



The peaceful lions are just about to kill a buffalo for dinner. **The not-so-fearful editor in the Land Rover is just about to witness the slaughter.** Sandra Carpenter is a hair's-breadth away from being an involuntary part of the action.

PHOTOGRAPHS BY ROBERT CORKERY AND BOBO OLSSON



Left Heading out to look for the legendary Big Five of the South African safari. Right: Two young male lions stop for a drink while hunting a buffalo.

INTO THE WILD



Silently, our tracker points to the tracks in the dirt from his perch on the front of the Land Rover, then gracefully leaps to the ground to better continue following the trail. Morris walks down the road for a few meters, then disappears into the thick, grassy underbrush.

After a few minutes, he returns and confers with Ralf, our guide and driver. Then we are on our way, following the trail of several lions directly through the bushes, brambles and grass. From his seat Morris periodically gives easy, sure hand signals to Ralf as to which way to turn.

As I hang on to the side of my seat to keep from falling out, I find myself wondering what I am doing on this safari. We are in a roofless, open-air vehicle after all. What protection is that from a hungry lion looking for dinner?

We continue our bouncy trek for a few kilometers, then suddenly see two female lions directly in front of us.

So close.

Too close.

Just a few meters away.

Heart pounding.

I lean far back in my seat, somehow vainly think-

The bare-bones but stunning landscape of the Timbavati, bordering on Kruger National Park.

We are not to leave our huts after dark without a gun-toting guide.

ing that the miniscule extra distance will help.

This is day one, morning one of my first-ever safari, deep in the bush. More specifically, I am in the Timbavati, bordering on Kruger National Park, together with 20 friends. We are all in South Africa for a wedding, and the safari is the bonus on top of all the fun. Most of us have never experienced anything like this before.

AFTER A LONG DRIVE FROM JOHANNESBURG, we had arrived at Motswari, a private game reserve, the night before. As we got closer to our destination, we are reminded that we are not home in Scandinavia: we travel past an endless parade of impalas, zebras, baboons, elephants and giraffes. It's *Animal Planet* come to life outside my window.

On arrival, the men who will be our guides and trackers over the coming days greet us. They have shotguns. And we quickly learn they have them for a reason. There are no fences around our huts, and animals of all sorts freely wander through, both day and night. One tracker tells us that he just passed a pair of elephants on the way to meet us, while another says that a leopard was wandering through camp last night.

If they are trying to make me nervous, it's working. Because of the abundance of wildlife, we are told "the rules": while we are free to wander the immediate area of the camp during the day, we are

not to leave our huts after dark unless accompanied by a gun-toting guide. So come dinnertime, we wait for a guide to circle the camp to round us all up like kids going on a school outing.

The novelty of it all just heightens my anticipation. This is one of those dream-come-true trips for me. Since first falling in love with Hemingway's and Karen Blixen's stories as a teenager, I have been keen to see safari life. While I did not want to shoot anything, I wanted to have the whole big game experience: the tents, the campfire talk in the evening, the daytime tracking expeditions where I would see exotic animals and stunning landscape. And now it was all happening.

THE 5 AM WAKE-UP CALL for the safari comes way too early the next morning. Our group piles into the open-air Land Rovers to discover the fabled big five – the lion, rhinoceros, African elephant, leopard and African buffalo. Although it's summer, the air is cool, and we wear jackets to ward off the morning chill. There's a lovely softness to the purples and blues of the early morning sky that contrasts beautifully with the golden yellow grass – somehow the landscape looks like a painted movie backdrop.

We set off down a road of sorts – more of a dirt trail, really – that borders on Kruger National Park. Fairly quickly, about 20 impalas gracefully

Safari day one, morning one: we watch a pair of female lions bring down a huge buffalo which the cub here has just had a meal of. The scene is terrifyingly real and mesmerizing all at once.



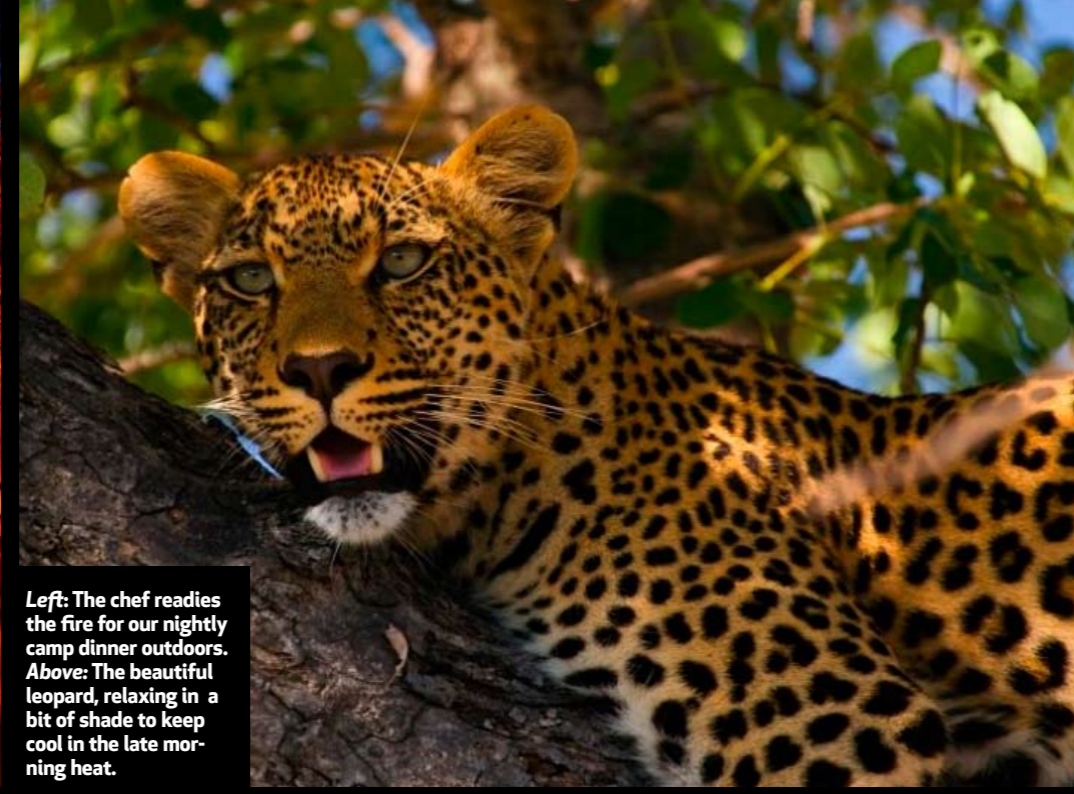
run across the road in front of us and then stop to graze alongside our vehicle.

"Impalas are called the McDonald's of the bushveld as they provide food for everyone," Annelie tells us. "Plus, they have a McDonald's M shape directly on their backsides!" Since she's the daughter of a South African hunter, we figure our newlywed knows what she is talking about.

Just as rapidly, we see zebras ahead of us. They are too cool in their stripes, more beautiful in the wild than in the zoo settings where I've seen them in the past. And then of course, we encounter the family of lions.

Just as we pull up, the lionesses are trying to bring down a huge buffalo for their Sunday dinner. One of the lions is hanging by her claws and teeth onto the backside of the buffalo. With a horrible call of distress, the buffalo suddenly charges toward us to rid himself of the lion. Simultaneously, Morris smoothly leaps from his front perch into the front seat of our Land Rover.

The smell of blood is thick in the air, as well as a strong, wild aroma that I come to decide is literally fear. The cries of the buffalo regularly break the stillness of the scene. But the lionesses are working as a well-practiced team, and even though the buffalo is far larger, they are wearing him down, continually attacking him from the rear, safely keeping away from his horns. It's both horrifying and fasci- →



Left: The chef readies the fire for our nightly camp dinner outdoors. Above: The beautiful leopard, relaxing in a bit of shade to keep cool in the late morning heat.



Above: The swimming pool at Motswari overlooks the riverbed and watering holes, making it a perfect spot to see wildlife in action throughout the day.



Above: A water-hole in the bush by early morning light. Below, left: A pregnant zebra gives us a backward glance. Right: Our camp rations could hardly be considered roughing it.



nating all at once – much like viewing a car crash – and I see the scene unfold before me in disbelief, not quite able to fathom that this is actually live in front of me and not on the television screen. I turn away periodically, struggling to understand the astonishing events.

“There are three hungry cubs who have not eaten in a while who will dine well tonight,” says Ralf quietly, trying to help alleviate our stress.

We are so close to the action that I fear we will be part of the action. After some minutes – maybe two, maybe 20 – the buffalo falls down with a terrified and wild look in his eye. We watch the surreal scene until our reverie is broken by the sound of other safari jeeps approaching. Since we were the first vehicle on the scene, we pull away to let others have a view as safari etiquette calls for only two jeeps at a time on the scene.

As we do so, we encounter the majestic male of the pride, lounging in the sand of the riverbed as his women do all the work to make dinner for the family. As his gaze meets mine, I feel the cold threat of his golden eyes. His look says: come near me and I’ll kill you. And I don’t doubt that he means it.

LEAVING BEHIND THE LIONS, Ralf sets up camp for a morning tea. Feeling equal parts subdued and excited, we watch him set up a table, complete with tablecloth, tin mugs, coffee, tea, juices and biscuits. It’s hard not to miss the contrast of civilization against the wild scene we’ve just witnessed. As we regain a bit of equilibrium, we celebrate the morning’s sightings as happily as if we were successful big game hunters.

“You are lucky to get to see a kill at all, let alone on your first day,” Ralf tells us. “Most people don’t get to see one. And especially of a lion killing a buffalo. Typically, people will see lions kills zebras, impalas and warthogs.”

Our guides and trackers know many of the animals in the reserve like you would know a close neighbor, with intimate knowledge of when they last had a meal, what it was, where they like to hang out and even of the battles they have fought. As we are filled in on lion gossip, Morris leaves for a while to trace a leopard’s track.

And it is only 10 am.

Back at the lodge, we sit on the veranda overlooking the dry riverbed, swapping stories and sharing photos of our morning adventures. From our elation, you would think that we had done the tracking and made a kill like a big game hunter. A family of warthogs – so ugly and bizarre-looking they are kind of cute – wanders up from the riverbed to graze on the grass in front of us. Mom, dad and three babies are as close as the next table. They are truly crazy looking creatures with wild hairstyles and tusks. And they are completely oblivious to us as they eat.

We watch two elephants just across the dry riverbed from our seats on the veranda. One is eating grass; one is bathing. With his trunk, the bather

reaches down into the water and then lifts the trunk to fling water over his backside first. Then he gets more water and sprays underneath, coating himself with mud and water to cool off in the heat of the day. Systematically, he alternates between his back and belly over and over again, reminding me of a kid playing with the hose on a hot summer day.

“He’s coating himself with sunscreen,” says Tabie, another of the guides.

It’s crazy to be able to watch this from our perches on the veranda, cool drinks in hand.

In fact, Motswari Game Reserve, where we are staying, feels a bit like a scene from *Out of Africa*. Somehow, the stop for tea in the morning fits perfectly into my literary vision of this place. And the mosquito netting around the bed only adds to that romantic vista.

AT NOON, WE TAKE A BUSH WALK across the riverbed with Ralf and Tabie. As we walk single file with a guide in front and a tracker at the back, each holding a gun, I feel even more exposed than in the jeep. I can’t help but think that I would have been better off to have a siesta back in the room rather than to trek in the sweaty, sweltering afternoon stillness.

We follow elephant, baboon and the ever-present impala tracks, but don’t encounter any living creatures in the midday sun. The buzz of the heat reminds me of the phrase only mad dogs and Englishmen go out in the midday sun. But as our group consists of two Swedes, one Finn, two Germans, one Australian and one American, we don’t quite fit the origin part of the bill. Given what we are doing, I think the mad part may be a reality.

At 4 pm, we head out on the evening safari. There’s a different feel to the light and landscape at this time of the day. The colors are brighter and more intense, and the animals are just beginning to venture back out from their shady and cool afternoon spots.

As we pull up to catch the progress of the lion kill, the smell of blood and death is overwhelming. Immediately, I see that the area looks different. Where before it was wild bush, now a path has been made to the scene, courtesy of the safari vehicles eager to give guests a sighting. The lionesses are covered in blood, working on the backside of the buffalo, who lucky for him is no longer alive. One of the females is ripping out the spinal cord. The sound of the lions eating flesh is something I cannot quite fathom – a teeth gnawing, pulling, ripping sound.

It’s nature, I tell myself again and again.

As we drive away, there is a male elephant on the road ahead of us. It doesn’t move. Instead, he stays planted in front of us, trunk swaying, blocking our progress, menacing. We’ve been told stories of elephants charging vehicles like ours, even knocking them over. So I am happy when we detour off the road to avoid a confrontation.

At sunset, we meet up with the other two vehi-

There’s a lovely softness to the early morning sky— somehow it looks like a movie backdrop.



Above: An elephant has a mud bath to keep cool, flinging water over his back and then underneath to his belly using his trunk. Not only practical, the process also looks fun.



Left: The outside verandah and bar area from where we regularly see a parade of wildlife, including the warthog (right) and his family, who stop to dine on the lawn.

cles from our group for a sundowner. The tables and tablecloths come out again, as do the makings of a mini bar in the bush. I opt for the malaria “cure” of a gin and tonic. And we sample some biltong – dried beef – South Africa’s version of beef jerky. The colors in the sky change from blues to deep purples, and I am completely happy.

The next morning, we are seasoned safari track-

SAFARI ODD FACTS

WHERE Motswari Game Reserve is located in Timbavati, South Africa, on the western edge of Kruger National Park. It is part of the Greater Kruger National Park Conservancy, and no fences separate the reserve from Kruger.

SIZE Timbavati is 680 square kilometers.

CLIMATE In the summer, temperatures reach up to 30 degrees Celsius. (Remember that seasons are swapped in the Southern Hemisphere.) Optimal visiting time is April to September due to cooler temperatures and foliage not being as dense.

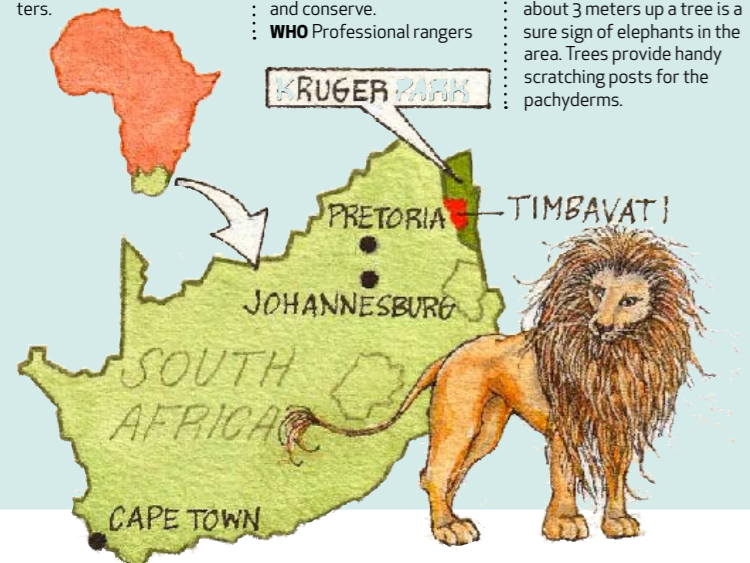
WHAT In the local language, Motswari means to keep and conserve.

WHO Professional rangers

and Shangaan trackers guide our early morning and early evening drives.

SAFETY As long as you stay seated in your Land Rover, you provide no threat to the wildlife. Stand up, and you are not part of the rover pack, but a dominant figure on your own.

THE SIGNS Shredded bark about 3 meters up a tree is a sure sign of elephants in the area. Trees provide handy scratching posts for the pachyderms.



ers. By now it’s become commonplace to see the impalas, zebras and warthogs. Just yesterday, these sightings were enough, but now we need more. And more we soon get. We see a spitting cobra, kudu, duiker, giraffes, mongoose, orb spiders. Directly, we start on the trail of a leopard. Tabie’s vehicle found the track, and he is in radio relay with our guide, giving directions as to where to travel off road, bouncing over dried brush and trees.

Suddenly, the magnificent cat is there in the tree above us, casually lying on a branch few meters above, paws dangling. She is not at all worried that a pair of safari vehicles filled with tourists is gawking up at her, cameras pointed at her like paparazzi at Britney Spears.

She keeps her composure and while this young female has a casual pose, she is also pointedly alert. With her tail gently wagging and hanging below the branch, she surveys the distance, keenly aware of all that is around her, seemingly ready to pounce in an instant – hopefully not into our Land Rover. In the late morning sun, she is content to lie on her shady branch.

“Leopards are the best climbers,” Ralf tells us. “Much better than the lions, who can be a bit clumsy. The leopard’s body is built for running and endurance.”

This is the most beautiful creature I’ve seen yet, with her spotted coat and intelligent-looking eyes. Part of me would like to pet her like a house cat. But her easy demeanor belies the hunter she is.

“She’ll eat anything she can catch, including young warthogs, mice, rats and guinea fowl,” says our guide.

Fascinated, I don’t want to leave.

But in our quest to see still more wildlife and complete our sighting of the big five, we continue our tracking. After some conferring between guides,

we find a white rhinoceros. This is an amazingly huge animal – 2.5 tons we’re told – and he’s just lying under a bush to keep cool in the sun. He looks enormous and somehow lazy, not frightening at all, although I know he can be. Two red-billed oxpeckers are sitting on his back, eating ticks from the enormous expanse of rhino flesh. Amazingly, this guy eats about 60 kilos of grass every day. But it’s his ears that are fascinating to look at: somehow, they look just like Shrek’s.

Still later, we come across some baboons running and playing along an old dam wall. They are extremely shy and run off as we approach. Just below us in the water, hippos are wrestling. “They are among the most aggressive of all animals and generally regarded as the most dangerous in all Africa,” Ralf tells us. “They kill more people than any other animal.”

And in spite of their enormous size, these bulky animals can run fast. In the water, they sink to the bottom and then charge, running up to eight kilometers per hour. Once they hit land, they can reach speeds from 30 to 40 kilometers per hour. It’s hard to imagine. All we see are dozens of pairs of eyes, intently watching us, while their bodies remain submerged to keep cool.

OUR EVENING SAFARI IS BUSY. We see bushbuck, buffalo, crocodiles, a black-breasted snake, an eagle with beautiful black and white wings, and giraffes. Bird life is abundant: we encounter a brown snake eagle, a marabou stork and much, much more.

When we go back to the lion kill, the cubs are literally inside the bull carcass, cleaning out the insides with only their backsides and tails hanging out. The sound of gnawing is periodically punctuated by a low growl as one cat moves too close to another’s dinner. The two lionesses are now lying

in the riverbed, stomachs engorged, breathing heavily from the effort of it all.

On our way back to camp, we stop for a barbecue. There are all sorts of meats to choose from: kudu, chicken, lamb, beef. As we are eating, hyenas circle our tables, getting braver and ever closer as the night goes on. I can see their eyes shining in the darkness just beyond us.

Feeling vulnerable and surrounded, I think I am the prey. In reality, the hyenas probably just want my dinner, not me for dinner. Periodically, one female shows her dominance by chasing the others off. The snarling sounds as she does so leave us all on edge.

On our last morning, we are on the track of two young male lions. We find them drinking at a dam. They notice us but continue lapping anyway, intently keeping their eyes on us. Lazily, one mounts the other in yet another show of dominance, back to front.

There is blood on the beach.

“Probably there has been a territorial dispute,” remarks Tabie. “They have been in someone else’s space and been reprimanded by a dominant lion. They are eating a lot now to get as big as possible as soon as possible so they can dominate.”

The lions stand up, intently staring off in one direction. Carefully, they start walking, stalking some unseen prey as we follow in the rover. As we come around them from the other side, we see their quarry – a buffalo. The boys size up the situation for a while. Then the pair just as carefully lie down in the shade to relax out of the midday sun.

The hunt will continue later. □

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