

About the bush

Contributing Editor Brian Berkman spoke to Mark Witney, Singita's CEO, about the lure of the bush... the silence, the smells, the rhythms of the bush... and much, much more.

 By Brian Berkman: contributing editor, travel ^{27 Aug 2012}



By Mark Witney, chief operating officer of Singita, winner of the 2012 Travel + Leisure 'World's Best Hotel Overall' Award

- 1) *Waking up to the pre-dawn bird chorus.* I have never forgotten waking up one morning in a tent on an island in the Okavango in Botswana to the loudest chorus of bird calls I have ever heard.
- 2) *Silence.* When you live in a city you get so used to the background sounds of traffic, sirens, machinery and voices. It is always the first thing that strikes me as I arrive in the bush - once the aircraft shuts down or the car engine switches off - perfect silence.
- 3) *Walking in the bush.* The heightened awareness that comes with walking in areas where there is dangerous game. From my experiences as a guide in the early 90s (when I opened the first Singita lodge GM, guide and pilot) I can vouch for the fact that, thankfully, by far the majority of large animal charges are mock charges. The intention is to scare you rather than kill you but, either way, it is an adrenaline experience like no other to have a bull elephant or a lion charging straight at you! Even the sudden blur of wings and loud protestations of a disturbed spur fowl can get the heart racing.
- 4) *I love the collective smells of the bush.* I love the unique, individual smells of the potato bush, fresh rain on dusty ground, the musky smell of waterbuck and so many other smells - good and bad - that epitomise the African bush.
- 5) *Sitting in a hide at a waterhole is a wonderful way to appreciate the rhythm of the bush.* But you have to have time - a short half hour is unlikely to yield much unless you are very lucky - long hours of observation often bring the most unexpected pleasures. It is a wonderful opportunity to absorb the peace and quiet. A troop of baboons may come by who will keep you amused with their antics, the painstakingly slow approach of the impala always alert for danger and the constant arrivals of birds. Patience is essential to see anything worthwhile in the bush - ask any wildlife filmmaker.
- 6) *Sleeping under the stars is something we should all do more of.* At night on a wilderness trail lying in your sleeping bag looking deep into the infinite wonder of the universe while a hyena whoops in the distance and a nightjar's call is your lullaby is a most profound experience.

7) *The interconnectedness of it all.* To understand why the preservation of biodiversity is so important one needs to learn and observe how species of animals, birds, insects and plants depend on one another, sometimes in the most unexpected and intricate ways. The manner in which nature has evolved to create these fine balances of interdependence is a fascinating and humbling subject. We are a part of nature as nature is a part of us.

8) *Being up on a vantage point and looking out over pristine 'as God made them' landscapes.* At Singita we believe that the preservation of wilderness needs to be our primary goal. With the world population increasing and the demand for land intensifying, these pristine landscapes will become ever more special and sought after.

9) *Rhino.* I love the rhino's lumbering gait (with the tail curled up when they run), their placid nature (when left undisturbed!), their bad eyesight (which often causes them confusion), the sloppy munching sound when they feed and loud slurps when they drink. The way they roll on the mud and rub themselves on stumps. They are gentle giants who go about their business without much regard for other animals - without friend or foe. It is just so sad that, for the sake of greed and false medicinal claims, these beautiful creatures are being persecuted on a scale never seen before.

10) *Sitting around the camp fire.* For hundreds of thousands of years man has gathered around the fire - to cook, talk, tell stories - and this ritual is deeply ingrained in our psyche. There will always be something intensely rewarding about the contentment of an evening around a log fire and the sleep that comes later seems to be a deeper, more relaxed sleep.

For more information go to www.Singita.com.

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