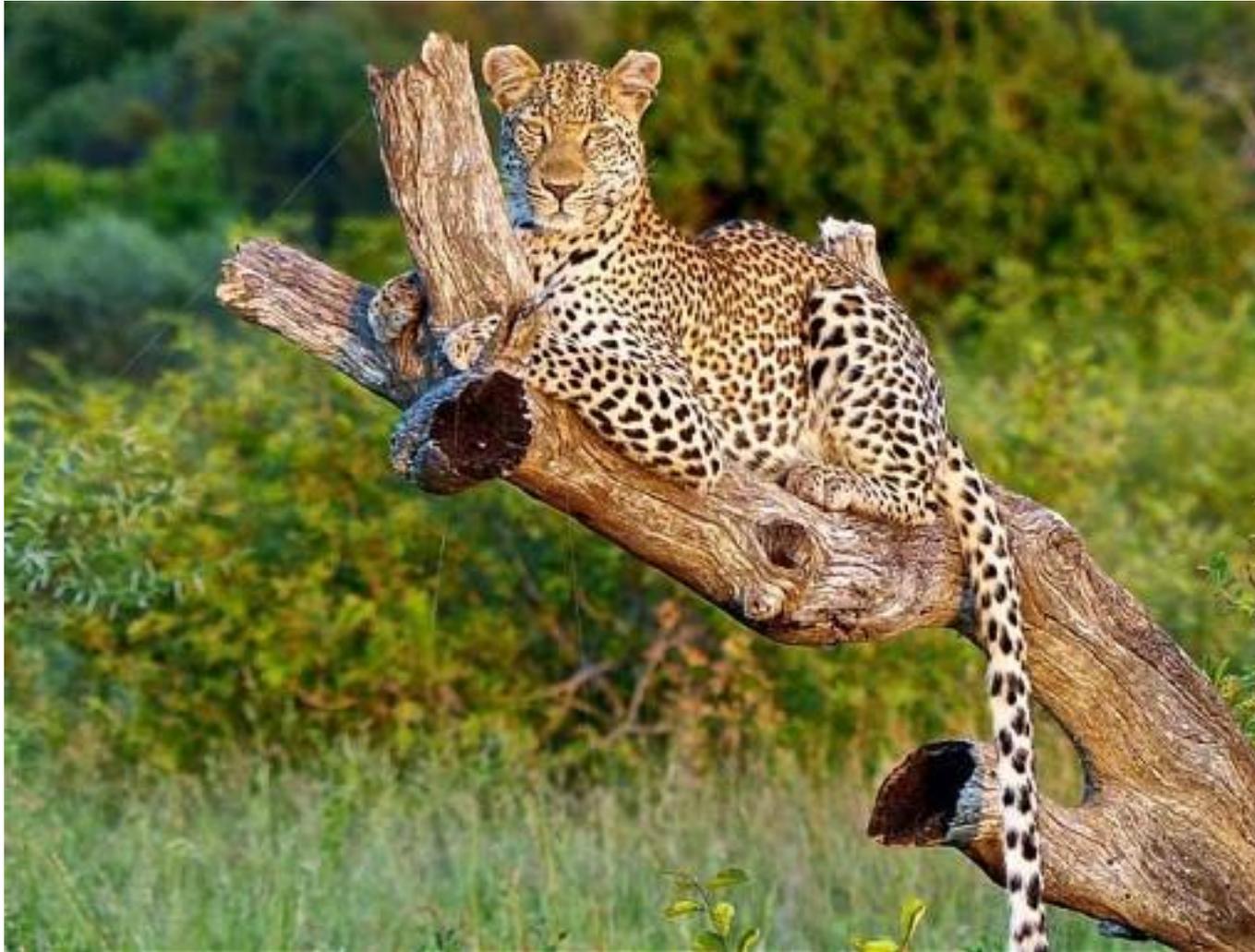


The Bush Telegraph: Cats and meerkats

Some expert tracking ensures that Richard Madden enjoys an encounter with two of his favourite creatures - leopards and meerkats



'Sarah and I have had some memorable leopard sightings during our year in the bush but each and every encounter is unique' Photo: Sarah Madden

By Richard Madden

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Comment

I love cats. I always have and I always will. I admire their sleekness and agility, their sociability and their sheer bloody-mindedness. I love the way they stalk the borderlands between the savage and the unknowable and paws-in-the-air, tummy-tickling, live-in-the-moment hedonism. If the sound track to infinity turns out

to be an eternal purr and heaven is being licked behind the ears by one of those sandpapery tongues, that will be paradise enough for me.

I have been lucky enough to see many different cat species in the wild including lion, tiger, cheetah, serval, caracal, ocelot and wild cat. But when I lie awake at night listening to the sounds of the African bush, the luminous orbs staring back at me from the deepest thickets of my imagination are the eyes of a leopard. So you can understand why my pulse quickened and my heart thumped in my rib-cage when Christoff Ndlovhu, our Shangaan tracker, leapt from his observation seat on the bonnet of our game vehicle, pointed to some distinctive oval indentations in the soft earth, and whispered, "Leopard!"

Sarah and I have had some memorable leopard sightings during our year in the bush but each and every encounter is unique. We have recently been staying at the Singita lodges in the Sabi Sand Reserve in the Kruger National Park on South Africa's border with Mozambique. An isolated slice of wilderness with four distinct ecological zones from riverine grasslands in the west to the rocky ridges in the foothills of the Lebombo Mountains in the east, the reserve is prime real estate for big cats.

"The best trackers don't learn from a book, their skills are passed down from generation to generation," our bush guide, Nick du Plessis, told us. "The Shangaan are taught to track from a young age and Christoff has an instinctive knack for it. He always tells guests there is a difference between looking and seeing. Looking stops you walking into a wall, seeing makes you understand."

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As Christoff put his skills into action disappearing on foot into the bush, we continued our game drive enjoying the lush fecundity of the wet season. Although the dry season (May to September) is peak season for game viewing and the animals around the waterholes are easier to see, there is no competition when it comes to the aesthetic beauty of the bush itself.

Christoff's tracking skills were later rewarded as a five year-old leopardess strode through the long grass around our vehicle in golden evening light before posing like a diva on the dead branch

of a tree just yards from our vehicle. Nick told us later that Christoff had back-tracked the animal's spoor to get a sense of what she was doing and where she was going and his hard work had paid off with a spectacular sighting.

The five Singita lodges in the Sabi Sand have been designed and built by the conservation-driven Bailes family and vary in style from the traditional dark wood and colonial elegance of Ebony Lodge to the contemporary wood, steel and glass of Sweni and Lebombo. The voluminous rooms, the service and the gourmet food, are everything you would expect from an operator at the very top of the safari food chain.

But behind the luxurious trappings, hard-nosed conservation projects are ongoing. One such is K9 Conservation who are working with Singita using tracker dogs in the increasingly vital fight against poaching. More than a thousand rhino were killed in South Africa last year for their horn, up more than 50 per cent on 2013.



Co-run by ex-Londoner, Catherine Corrett and her partner Conraad de Rosner, K9 work with a combination of Weimaraners, German Shepherds and Belgian Malinois. The dogs may look cute but we saw with our own eyes how with just a couple of words of command they can turn from slobbering pooches to snarling attack dogs as Conraad put them through 'bite training', bringing down one of the K9 dog handlers wearing a protective body suit.

"There are many advantages to using dogs," Catherine told us.

“They can’t be bribed and so you always know a dog is 100 per cent honest. They can also track down the incriminating evidence discarded by fleeing poachers that is needed to bring a successful prosecution.”

Watch: The dogs fighting rhino poachers

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And from dogs, it was back to cats again. Well, meerkats to be precise, which aren’t cats at all, of course, but part of the mongoose family. After leaving Singita we flew to Tswalu, the largest private game reserve in South Africa, in the ‘Green Kalahari’ near the border with Botswana. Motse Lodge is a design classic that merges seamlessly into the soft curves of the rust red Kalahari sands. The surrounding bush is carpeted by sage green scrub while the craggy topography and the panoramic horizons resemble a scene from a David Lean epic.

The lodge is surrounded by large herds of springbok, those twinkle-toed mascots of South African athletic prowess, who after the recent rains were in full spring - bouncing on all four legs at a time. There were literally hundreds of them in front of camp alongside doe-eyed nyala, majestic sable and blue-jeaned tsessebe, that most fleet of foot of all African antelopes.

And then there were the meerkat ‘gang’ (surely one of the most apposite of collective bush nouns) which we had tracked for three consecutive mornings at sunrise without success. It was our last morning at Tswalu and Bruce, our guide, was almost crying with frustration.

Meerkats sometimes move den in the middle of the night and, once again, it looked as if we might have missed out.

Watch: The Maddens' meerkat encounter

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But, finally, our perseverance paid off and it was hard to contain our delight as these cartoon action heroes outdid our wildest expectations. A pregnant female had given birth during the night and while her offspring were safely ensconced in their den, the rest of the gang took it in turns between hyper-alert, bipedal, head-swivelling observation duties and sand-scrabbling, bush-scurrying, bug-gobbling refueling operations. In between, they would occasionally stop and study us, heads cocked to one side, before returning to more pressing matters. The crazy gang, indeed.

Sir David Attenborough had recently been filming here, so perhaps our boys had been practising, but after watching them for more than two hours, the alpha male suddenly decided that Sarah would make a good observation post and climbed on to her shoulders.

Sir David may not need to look to his laurels quite yet, but for us it was a moment of pure joy.

Essentials

Richard and Sarah organised their trip through Audley Travel (01993 838 550; audleytravel.com), who offer an eight-day trip including three nights at Singita Ebony and four nights at Tswalu from £6,145 per person sharing a suite. Included in the package are all meals, drinks, laundry park fees, guided activities, all internal flights and taxes, private guided transfers and VIP airside assistance in Johannesburg.

South African Airways (0844 375 9680; flysaa.com) has return flights from London Heathrow to Johannesburg from £642.75pp.

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