

The magic of Marataba

Charging elephants, fine dining and clear skies — JEREMY JOWELL found them all at Limpopo's Marataba Lodge

THE air is sultry and still as we set off down the dusty road on the late-afternoon game drive. Our guide, Jonathan Spencer, steers the vehicle past zebra spoor and rhino dung, searching for the breeding herd of elephants he saw early this morning. As the sun drops and the light starts to soften, we hear branches cracking in the nearby bushes.

Jonathan stops next to another vehicle and we watch silently as the herd of 40 elephants munch away in the thicket.

"This group includes several of the Tuli elephants who once featured in a Carte Blanche programme," whispers Jonathan. "They were confiscated in Brits after being inhumanely treated by their handlers and brought here to Marakele, which means 'place of sanctuary'. There weren't many tourists so it was a place where they could relax after their ordeal."

Suddenly the matriarch elephant turns to us and charges. She's not happy and in a flash comes crashing through the bushes, trumpeting loudly with ears flapping and trunk extended.

"Let's get out of here," shouts our guide, quickly starting the engine. We speed off in a cloud of dust and when we're out of range, stop and look back to see the other vehicle being chased by the angry elephant. "Was that a mock charge?" I ask Jonathan with my hands shaking.

"Not at all, that was the real thing. She was out to kill."

"Nothing like an elephant charge to wake you up in the late afternoon," he smiles.

Situated in Limpopo just a three-hour drive from Johannesburg, Marataba is the latest addition to the Hunter Hotels portfolio and is a member of the Relais & Châteaux collection of properties. The lodge is situated beneath the Waterberg Mountains on a 23 000ha, malaria-free

private concession, adjoining Marakele National Park.

The Big Five are present as well as a variety of other wildlife, including the endangered roan antelope, and more than 400 species of birds.

Marataba is a combination of ancient African and modern architectural designs. The main lodge, built with glass, indigenous stone and timber, has a spacious lounge, bar, library, business centre and swimming pool.

Accommodation is in 15 luxury tented units with en-suite stone bathrooms, indoor and outdoor showers and private decks overlooking the sweeping plains and river below.

It's midday when we arrive at the gates and hop into the 4x4 for the 20-minute transfer to the camp. "Welcome to Marataba," says Jonathan cheerfully. "It's very hot today but it's still winter so it gets freezing at night. I hope you've got some warm clothes."

At the entrance, we're handed glasses of iced tea and cool face towels. Then we're shown to our luxury tented suite, where chilled champagne awaits us. After lunch, I take a siesta in a hammock at the pool deck. Then it's time for high tea — delicious chocolate cake and banana smoothies.

A few hours later, long shadows slant across the high peaks of the Waterberg as a big red sun drops to the horizon. Stark silhouettes of leafless branches stand out against the purple sky.

The warm glow of dusk disappears and we start heading back to camp. Jonathan speaks with one hand and with the other he flicks on the spotlight and begins searching for nocturnal creatures.

A spring hare freezes momentarily in the beam, then hops off frantically into the bushes. We also spot an aardvark and make out ghostly shapes of giraffe and zebra hovering in the distance.

Jonathan is something of a



OVER THE HILLS: The view across the plains to the Limpopo's Waterberg from one of the luxury tented suites at Marataba Lodge. Pictures: JEREMY JOWELL

celestial expert and points out Mars, Jupiter and Scorpio. He also shows us how to determine due south using the various constellations as points of reference.

It's a clear moonless night and I gaze up to the starry darkness. A satellite streaks past the Southern Cross. Shooting stars whiz through the million lights of the vast Milky Way.

Dinners at Marataba are to be slowly savoured. The five-star cuisine, which includes Moroccan and other African dishes, is expertly prepared by chef Brigitte Rösemann and served either outdoors or in the elegant dining area.

Rösemann studied at the Institute of Culinary Arts in Stellenbosch and then honed her skills by working in London at Rhodes-in-the-Square, a restaurant owned by celebrity chef Gary Rhodes. Then followed stints at upmarket guest-

houses and restaurants in SA, and a six-month job as chef on a luxury yacht in the Mediterranean.

"Here at Marataba, we try to move away from the buffet and boma-style cooking," she says.

"I love to experiment, and being out in the bush means that sometimes I cannot get the ingredients I want, so often I improvise and try new dishes."

"I've always been creative and working here I have the opportunity to express myself on a plate."

Starters tonight are a choice between cauliflower and cheddar soup or smoked salmon terrine with roasted beetroot salad and horseradish cream. Main course is either deboned quail with a fig and thyme filling or blackened kingklip with potato rosti and zucchini, served with a mild chilli and coconut sauce.

After a good night's sleep, we set out on an early game drive and immediately see several warthog and wildebeest. As we drive across Takadu Plains, Jonathan points into the distance. A white rhino and her calf are coming our way.

The pair runs towards us and

crosses the road close to our vehicle, with the baby leading the way and mother bringing up the rear for protection.

Further on we find two bull elephants, but unlike the breeding herd last night, these tuskers are totally relaxed and don't bat an ear as we park just 15m away. One crosses his hind legs in a nonchalant pose and flicks his tail at some bothersome flies.

To cap off a perfect morning, we catch sight of a cheetah teeming himself on a faraway termite mound before stretching and walking in our direction, heading

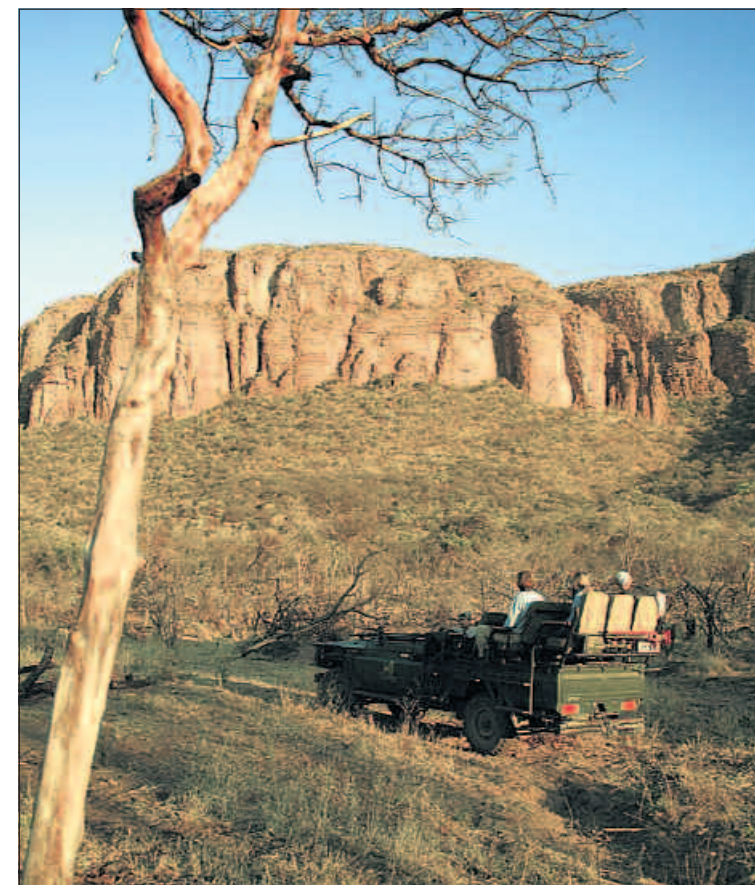
for the shade of some bushes. We're also lucky to see two bat-eared foxes, easily identifiable by their large, parabolic ears. The bat-eared fox is usually nocturnal.

Later that afternoon, we drive down the bumpy path alongside the Matlabas River for our final game drive. We stop to watch a pod of hippos grunt and wallow in the shallows.

With the light fading fast, we continue to Fish Eagle Dam for sundowners, where we sit in the silence, sipping our gin and tonics as the colours slowly fade to purple and grey.



MOTHERLY LOVE: A white rhino calf on the run, with the mother bringing up the rear for protection.



MOUNTAINS' MAJESTY: Sundowners as the sun sets over the Waterberg.

WEEKENDER SPECIAL

The writer was hosted by Marataba Lodge. Marataba Lodge is offering the following special for Weekender readers: R1 950 per person per night, valid until December 15.

The price includes full board and all game drives and taxes, but excludes beverages. Readers may only book within seven days of the date of their stay. Call (044) 532-7818 or visit www.hunterhotels.com

BOOK + TRAVEL

A travel guide with added fauna and flora

ATLAS OF NATIONAL PARKS AND RESERVES OF SOUTH AFRICA
Mariëtte Renssen
MapStudio

THERE are coffee-table books (a very over-subscribed South African literary genre); and there are atlases and maps, which tend to be boring but necessary. It's rare to find a book that can combine interesting reading, great photos, excellent maps, and everything you're ever likely to need to know about our national parks and reserves: this is that rare book.

Because this is essentially a reference book — and small enough (though only just) to always keep in the car — the editorial content is kept short and to the point, never gushy or overblown. But because it's more than just a "guide", it has enough mouth-watering photographs (that never engulf a page) to make

it readable rather than just something to refer to.

The book gives detailed coverage of more than 250 parks and reserves — but not so detailed that reading it actually cuts into your travelling time. It's accurate, easy to read, informative without overloading you with unimportant trivia, and attractive without attempting to "sell" you on any particular destination.

The book kicks off with an overview of the region's parks with an eminently readable double-page spread that indicates malaria areas; adventure capitals; which side of the road you're expected to drive on in each country; and the like. Then the book is divided into SA's provinces, and the page numbering at the bottom is colour-coded so you can easily look up parks by the province of your choice.

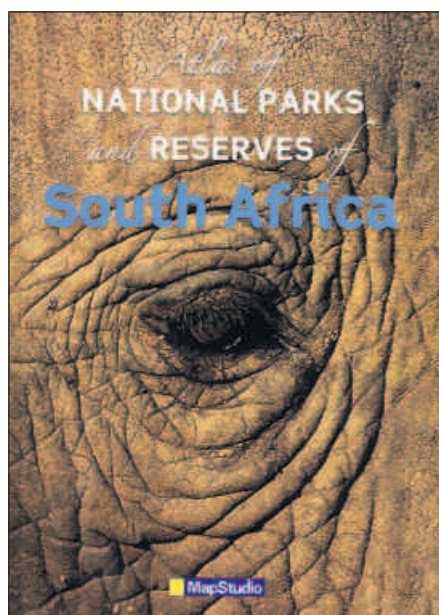
Parks are given two pages where necessary: one for editorial;

photographs and an information bar detailing the nearest large towns; fauna and flora; contact details; opening times, and other important facts. The facing page is for a detailed map.

The second half of the book begins with touring maps with an idiot-proof legend and distance charts, covering everywhere from Cape Agulhas to the Zimbabwe border.

Next up are 15 street maps with the same easy-to-read legends. These are of the major towns and cities you're likely to encounter en route to the parks, from Pretoria to Upington.

Finally the book gives an overview of the surrounding countries of Namibia, Botswana, Zimbabwe and Mozambique. These are, again, kept to a simple map, the "top town" of the region,



"five big facts", "10 great adventures" to be had there, and a brief breakdown of the fauna and flora of each country.

This is the kind of book that's likely to be coveted by friends wanting to plan their travels so it's advisable to cover it in plastic and keep a list of people to whom it's been loaned. It's also the perfect gift as we approach the "travelling season" for those prone to upping and going at a moment's notice.

KATY CHANCE

GEAR TO GO

Vintage steel

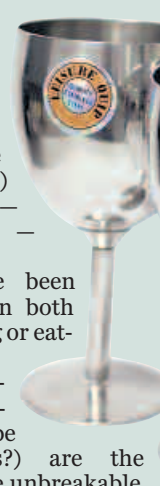
LET's face it, life is too short to drink bad wine. It's also too short to drink wine (good or bad) from plastic or — heaven forbid — polystyrene.

Yet I have been offered wine in both when travelling or eating *en plein air*.

These stainless steel goblets (can they be called glasses?) are the answer. They're unbreakable, like plastic, but considerably more elegant and stylish than drinking from Tupperware.

They'll also keep wine cooler than glass or polystyrene. And they're unlikely to end up as toxic waste littering our landscape as so many polystyrene containers do.

The range includes plates and bowls too, which adds a



little bling to any picnic.

At R25 the goblets aren't that cheap (you can get handmade glasses for that price) and make sure you choose a pair that are both straight — I spotted a few off-kilter, half-pissed ones at the back, but they're likely to last and are easy to wash.

Keep a couple permanently in your cooler box or in the back of the 4x4 so that drinking in the bush (or at Zoo Lake or Kirstenbosch) retain a suitable savour faire.

If that isn't on your travel itinerary, they're handy for sundowners in the backyard too. Available at selected Pick 'n Pay stores.

KATY CHANCE