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Lying in my camp bed with the dawn light streaming in, I listened for the noise that had woken me. At first all I could hear was the everyday chorus of francolins and Cape turtledoves. But there it was again – the most thrilling sound in Africa – a lion roaring its heart out on the banks of the Luvuvhu River.

What better way to start a wildlife safari? And where better than Pafuri, a luxury camp in South Africa's world-famous Kruger national park? Pafuri lies in the Makuleke Concession, the northernmost corner of the park, wedged between the borders of Zimbabwe and Mozambique in an area once known as Crooks' Corner.

In the early days of the twentieth century this was where outlaws and ivory traders could escape their pursuers by simply slipping across the Limpopo from one country to another. Today it is peaceful and law-abiding, but as remote as ever. In the Kruger, the road to Makuleke is the one less travelled. This is where the tarmac runs out and true wilderness begins, among ghostly forests of fever trees and the red rocky gorges of the Lebombo Hills.

### LIONS ON MY MIND

The Kruger has long been renowned for its giant tuskers. Among them was a magnificent old elephant called Ndlulamithi ("Taller than Trees") who roamed the park in the 1920s. The most famous herd of all – the so-called Magnificent Seven – were still around in the 1980s and included such monsters as Mafunyane

("Grumpy"), whose tusks were so heavy they dragged on the ground.

But on the morning when the lion roared I had other things on my mind. "That must be our local pride male," said Andy Shafer, my safari guide, when we met by the campfire for a quick coffee before going out to look for him. We soon picked up his fresh tracks in the dust and followed his trail through a tunnel of caper bushes and flame creeper. Eventually the bush opened out onto a plain called Mangala, and there sat our lion, glowering at us from a grassy knoll, a magnificent specimen in the prime of his life, with a gold mane turning black at the edges.

Later, during my stay at Pafuri, I would see other lions, other animals too; kudu and nyala and herds of elephant with tiny babies, but nothing to match the hauteur of that Makuleke pride male. Nor did I see leopard, although they are present.

But I was not worried. My next stop was at Londolozi, a private game reserve on the edge of the Kruger in the Sabi Sands lowveld, and nowhere else in the world offers you a better chance of finding leopards.

Londolozi is a family-run affair, owned by the Varty brothers, Dave and John, whose grandfather bought it in the days when big-game hunting was all the rage. Nowadays, of course, it is conservation that counts, and over the years Londolozi has come to epitomise the special brand of low-density, high quality ecotourism pioneered by the Vartys, with the welfare of the local Shangaan people always at the forefront of their minds.

Like all the other private reserves in the Sabi Sands

### IN THE KRUGER, THE ROAD TO MAKULEKE IS THE ONE LESS TRAVELLED

**MAIN PICTURE:** Springbok in the Kgalagadi transfrontier park  
**TOP LEFT:** Cape mountain zebra  
**MIDDLE:** a view of the karoo at dusk  
**BELOW:** a magnificent pair of cheetahs

– MalaMala, Singita, Ulusaba – it is quite small by East African standards; but wherever you go the dense lowveld woodland wraps itself around you, preserving your privacy and creating the illusion of endless wilderness in every direction. Furthermore, the game-viewing is out of this world, and a few days at one of Londolozi's stylish and intimate lodges guarantees close encounters with all the 'Big Five' (elephant, lion, leopard, buffalo and rhino).

But it was the leopard that I had come to see, and I was not disappointed. The leopard is the cat that walks by itself. By nature these gorgeous predators are solitary, nocturnal and notoriously shy. Except at Londolozi where they pose for visitors in broad daylight, at rest in the grass or stretched out on the limb of a marula tree with all four legs dangling.

### ALL BASED ON TRUST

The reason for their relaxed behaviour goes back to 1979 when a mother leopard and her cubs were found by rangers. Slowly, over the months that followed, the rangers built up a relationship with the leopard family until in the end they had gained their trust, allowing visitors to observe them.

That bond, once established, was passed on from one generation of leopards to the next and continues to this day, as I discovered earlier this year. Mine was only a brief return visit, only a couple of days, but in that time I still managed to see five leopards, all in daylight and only a few metres from our vehicle, including a mother with two large cubs stalking impala in a thorny clearing.

After the long grass and lush riverine woodlands →



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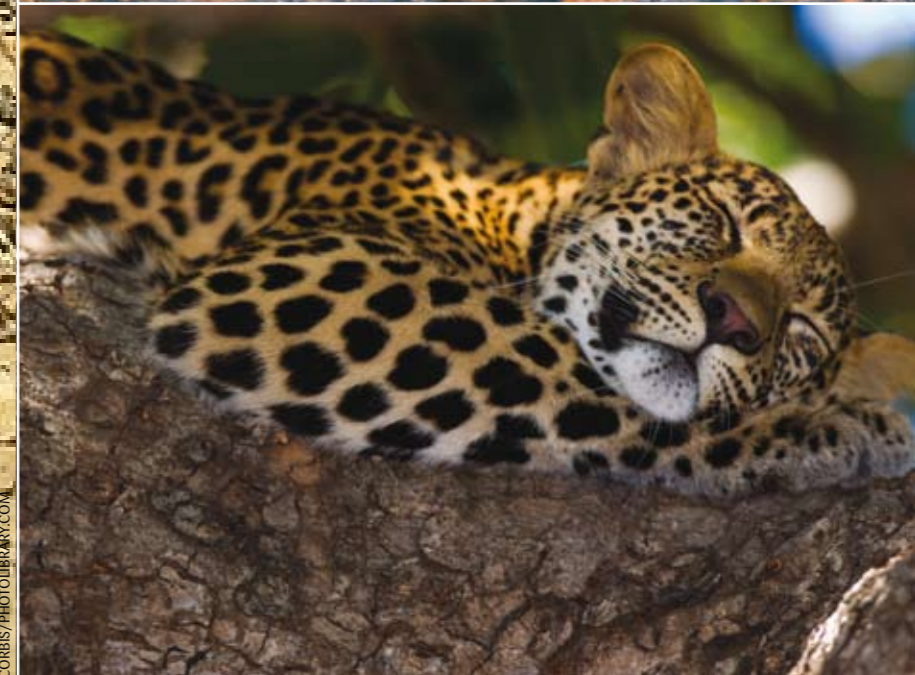




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of Londolozzi, where better for a complete change of scene than Samara? Like Londolozzi, it too is a private game reserve, but the landscape could hardly be more different – or more dramatic.

Samara lies in the Great Karoo, a vast upland desert of burning plains and barren mountains in the malaria-free heart of the Eastern Cape Province. To the south, only a couple of hours away by road, tourists through the Garden Route, the scenic highway that hugs the coast between Cape Town and Port Elizabeth. But most hurry by, unaware of what they are missing in this ancient hinterland of dinosaur bones and prehistoric cave paintings.

Now, with the creation of Karoo Lodge at Samara, that is about to change, and visitors have somewhere to stay that is both gracious and supremely comfortable, with a swimming pool and shady trees and the most sumptuous cuisine you could wish for. Even the picnics at Samara are special, with delicacies such as carpaccio of eland and sandwiches individually wrapped and tied up with blue ribbon.

Samara is the dream of Mark and Sarah Tomkins. He is English, she is South African, and together they

bought a derelict farm in the heart of the Great Karoo. In the ten years that have passed since then they have immaculately restored the original farmhouse, bought another ten farms, torn down the fences and transformed the land into a born-again wilderness whose 70,000 acres they have re-stocked with all the animals that lived there a century ago, including cheetah, white rhino, 15 kinds of antelope and the highly-endangered Cape mountain zebra.

### UNIQUE IN AFRICA

The vegetation is unlike anything you are likely to see elsewhere in Africa. The hillsides bristle with tall mountain aloes and the mountains themselves, rising to 7,000 ft in the Sneeuwberg range, are seldom the same colour for long, changing from hazy blue in the mid-day heat to a cindery orange when the sun passes down.

Options at Samara include searching for the reserve's radio-collared cheetahs, to night drives with a spotlight, looking for nocturnal animals such as aardvarks, jackals and bat-eared foxes. But best of all

**WHEREVER YOU GO THE DENSE LOWVELD WOODLAND WRAPS ITSELF AROUND YOU, PRESERVING YOUR PRIVACY AND CREATING THE ILLUSION OF ENDLESS WILDERNESS IN EVERY DIRECTION**

is a day on Kondo, a flat-topped mountain that soars 2,500ft above the Plains of Camdeboo.

On Kondo's grassy summit Cape mountain zebra cavort across the grass in the company of blesbok and herds of black wildebeest. The air is cooler, the views inexpressibly beautiful, and as you sit there, a glass of chilled Sauvignon in hand, you could be forgiven for imagining this to be the most peaceful place on earth.

For much of the year the Karoo is bare and biscuit-brown; but when I was there in March just after the rains the desert bloomed with a million flowers, and it's the same if you visit Kgalagadi, Africa's first ever trans-frontier park. Formerly known as the Kalahari Gemsbok Park, it lies in the Northern Cape Province straddling the Botswana border, and took its original name from the handsome gemsbok, a desert-proof antelope that can go for months without drinking.

### MADE OF MIRACLES

In the Rainbow Nation of South Africa, red is the colour of the Kalahari dunes – a fiery Martian red deep-etched against the cloudless blue desert skies. For much of the year this is one of the harshest places on earth. The Nossob River, whose bone-dry bed marks

the Botswana border, flows perhaps only once in a hundred years. But when the rains come, mostly in a few fierce storms between December and April, the desert undergoes a miraculous transformation. Pink-and-white vlei lilies spring from the sand. Valleys fill with the yellow flowers of devils thorns and sociable weaverbirds build their haystack-sized nests in the camelthorn trees.

For bird-watchers there are raptors of all kinds, from pygmy falcons to martial eagles big enough to grab a small antelope. As for mammals, the meerkats are the most adorable Kalahari residents, but like everywhere else it's the big cats that most people come to see – in particular the black-maned Kalahari lions.

Yet my most abiding memory of the Kgalagadi Frontier Park is not the lion I saw padding down the Auob valley, but the two male cheetahs that appeared one morning on the banks of the Nossob. Out of the dazzling dawn they strode, backlit among the ripening grasses, heading for the shelter of a solitary camel thorn tree. There, having rubbed affectionately against each other, they sat, one sphinx-like, the other upright, staring into the distance with amber eyes. What an image to take home. →

**MAIN PICTURE: Meerkats, standing on sentry duty – the most adorable Kalahari residents**  
**TOP RIGHT: a vlei lily in bloom in the desert**  
**BOTTOM RIGHT: you can't beat the Sabi Sands lowveld for sightings of leopards**



TOP FIVE SPECIES TO SEE	WHY	WHERE	HOW
 <p><b>LION</b></p>	Africa's largest and most powerful predators. Lions are sociable animals that live in prides of between three and as many as 40 individuals.	Most at home on the plains and savannas. Good numbers in the Kruger and adjoining private reserves, and also present in Kgalagadi Frontier Park.	Listen for their roars. Follow their distinctive tracks. Watch for prey on the alert. And remember; if you see one lion, look for more.
 <p><b>LEOPARD</b></p>	Of all big cats the leopard is the most elusive. Those black rosettes on its sleek coat are the perfect camouflage in dappled shade.	Leopards are widespread but invariably elusive, except where habituated to tourist vehicles at Londolozi and other Sabi Sand reserves.	Listen for their wood-sawing call and look in trees where they love to lie and store their kills out of reach of hyenas.
 <p><b>CAPE MOUNTAIN ZEBRA</b></p>	This rare subspecies was rescued from extinction in the 1930s. Even today only 1,000 or so exist in their few remaining South African strongholds.	Mountain Zebra national park in the Eastern Cape Province was specially created to protect the species and they are now present at nearby Samara.	Take a game drive to Kondoa mountain while staying at Samara for particularly good sightings.
 <p><b>MEERKAT</b></p>	These endearingly hyperactive members of the mongoose family live in social groups. Highly entertaining to watch as they busily forage.	Dry, open country is what suits meerkats best. That is why Samara and the Kgalagadi Frontier Park are such good places to see them.	Watch for them when they leave their den just after sunrise and again after their mid-day rest when they forage until dusk.
 <p><b>CHEETAH</b></p>	The enigmatic cheetah is the fastest animal on earth. Everything from its elegant greyhound chassis to its small head is designed for the chase.	Widespread in South Africa but at low density. Samara and the Kgalagadi Frontier Park are as good as anywhere for seeing them.	Cheetahs are daylight hunters. Look for them at dawn and early evening, or resting at mid-day in the shade of a solitary tree.

**ESSENTIAL INFORMATION**

Kenya Airways ([www.kenya-airways.com](http://www.kenya-airways.com)) has 15 flights weekly to Johannesburg, from where there are regular connections to the Kruger and Londolozi. Samara can be reached by air charter or by road (two hours from Port Elizabeth). The best way to reach the Kgalagadi Transfrontier park is to fly to Upington and hire a car.



**WHERE TO STAY**

**KRUGER NATIONAL PARK**

- \* **TOP END** Pafuri Camp ([www.wilderness-safaris.com](http://www.wilderness-safaris.com))
- \* **MID RANGE** Nottens Bushcamp ([www.nottens.com](http://www.nottens.com))
- \* **BUDGET** Olifants Restcamp (park-run accommodation)

**LONDOLOZI PRIVATE RESERVE**

- \* **TOP END** Londolozi Tree Camp ([www.londolozi.co.za](http://www.londolozi.co.za))

**SAMARA PRIVATE GAME RESERVE**

- \* **TOP END** Karoo Lodge ([www.samara.co.za](http://www.samara.co.za))

**KGALAGADI FRONTIER PARK**

- \* **TOP END** Twee Rivieren Restcamp (park-run accommodation)

**WHAT TO DO**

All the above camps offer vehicle safaris and those in the Kruger, Londolozi and Samara also offer walking safaris. Night drives are offered at Londolozi and Samara and top end camps have swimming pools, as does Twee Rivieren.

**msafiri RECOMMENDS**

South Africa (Footprint Handbooks) [www.footprintbooks.com](http://www.footprintbooks.com)

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