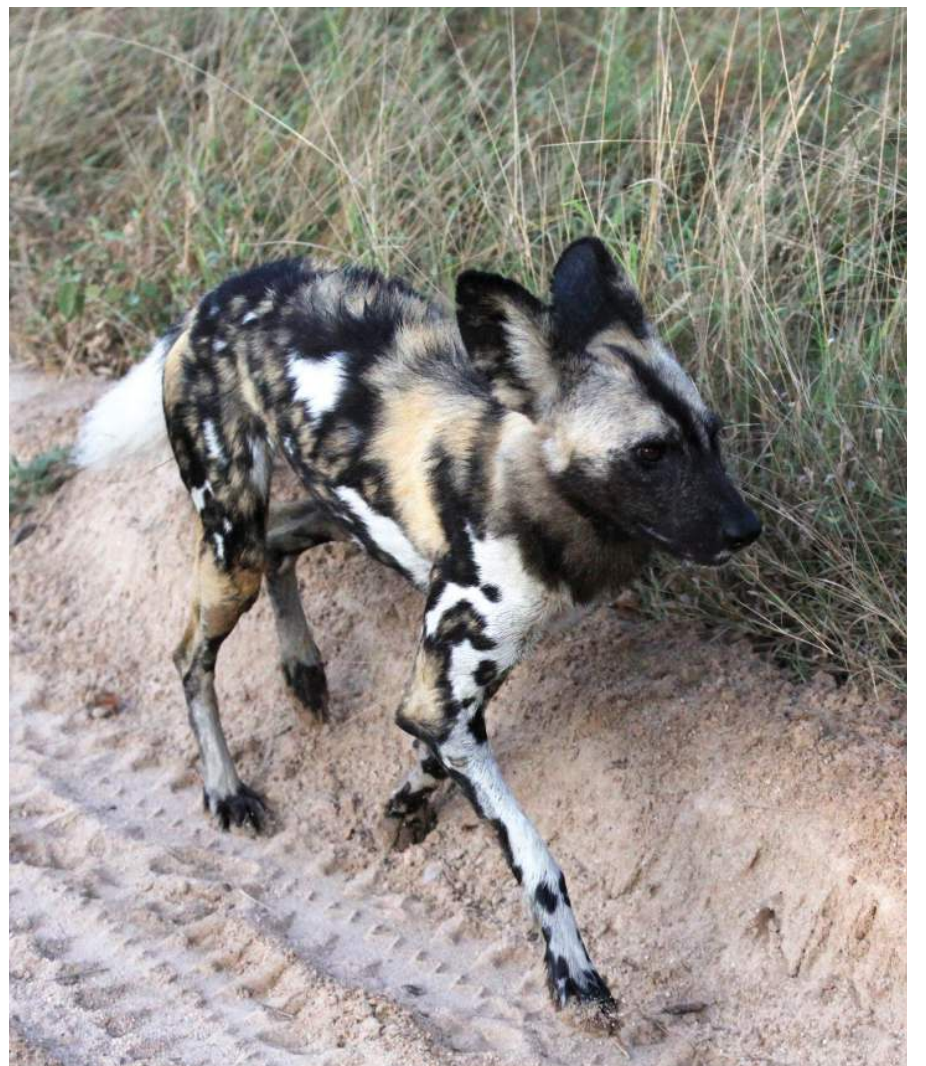


Sabi Sand's Arathusa Safari Lodge



PHOTOS BY DAVE GIBSON

Predators and prey

Top, left; A black-backed jackal gnaws on a kill. Top, right; A leopard with a nicked muzzle received while defending her territory. Bottom, right; Wild dogs make kills on 80% of their hunts. Bottom, left; A blue wildebeest. Lower middle, left; A 3-month-old baby white rhino. Upper middle, left; A young impala hides in the grass. Upper middle, right; The king of beasts lets out a roar.

Dave Gibson South Africa

Following a 120-mile, four-hour, road transfer from Notten's Bush Camp to Arathusa Safari Lodge in the northern section of Sabi Sand Game Reserve, I had 15 minutes to prepare for the afternoon game drive. With just enough time to organize my camera gear and lock my travel papers, passport, and wallet in the room safe, my initial impressions of the lodge would be brief. All of the thatched roof bungalows have lovely views facing the water and are smartly decorated. My suite at Arathusa was newer and more spacious than my previous accommodations; the extra \$200 a night seemed well spent. If it were any fancier, I probably wouldn't have felt comfortable. I can't imagine what another \$1,000 to \$1,500 per head per night at the upper end lodges could

possibly buy.

We drove across a dam that had been built in the days of ranching over 75 years ago. A monitor lizard poked its head out from the grass by the water's edge. Just beyond it, a crocodile basked on a bank displaying its pointed rows of sharp teeth. A vibrant blue and gray woodland kingfisher sat perched on a branch.

Around the bend, we came across the Talamati lion pride lounging by the side of the dirt road. Their members at the moment include: two females, four sub-adult females, one male, one sub-adult male, and one cub. The cub was nursing and not showing itself so we moved on. We would check back in with them later in the safari.

After receiving a call on the radio, my guide turned to me with a twinkle in his eye and said, "I have something good for

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Sabi Sand's Arathusa Safari Lodge



PHOTOS BY DAVE GIBSON

In the African bush

Above; Members of the Talamati pride. Right; A crocodile near the lodge basks in the sun. Bottom, right; A rambunctious lion cub scouts its surroundings.

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you.” Arathusa sits in the middle of five other concessions and guides from each of them share access to their sightings.

I hung on as we raced away at breakneck speed until we reached a pack of wild dogs! Comprised of approximately ten individuals, they combed the forest in pursuit of prey. All we could do to keep up with them was to anticipate their direction and intercept them at one of the roads that crisscross the terrain. When wild dogs hunt, they are successful in making a kill 80% of the time. Knowing there would more than likely be bones to eat, hyenas followed them. The alpha female dog was visibly pregnant and would make a den and give birth to around a dozen pups in about a month. As the crepuscular sky darkened, we met up with the wild dogs merely seconds after they killed an impala. Already tearing it apart, a tawny eagle gave out a cry as it swooped low over the grisly scene. We would see wild dogs twice more during my stay at Arathusa.

The next morning brought a leopard well-known to the rangers and trackers named Xidula and her three-month-old cub. Having lost the two other cubs of her litter, she seemed particularly attentive with this one. They pawed at each other playfully and the cub bounced around investigating as it went.

Lunch was served by the lodge overlooking the reservoir that held a couple of hippos. Two impalas sparred on the other side amongst waterbuck and yellow-billed hornbills snatched bits of food left on the serving table. That evening for supper, the first course of impala carpaccio defined gourmet

dining.

We saw a mother white rhino and her three-month-old calf bathed in the golden light of late afternoon. At the beginning of the 20th century, there is estimated to have been half a billion rhinoceros in Africa. Today, there are 15,942 white rhinos and 6,195 black rhinos still alive in the wild. South Africa holds 80% of the world's white rhino population and 30% of the black rhino population. Driven by the illicit traditional Asian medicine trade in rhino horn, rhinos are slaughtered for their horns made mostly of keratin that provides absolutely no health benefits. Poaching has spiked alarmingly in the last decade, with the rhino suffering heavy losses. As a last resort to save the two species, beginning in 2022, a decision was made to dehorn the animals once every year in South African parks and reserves. In Sabi Sand Game Reserve at least, the strategy appears to be working, recording 20 instances of poaching in 2021, one in 2022, and none so far this year.

The next day we spent time completely surrounded by a herd of Cape buffalo. With members of all ages, they contentedly grazed and chewed their cud while yellow-eyed oxpeckers rode on their backs ridding the beasts of ticks and other insects. We later witnessed lions feeding on a buffalo kill. Most of them had grossly protruded bellies, having already gotten their fill.

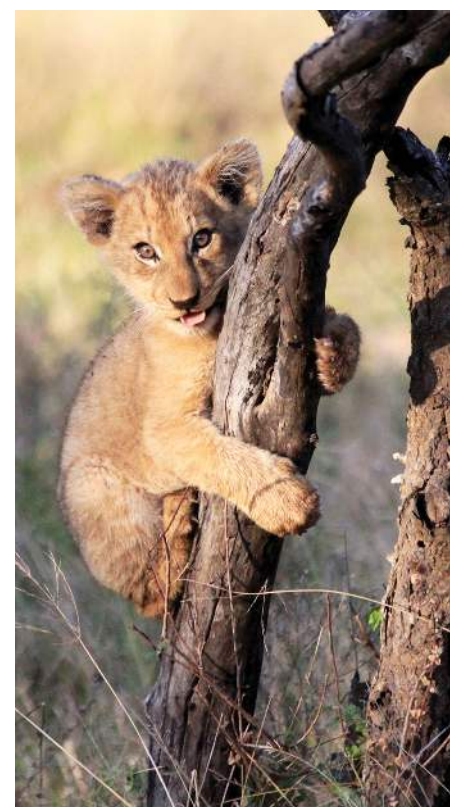
Further along, we came across a headless impala cached high in the branches of a tree. A two-year-old leopard had put it there and was sitting at the tree's base. At once out of nowhere, another leopard appeared and chased the



first leopard away. The first leopard was the daughter of the second and she had blatantly encroached on her mother's territory. With an abundance of leopards in the reserve, the animals are constantly testing each other's boundaries. That night we followed a male leopard thrashing at the bushes with its forelegs and chest to spread its scent. It answered the roar of another male leopard in the distance. Other night drives produced black-backed jackal, a genet, and a rare African wildcat.

Of all the animals observed while on safari, perhaps the most enjoyable are the babies. Cute as can be, swathed in soft gray fur, a one-month-old hyena cub stayed close to its mother's side at the entrance of their den built in a termite mound. Not far from there, a knot of lions dozed the morning away. It was the Talamati pride that we'd seen on our first game drive. Nothing was happening until the cub began to stir. Crawling over its mother onto the next lion, it was ready to play and explore every square inch of its environment. A stick lying on the ground became something to chew on. The tail of another lion made an outstanding toy.

One by one the other lions came to as the gregariously rambunctious cub made contact with each of them, sometimes pawing at their faces and at other times launching a surprise attack. Swept gently away with a paw, undeterred, the cub boldly charged again. If the irrepressible



young rascal made it into adulthood, it was quite obviously destined to be a terror. Climbing a short distance up a tree to scan its new playground, the other lions of the pride kept a close eye on the cub, and seemed as amused by its antics as we were.

For more information about Arathusa Safari Lodge, go to www.arathusa.co.za. To view past articles and photos, see www.davegibsonimages.com.