

# Game park with plenty in reserve

Breathtaking lanscape, selected wildlife and natural fauna combine to make Samara the perfect place to get away from it all. Words and pictures by **Jeremy Jowell**

**I**T'S A CALM, clear evening and we dine outdoors, toasting our good fortune to be in such remote and beautiful surroundings. The conversation flows easily, as does the white wine and Jack Daniel's. The main course is grilled kingklip with rice, vegetables and a mustard sauce. I make sure to leave space for the decadent dessert of rich crème brulee.

In the middle of the night I wake and walk onto the stone veranda. There's not a sound until, suddenly, a jackal yelps loudly in the distance. The moonless sky is ablaze with a billion pinpricks of light. Gazing at the Milky Way, I'm lucky to see a brilliant shooting star streak across the dark heavens above the Camdeboo plains.

From Port Elizabeth it's a three-hour drive to Samara Private Game Reserve, where we are welcomed by Andre Nel, our guide for the next few days. "You are staying at the Mountain Retreat which is a 30-minute drive up into the mountains," he says, loading our bags onto his 4x4 vehicle. "It's so beautiful and remote up there, the tranquillity and isolation is complete."

We drive along the bumpy road as the late afternoon light starts to soften, and arrive at the Mountain Retreat after sunset. Oil lanterns light the pathway, where we are offered warm face towels and a cool drink.

The Mountain Retreat has been open to the public only since last December. It offers exclusive use for groups up to 10 people, making it an ideal private getaway for families or friends. The building dates back to the 1860s and consists of two separate homesteads containing five luxury en-suite rooms, a lounge with fireplace, wraparound veranda and dining area. There is no electricity and power is provided by a generator during the day. At night, candles and oil lanterns add to the romance of the retreat.

Measuring 28 000ha, Samara is one of the largest private game reserves in South Africa. It is situated close to Graaff-Reinet, in the malaria-free Camdeboo region of the Greater Karoo. The diverse landscape is breathtaking, and encompasses four of South Africa's seven biomes.

Samara has been a huge success story. In 1998, Mark and Sarah Tompkins bought more than 11 farms and began stocking them with wildlife, concentrating on endangered species like cheetah and Cape mountain zebra.

The lodge has received numerous international accolades. It was voted among the Top 101 Hotels in the World by Tatler, and on three occasions Conde Nast Traveller nominated it among the Top 60 Hot Spots.

Apart from cheetah and zebra, the reserve has a wide variety of game including white rhino, giraffe, black wildebeest, eland, kudu, gemsbok, aardvark, red hartebeest and smaller mammals like vervet monkeys and meerkats.

Activities at Samara include game drives and guided bush walks. There are also visits to fossil sites and well-preserved Bushman paintings.

It's dark and chilly when we wake early the next



The romantic bed at the Mountain Retreat at Samara Reserve.

morning. After coffee and rusks, we set out for a game drive into an eerily thick mist hanging over the plains.

Baboons bark from the hills as we stop to inspect the web of a golden orb spider, its fine silky strands glistening with droplets of dew.

Andre is an experienced guide and is highly knowledgeable on all aspects of the natural environment.

"This is a kree bush and the leaves are good for heartburn," he tells us. "And that is a spekboom tree which removes roughly four tons of carbon a year. It negates the bad effect that our vehicles have on the environment."

We descend into a valley and are treated to the striking sight of Burchells zebra and red hartebees silhouetted on a ridge. A herd of wildebeest watch us warily from a distance.

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The Mountain Retreat offers luxurious accommodation for small groups in a remote and beautiful

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Samara is famous for its cheetahs, which were reintroduced into the area after an absence of 125 years. "We have nine at present, but only one, a male called Mozart, is collared and can be tracked using a radio transmitter," says Andre. "Sibella is our most famous cheetah. She's been a prolific breeder and has produced 18 cubs which were relocated to other reserves in South Africa, ensuring that the gene pool is spread as wide as possible."

With Sibella's success, Samara Reserve has proved to be a major player in the conservation of cheetahs in South Africa. It now has plans to breed and relocate other species as well.

"Sarah Tompkins has a great love for the wildlife of southern Africa and she hopes to get Eastern Cape Nature Conservation involved in the area," explains Andre.

"They could stock our land with animals and the reserve would be a breeding station for buffalo, black rhino, cheetah and smaller game. The offspring would be distributed to other reserves, resulting in a win-win situation for all concerned."

There's nothing like being in the bush on a misty morning and I inhale the fresh scent of earth after the overnight rain. "Has anybody got a fear of heights?" asks Andre, as we approach a steep section of the track. "Sit back and enjoy the ride because we need to keep up our momentum to get to the top."

When we reach the plateau, Andre holds up the radio antenna and we hear a series of loud beeps. "Mozart the cheetah is pretty close, about 100m away, so we're going to walk in on foot. There are three basic rules when tracking cheetah. Don't squat down, don't make eye contact, and never turn your back on it. That could be a fatal mistake."

We walk silently in single file over the stony ground. Andre turns the antenna, looking for the strongest signal. "His tracks are fresh, he probably passed here a few minutes ago. But he's on the move so hopefully we'll find him before he heads into that rocky valley. There it will be impossible to track him safely on foot."

Unfortunately Mozart keeps



One of the highlights of a stay at Samara is tracking cheetahs on foot, using a radio transmitter to locate the cats.

up the pace and we eventually give up the chase.

Ominous storm clouds build up and at 3pm the the mother of all storms deluges Samara.

On our last morning we wake to a perfect dawn. Andre soon stops the vehicle at a burrow next to the road. "It's an aardvark hole, very fresh, dug within the past few hours."

We're also lucky to find the reserve's two male buffalo grazing on grass as they watch us with lidded stares. A golden mongoose scampers across the road, stops at a safe distance and stands up on its hind legs. Further on we spot seven Burchell's zebra cantering across a field next to a big herd of springbok.

But our best wildlife encounter comes right at the end. Andre has located 12 giraffe grazing on a hill about a kilometre away. Keeping low to the ground, we advance slowly, moving from one bush to another. Excitement

mounts as we creep to just 50m from where the giraffes are feeding on jacket plum and wild pomegranate trees.

"This is what it's all about," whispers one of our group. "Seeing animals from this close on foot is so different to watching them from a vehicle."

● Where it is: Samara Private Game Reserve is in the Great Karoo, 55km from Graaff-Reinet and 258km from Port Elizabeth. It measures 28 000ha and is one of the largest private game reserves in South Africa.

● Getting there: It's a nine-hour drive from Johannesburg and seven hours from Cape Town. Alternatively, fly to Port Elizabeth from where it's just three hours by vehicle. Air charters to the landing strip at Samara can be arranged.

● For more info and reservations, telephone: 049 891 0880. E-mail: reservations@samara.co.za; www.samara.co.za