

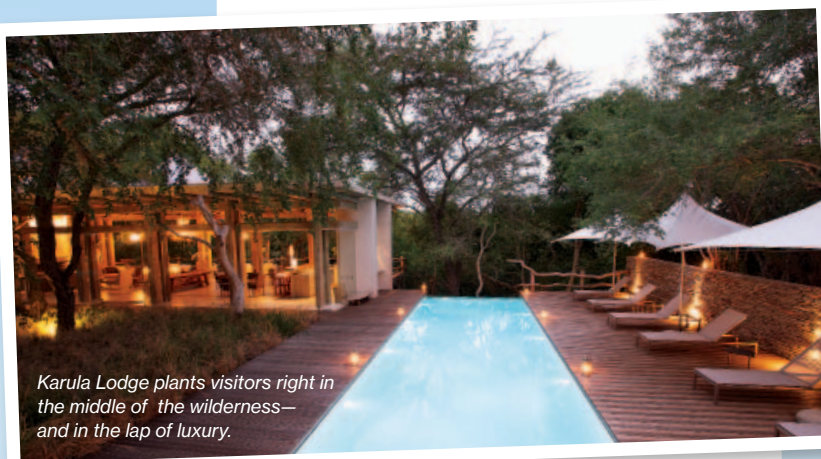
VACATION OF A LIFETIME

African Dream

OUR WRITER SETS OUT ON A SOUTH AFRICAN SAFARI
AND SOON FINDS HERSELF SMACK DAB IN THE MIDDLE OF
HER VERY OWN VERSION OF "THE LION KING."

BY COLLEEN FRIESEN

The 12,800-hectare Kapama Private Game Reserve, just below Greater Kruger National Park, is home to thousands of roaming animals. Zebras share the Bushveld with giraffes, lions, warthogs and hippos.



Karula Lodge plants visitors right in the middle of the wilderness—and in the lap of luxury.

Shadows twist and scatter as our Land Cruiser speeds through the Bushveld. Mike, our safari driver, holds the wheel in his right hand, the radiophone in his left. Using a voice too low to hear, he talks in urgent tones.

Thully, the wildlife spotter, has a tight grip on either side of his chair, which is affixed to the front bumper. His hands appear waxen in the cold South African moonlight. His clenched fingers make his knuckles shine bright and smooth.

Mike slams the phone back on its hook, then takes another hard right. We fly down a different dirt path.

How on earth does Mike tell these dusty roads apart? More importantly, how does Thully stay in that little chair?

It has been only a few hours since our group arrived for a three-day safari stay at the Kapama Private Game Reserve. But Cape Town's city lights and lattes are already very far away, replaced by stars that seem close enough to touch.

Tonight's drive started out leisurely. Kapama's 12,800 hectares, situated just below Greater Kruger National Park, gave us plenty of space to play the safari version of I Spy. Over the course of three hours, spent partly in the deepening nightfall, we spotted giraffes and zebras and collectively gasped at the massive bulk of the rhinos that passed on either side of our open vehicle.

Framed by the distant Drakensberg Mountains, the Bushveld, with its thorny acacias and broken pillars of anthills, has a harsh, flat beauty. It also has a bewitching odour: an exotic, somehow familiar aroma that teases me with my inability to name it. It has a slightly dusty undertone, brightened with a hint of newly mown grass and something like cold smoke. I can conjure no other olfactory memory as captivating. It feels like a remembering. Perhaps a memory buried deep in my DNA—the smell of life's very beginnings in this ancient landscape.

My pondering stops as suddenly as our vehicle.

Another Land Cruiser is parked across from us. It, too, is filled with shadowy shapes in rows of theatre-like seats. Thully and another guide hold bright spotlights on the scene between our vehicles, revealing the reason for our speedy arrival.

"Oh my God," a friend whispers from her seat behind me. "How many do you think there are?"





When You Go

Lion World Tours (lionworldtravel.com) can set up your itinerary.

TO BOOK DIRECTLY with Kapama Private Game Reserve, go to kapama.co.za. There are four lodges to

choose from: Kapama River Lodge, Kapama Southern Camp, Kapama Buffalo Camp and Kapama Karula. A night in the opulent River Lodge Spa Suite during high season is approximately \$400 to \$500 per night, but prices vary throughout the year.

The main North American gateways to Johannesburg are from New York and Washington, D.C. (via South African Airways), and Atlanta (via Delta Airlines). From Toronto and Vancouver, there

may be routes via Emirates Airlines. Alternatively, Air Canada and British Airways fly to South Africa via London, and KLM flies via Amsterdam.

KAPAMA RIVER LODGE picks up guests in Hoedspruit. Flying to Hoedspruit is easy with South African Express.





PHOTOGRAPHY: THINKSTOCK (TOP LEFT)

Mike's answer is barely audible. "Thirteen."

We are less than five metres from a huge, shaggy-maned lion, two lionesses and 10 cubs. Like a visceral form of hearing, I feel their growls in my gut, hear the wet sound of ripping flesh and snapping bones as they bury their golden faces in gore.

A new smell, iron-rich and thick, rises in the steam illuminated by the spotlights. Heat rolls from the bright red ribs of the torn-asunder warthog. One young lion trots past, something hanging, round and heavy, from his jaws.

Another voice comes out of the dark. "What's in his mouth?" Mike's tone is matter-of-fact: "That is the warthog's stomach."

Back at the Kapama Karula Lodge, our group glows in the dancing light of the fireplace. We polish off several bottles of sparkling Pongrácz, South Africa's award-winning answer to Champagne. We repeatedly toast our luck at all we've chanced to witness.

Kapama has four different lodges scattered around its vast terrain. Karula is the best of the bunch. My suite is a Palm Springs mid-century design that's all glass and angles and Flintstone-esque accents, like a one-metre-long giraffe's femur that serves as an improbable handle for the icy-blue glass front door.

We've checked into the best safari resort I can imagine. Not only are we smack dab in the middle of our own version of *The Lion King*, we're seeing it from the vantage of ridiculous luxury. Having just enjoyed front row seats to the survival-of-the-fittest show, then a dinner of ostrich, I go to sleep in a suite bigger than most Vancouver apartments.

Tomorrow, I will discover that my room's espresso machine is a godsend when getting ready for 6 a.m. game drives, and that the stand-alone tub is a perfect way to warm up upon returning from evening outings.

My deck, suspended above the Klaserie River, is a different sort of delight, a place where giraffes on the opposite bank can follow my every move. Still to come: the inexplicable grace of swimming hippos, a hot-air balloon ride, and much, much more. But on this glittering, velvet night, all of that is still to come.

"What," one of my fellow travellers asks, "could possibly top tonight?"

I take another long swallow of Pongrácz.

We have two more fabulous days to unearth the answer I already suspect: plenty. ●



Kapama River Lodge, a nearby sister property, has 40 suites, making it the largest luxury game lodge in the Greater Kruger National Park area.