

## *My First Trip to South Africa*

Well, where do I start? :) As I write this, I am sitting and relaxing with a nice glass of South African white wine outside our thatched roof bungalow—only ten suites in total in this private reserve in Timbavati. Our back terrace overlooks the dry, thirsty brush and grassy landscape which South Africa is known for. Dan and the guests are out on an evening game drive, the sun is getting low and the air is getting cooler. At about this time last night, we watched a beautiful female leopard jump over the live-wired fence and into the lodge's common area in search of a drink at the pool. We lost sight of her in the nightfall but later heard alarm calls by the birds and monkeys indicating she was lurking in the shadows, most likely trying to hunt the lodge's resident bushbucks...

Our adventure begins in Johannesburg. After a 15+ hour direct flight from Atlanta, we met up with guests and then spent the night at a hotel near Tambo International Airport. The airport terminal is new, inviting and simple to get through - even after very little sleep. I was impressed with how modern and clean the building was. It did not look third world by any means, and the locals were more than happy to help you find your way around.

After a good night's sleep, we headed for the small off-site terminal and waited for our chartered commuter flight number to be called for our first destination, Londolozi Game Reserve. The terminal was impressive with a beautiful sitting area containing leather sofas overlooking the air strip, complimentary Wi-Fi, beverages, sandwiches, and muffins, clean bathrooms and, of course, a Curio Shop :) Our flight was called, humorously, flight #1 :) We were escorted onto the plane - the only guests onboard the aircraft aside from the pilots, so we had a lot of room to spread out. Our duffel bags traveled by land, so guests had no stress or worries about overweight luggage. As the engines revved up, we passed a goodie basket filled with treats down the aisle.

The plane landed on a paved landing strip at Londolozi after a short one-hour flight. This was the first indication that this reserve was all about detail and a quality experience. Upon arrival, our four guides greeted us with smiles and a helping hand. As we rode in our safari vehicles to the camp, I noticed how padded the seats were. The vehicles also had custom built-in sliding bean bags fitted on each row of the vehicle, eliminating the stress of not having overhead rests on the roof, which we usually have in the land rover style vehicles in Kenya. All vehicles had three rows of seats with three seats across and no sides or roof. We had concerns about the vehicles in South Africa but were impressed with how well they actually worked for our needs.

We arrived at Londolozi Founders Camp. The lodge managers greeted us with enthusiasm and a silver-plated ice bucket of spirits, champagne, and wine. Lunch was waiting for us to enjoy before settling into our rooms. It was evident that the chef had prepared the meal with fresh quality ingredients. As we dined on the airy balcony, we witnessed our first wild game - a small elephant passing through the dry river bed below. Cameras were out and shutters were clicking in between bites :)

No room keys needed at this camp - the only lock you'll find is the one outside your door to keep the monkeys out :) Our bags had been delivered and were waiting in our rooms. When we walked into the room, I first noticed the contemporary look of the room - pewter and white master colors mixed with a dark wood. A chandelier hung above - yes, a chandelier. Everything looked new. Large windows looked out onto a massive, secluded balcony which housed a private plunge pool and outdoor shower. The bathroom had dual sinks, a separate toilet area along with ANOTHER shower, AND a big porcelain bath tub! Branded Londolozi bathroom toiletries in beautiful glass bottles sat at all bathing stations. A complimentary mini bar was fully stocked for our enjoyment, which included the infamous African liquor, Amarula, for a night cap. Too many fluffy pillows to count on the king size bed...

Out for our first game drive this evening! We leased two extra vehicles for guest comfort, allowing each guest their own seat row, or three guests per nine-seater vehicle. This is not usually available at these South African reserves due to the limited number of vehicles they allow on the overall property. Each vehicle was also equipped with a highly educated guide and a tracker in order to find the animals.

We had a great encounter with three rhinos within the first few minutes on the vehicle. Giraffe and hippos, nyala, and birds were seen. The highlight of the evening was a sleeping pride of lions. As dusk emerged, each lion awoke, yawning and stretching. One by one they started to stand up and walk away from their resting grounds. Our vehicles were equipped with spotlights, and the guides used them to follow the pride of cats as they began their outing up the road. The light seemed to add a sense of dimension to the cats as they walked past our vehicles - you could see every ripple of muscle on their bodies - some were even too close to photograph. At a certain point we had to put down our cameras and just simply enjoy the experience. It was thrilling!



Throughout the four days at Londolozi, we had incredible photographic opportunities with the big cats. We found a lion pride with little cubs in a dried up river bed - too many to count! They would wander over to the watering hole and line up for a drink. The mothers would clean and nurture the attention-seeking cubs as they approached her. There is nothing like the sound of little lion cubs whining and crying for attention :)



Every day was a leopard day. Most of the leopards we saw were walking or lying on the ground, but we did have a few sitting up in a tree or on a kill. Beautiful cats...on one of the outings, we had a special encounter with a mother leopard and her two little cubs who had just come out of hiding. They were bouncing and pouncing and leaping and stalking one another. They were like little lightning bolts running around - on a mission to get into mischief - the smallest leopard cubs I've ever seen.

Since this is a private reserve with only Londolozi camps, there were very few vehicles. They had a very good way of rotating the vehicles in the areas, so there was not more than three vehicles at any sighting.

Overall, the experience at Londolozi was my favorite in South Africa. I don't think I've ever been at another lodge that was so organized and guest-oriented. Everyone was professional while catering to your needs. Every second evening there was an outside dinner with lit candle sacks lining the pathways, lanterns in the trees, and a large fire between the tables. The food was always fresh. The media center was great for photo workshops and also contained a large format printer so you could create a canvas of your favorite print to take home. The Internet was great throughout the camp, even in the rooms. Complimentary hardcover coffee table books about the leopards of Londolozi were provided to each guest.



Londolozi gives back to their employees. They gave us a walking tour of the staff quarters to show us how they live. Higher education programs are available to the adults in order to advance their skills, along with daycare and school for their children. A doctor comes in once a week to their onsite clinic. It was really nice to see what they are doing for their employees. The staff seemed very happy - which is important in any business - especially in South Africa. Londolozi is a perfect example of how a company is doing business right.

Our next stop was MalaMala Main Camp. MalaMala, and its "rival" Londolozi, as we later found out, share bordering properties (only one hour away) and animals, since there are no fences. There were a few noticeable differences between the camps as well. MalaMala had more of an "old Africa" feeling. The main sitting area had walls where mounted animal heads and images from the past hung, when the camps were, like many others in Africa, used as hunting camps. Very dated decor but yet cozy. After receiving our keys and orientation, we made our way along the sandy paths lined with bougainvillea to our rooms. We passed an older couple along the way and exchanged a few words about the weather. The lady was in prim and proper safari dress from early Africa days along with an antique metal safari hat which I found a bit odd.



When we got into our room, I browsed the informational welcome book, as I usually do in any hotel room. While skimming through a few pages in search of lunchtime, I came upon the photo of Michael and Norma, the long time owners of MalaMala. As I stared at the image, something seemed unusual. They looked familiar, and then it hit me! Norma, dressed in her antique metal safari hat in the picture, was the same lady we had passed on the walkway just minutes before. During our stay at MalaMala, Michael and Norma joined us in the evenings for wine and conversation.

The MalaMala Main Camp accommodations were bungalow-style - very large with "he" and "she" bathrooms. Decor was probably last updated in the 80s, but the quality was still very acceptable. Rooms overlooked a manicured lawn with shrubs and trees, where nyala and kudu grazed. In front of the camp, the Sand River had running water, so the occasional elephant would visit for a drink.

We've always heard that "MalaMala is the place to be to see leopards." We had young, enthusiastic, devoted guides and trackers looking after our group. The game viewing was as amazing, if not better, than Londolozi. However, with the animals moving through the two reserves I am sure it constantly changes.

I had a chance for a quick visit to MalaMala's more high-end camp, Rattrays, which is 15 minutes up the road from the Main camp. This eight bungalow camp had beautiful rooms - all very private, more quiet and posh than the Main camp. Did I like it better than the Main camp? Yes and no. Rattray's definitely had a "new" feel to it and was closer to the river for viewing the animals. The Main camp was a little outdated, but the history on the walls and in the lounge gave you a feel of what Africa was like in the 1940s, 50s, and 60s - a sort of remembrance of the old days.

Staying at these bordering lodges gave us a chance to stay at a variety of accommodations and experience the best of both worlds for game viewing. Both lodges are near rivers, so the animals would congregate nearby for water or use the riverbeds as walking corridors. The animals did not feel threatened by our presence. One attribute that was very different than Kenya was that we were allowed to go off-road anywhere on the private reserves, and I mean anywhere! Over shrubs and through thick bush, thrashing and bumping along - the guides will get you right next to the animals or track them through any kind of vegetation.



Overall the service at Londolozi was superior compared to MalaMala. The food was great at both locations though differently presented. MalaMala had more buffet-style home-cooked recipes, and they were very proud of their heated plates :) Londolozi was simple but with a gourmet feeling - quality cut meats, fresh dishes, top wines. Our guides dined with us a few evenings at Londolozi, and at MalaMala the guides dined with us at every meal. It was nice to experience both reserves, and we'd go back to either one of them.

After three nights at MalaMala, we started the drive to Kings Camp in Timbavati, only three hours away. The ride felt long on the wash-board dirt, and some parts paved, road. We saw villages and small towns with fenced reserves along the way. It was interesting to see how close and compact many of these reserves were - it was almost like going through a maze to get to our camp. You could definitely feel the encroachment on the wild areas - nothing like I have seen before.

We were greeted and shown to our bungalow suites when we arrived at Kings Camp. Our room looked exactly like the online photos, which almost never happens these days. The decor was over the top - so over the top it was actually too much! It was beautiful though, no doubt. When was the last time someone filled your bathtub with water, surrounded it by candlelight, and then added bubbles and rose petals after a long day on safari? The service and staff at Kings Camp were very good, but unfortunately I never did feel any kind

of connection with the staff as we did at the other lodges. The camp manager was very nice and more down to earth. He had an African wildcat named Sorocco that roamed around the grounds. Sorocco looked just like a house cat but stood a little taller and had a few more striped markings. He was known to play with the resident vervet monkeys. The guides were very nice and highly educated. Their positioning of the vehicles for photographers was not quite as good as we'd hoped, but they did try to please the guests.

Even though each lodge is a private reserve, many of the lodges in the area "share" their space, so there were more vehicles driving around. There were restrictions and limitations at all three lodges while on safari, but this one seemed to be the most systematic. Sightings were different than at Londolozi or MalaMala. We had many photo opportunities for herds of waterbuck and other animals at the watering holes with reflections. Cat sightings were pretty good, especially on the last day. On one morning, three of our four vehicles witnessed a mother leopard go after a male leopard and attack it numerous times, giving it a bloody nose, while she was protecting her young cub. Her older cub also came out and attacked the male on her behalf. During one of the struggles, a civet appeared out of nowhere, and the male killed it right in front of our group. Poor civet to be caught in the middle of the fight. It was very crazy, but talk about suspense and action! You should have heard the conversation over the breakfast table the next morning...

We consider our first South Africa experience a great success - it more than met our expectations. The photography opportunities were endless. Every day was different. Some of the guests continued with us after safari on the Cape Town extension - a great way to end the overall trip. In my opinion Cape Town had some of the best gourmet cuisine and wine than anywhere else I've ever visited. Loved seeing the little African penguins and the coastline... loved Cape Town.

I hope you enjoyed the journal of my first trip to South Africa. We'd love to have you join us to experience this amazing place for yourself :)

Safe Travels,

*Tanya Cox*

