

Wild luxury at Madikwe Private Game Reserve

 By [Brian Berkman](#) 5 Mar 2018

Dead Leadwood trees stretch from the ground as an arthritic wrist might claw for the sky. These sculptural form give the 75,000 ha Madikwe Private Game Reserve a haunting quality, particularly during the dry months.

The trees might have been killed by elephants that strip the cadmium bark which effectively starves the trees or from floods but while they are dead they provide for other life - scorpions in search of nibbles, a vantage point for a lilac-breasted roller before it dazzles in its dramatic mating aerobic plunge and rolling pattern. Together with the kori bustard, the largest flyir bird native to Africa, the roller is synonymous with Botswana and both birds are frequently seen in Madikwe in South Africa North West, bordering Botswana.



The vast plains that remind one of the Karoo are, for me, one of the most attractive aspects of Madikwe, a Malaria-free area that was once farmland and is today the fifth largest South African reserve area with a 150km perimeter electric fence. The historic Mafikeng Road runs through this big five reserve which is famous for its wild dogs.

Although there's an airstrip in the reserve with daily scheduled transfers, it is an easy four-and-a-half hour drive from Johannesburg on the N4 via Zeerust, all on good roads.

Game-viewing experience

Because the area was once farmland and of historic interest, there are a number of buildings, some ramshackle in which hyaenas have established a den, others converted into offices and training facilities for the park, but their presence adds an interesting visual dimension to the game-viewing experience and is a reminder how nature will take over our world when we humans leave it.



Although this is our third visit to this region, September 2017 stood out for the great volume of game. At a dam, in front of a crumbling church, so many elephants were active we watched through a veil of henna-red dust which they'd kicked up. Young elephant bulls were sparring and as they crashed their giant foreheads and the impact created the type of powdery dust you'd expect to see at an 18th-century wigmaker. While some played in the muddy water, others gave themselves a dust bath to rid them from biting ticks and flies.

Madikwe Hills Private Game Lodge field guide Sam Gaopelo is a veteran of the area with more than 11 years' experience guiding in Madikwe alone. While other lodge vehicles - there are 32 private accommodation options in the reserve - rush guests around in search of announced sightings over the radio, Gaopelo has a felt sense of where they are and what they will do next.

We head for the dam wall, which other than the kori bustard and spoonbill at the water's edge, appears quiet. In a nanosecond, a scene not dissimilar to the opening sequence of *The Lion King*, life shows itself: first the Impala appear in a large group emerging from the high grasses - next swallows and swifts swoop over the water dipping and darting to catch insects and to drink. A moment later, the group of kudu, confident it is safe for them to drink, shudder and snort in an alarm call at the sight of the lioness that has been stalking from under the Acacia thorn. In this drama the king of the jungle has been usurped: every being, including the lion and her hunting mate, demur to the herd of female elephants and their calves who have now arrived. With one exception, the Chacma baboon seems impervious to the elephants and only retreat after violent trumpeting and a stampede in their direction.



Gaopelo the whole while is decoding and interpreting the scene for we six, enraptured by the unfolding before us.

Big game sightings

In the four days we spent in Madikwe, we saw many of the big game one hopes to see - except for the wild dogs, which the reserve is so famous for. Similarly, Madikwe Hills has a young female leopard that is a near constant presence on their social media streams posing for photos in a very un-leopard-like way. We didn't see her either. That is the great mystery of the bush evidenced by the different reports from other guests over dinner. Cuisine at Madikwe Hills, a Seasons in Africa member, is of a very high standard with a pool of creamy broccoli soup with roasted nuts to start, springbok carpaccio and a choice of three mains - the oven-baked Kingklip was superb followed by dessert, cheese, and fruits.

Accommodations could hardly be more luxurious with focus on absolute privacy while overlooking a watering hole, vast bathrooms with freestanding baths, indoor and outdoor showers, a choice of two robe types, own swimming pool, and sitting area. An advantage of Madikwe Hills is that suites and public areas are connected by raised walkways which means that you could happily walk from the spa and gym to the dining area in open sandals.



Although Madikwe Hills is among the most costly lodging in the reserve they do have last-minute specials that also make them very competitive.

When you visit note that because of your proximity to Botswana your mobile devices will connect to international data roaming and its concomitant price unless you prevent it from doing so.

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