

Talking trees and mating leopards: Go on a nature escape in the Sabi Sands

 By [Mareike Pietzsch](#)

17 May 2018

It's 5.30 am. There's a knock on the door.

"Good morning! This is your wake-up call," a friendly voice booms.

"Yes, thank you," I reply in a croaky voice laced with sleep.

I pull on some clothes and wash my face before heading to the Leopard Hills main lounge for a cup of steaming coffee. The air is heavy with dew and birdsong. Our guide at Leopard Hills, Nigel Ridge, starts up the Land Rover engine and Ronnie, our tracker, jumps onto the seat that's fastened next to the bull bar. We're off. Ronnie, who's been at the lodge for over a decade, knows the Sabi Sands Reserve like the back of his hand.



The circle of life

We veer off-road and Ronnie jumps out the car – he's tracking something. We're not sure what, or if it's safe. But a few minutes later he's back and directs us to a pride of young lions: eight males and one female. Their moms have run off to mate with a bossy pride of Kruger cats that have moved into western Sabi Sands. Now the skinny teenage lions are fending for themselves. The weak ones will die unless they kill another buffalo tonight (you can read more about the pride [here](#)). The circle of life. Our ranger says we're not allowed to feed them tins of tuna – I guess that's conservation, right? To watch quietly, and merely observe as nature repeats its cycles and seasons again, and again.

We abandon our plans to feed the lions and continue our game drive. A large herd of buffalo crosses the dirt road. It's easy to differentiate males from females: the males have an extra layer of horn, Nigel explains, which looks like a helmet and protects them during fighting.



Slowly, colours fade from the land as the sun sets. The cats are out hunting.

Feline perfection

Each game vehicle is equipped with a radio system so the rangers, from different lodges within the Sabi Sands, can communicate with each other. Rangers use code words for animals to keep the sighting a secret and avoid disappointing guests. Nigel gets word about a leopard. We find her. She's a metre away from our vehicle, hunting. And there, something jumps out the grass. She's got it between her paws - a francolin. She kills it quickly and starts plucking its feathers. Every now and then she spits out the feathers – her big tongue flashing in our Land Rover's headlamps. Like a domestic kitty, she's perfect, elegant, and beautiful.



On the second day everyone in our group is calmer. The bush has a mysterious way of quietening my soul and slowing down my thoughts. I sit on my private deck, unable to sleep, and watch a line of elephants walking, crashing through the bush with their babies. A nyala male is greedily eating the lush grass nearby with his two females. There are birds and bright-blue lizards and soft air all around. I'm far away from car noises or crowds – it's just me and the bush.

Breakfast picnic

After the game drive, the Leopard Hills team surprises us with an outdoor breakfast overlooking a dry riverbed. Underneath a majestic tree (a special tree with its own story), we feast on croissants, coffee, platters of cheese and cold meats, and scrambled eggs and bacon. After breakfast, Duncan, the lodge manager, proposes a walking safari. I've been sitting in the Landrover for three hours so I'm game (pun intended).

Nigel readies his rifle and we set off. Walking over soft river sand, one by one – like a row of ducklings – it feels like every sound is amplified. A rustle could mean there's an animal close by. A lion? A leopard? My imagination runs wild. Adrenaline is pumping. We're not in the safety of our vehicle, after all. We keep walking in the midday sun, over animal tracks and ochre-coloured earth, brushing past bushwillow (whose flowers make tea) and acacia burkei (with the softest leaves!).



The air is fragrant. Nigel has his gun loaded and we walk slowly, following his hand signals. Every now and again he stops and explains tracks or trees to us. Did you know that some plants, including acacia trees, communicate with each other? They send out a warning when there are giraffes close by and make their leaves bitter as a defence mechanism.

Instagram-worthy leopards

That evening, we go on our evening game drive and see leopards mating. Ravenscourt, one of the most Instagram-worthy leopards, who likes to wander around the lodge occasionally, is being propositioned by a small female. She follows him around his large territory for a couple of days and they mate a few times. It's a man's world for the leopard!



We stop at a river for sundowners. The sky is inky-black and stars dot the horizon. The smells of mud, charcoal and bush fill the air as animal sounds echo in the distance.

It's just me and the night sky. Can I stay here forever?

[Sabi Sands Reserve](#)

[Leopard Hills Private Game Reserve](#)

ABOUT MAREIKE PIETZSCH

I am part of the fantastic marketing team at Giltedge Africa - a brand that is defining luxury travel for Africa, continuously on the lookout to improve its product offering for international travellers. I write content about the tourism offerings in Southern Africa, East Africa and the Indian Ocean islands, new travel trends, sustainable tourism and multi-generational travel.

- Talking trees and mating leopards: Go on a nature escape in the Sabi Sands - 17 May 2018
- A road trip from the Garden Route to the Klein Karoo - 17 Jan 2018

[View my profile and articles...](#)

For more, visit: <https://www.bizcommunity.com>