhere, even in the trees. Naturally we pretty well all gathered around the couple of bonfires blazing away and exchanged memories and experiences. We even had a choir - who seamlessly switched from a local song to "Happy Birthday" to one of the guests.

Quite frankly, to describe everything we saw and enjoyed would take a much longer article than this. The best option is to experience it yourself... it is unforgettable!

From us, a very big thanks to Sophia and the Lion Sands River Lodge family, Advice, our butler, and Kenneth and George, who not only showed us more wildlife than we have ever seen before, but also taught us much about the other things we sometimes miss... the trees, the insects and the bush lore we didn't know in the first place. Oh, and also fielding with good grace some seriously doof questions from us.

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Double: R6,240 per person per night sharing; single: R9,360 per person per night single

Rate includes luxury accommodation, all meals, teas/coffees, two game drives daily, game drive refreshments and specified safari activities such as bush walks.

Rate excludes all beverages, mini bar, curio shop purchases, spa treatments, telephone, gratuities, Kruger Park entrance fees, flights, transfers, and any additional extras

Minimum two-night stay.

Subject to availability.

For more information, go to <http://www.lionsands.com/promotions.asp> and <http://www.lionsands.com/riverlodge.asp>

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