

T Travel

Maldives

South Africa

Thailand

Ibiza

Edited by MELINDA STEVENS



Away from the hullabaloo, Bella Freud discovers a mighty piece of Africa and delights in taking her own cub back to nature...



Left, the outside sitting room at Motse Lodge. Above, the private plane to Tswalu. Right, Bella Freud with her husband James Fox and their son Jimmy



Above, Bella on the massage bed at Tarkuni Lodge. Below, the poolside waterfall at Motse Lodge

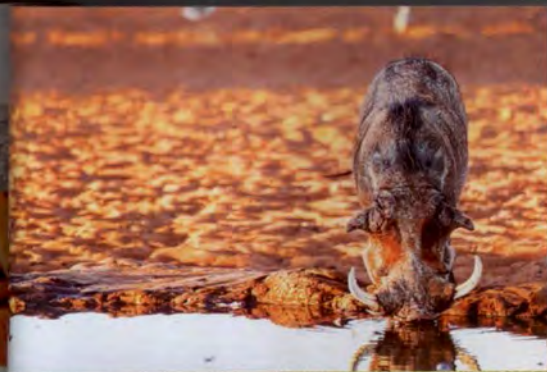


All my friends rave about going to Africa. And my husband's love of the continent led him to write his bestselling book *White Mischief*. But all I can imagine are spiders – huge and hairy or small and lethal...

However, a chance to enthral my 10-year-old son Jimmy tempts me to confront my phobia. I show him images of safaris and watch his face light up with curiosity. 'Are we going there?' he says, a well of disbelief and excitement in his voice. Africa! He is hooked before we've even packed. And so it is we find ourselves at Tswalu Kalahari Game Reserve, in the Northern Cape in South Africa.

Our guide, conservation director Gus van Dyk, looks like the hero of a Seventies film about Africa: stocky, sunburned, with blue eyes, dark hair and a good sense of humour. As soon as we arrive, Gus announces our routine: two forays daily, the first leaving at 5.30am and returning at about 10am, the second at 4.30pm when the temperature has cooled, with some hours for rest and swimming in between. I fear the early start, not just for me but also for Jimmy, who I have to boot out of bed every day for school...

But when the moment arrives it is incredibly exciting. In the very early light, the whole landscape shimmers with pale silky bushman grass, a lovely sight and strangely moving. The colours of the veldt are



Above, a warthog drinks from a waterhole. Right, Jimmy and Bella inspect a puff adder recently killed by an eagle



From top, Jimmy in the jeep; outside the spa; Bella, James and Gus have a cup of tea by the lake

dark camouflage, just distinguishable at this hour – shadowy green, yellow, white. It is windless when we stop and deliciously still. It is thrilling too, as the sun rises, to see how close we are to a herd of quietly grazing gemsbok with their long narrow horns. And as it warms up, the Kalahari sourgrass wafts a scent of caramelised apples in the breeze.

Made up of 43 old farms, Tswalu is 386 square miles of land resurrected over 15 years from overgrazed semi-desert, first by the late Stephen Boler, who bought it as a shooting estate, and then by Nicky Oppenheimer, Boler's choice of owner in his will. The reserve is divided, with one half securely sealed to contain the big predators, which means that you can safely go on rides of sheer wonder from Tswalu's stables, galloping through herds of wildebeest. The head of the stables is an Amazonian woman with black hair and the longest legs ever to be seen clad in suede chaps, who reminds me of a Bob Dylan song.

Midway through the early mornings, Gus and our big, tall and brilliant tracker Jonnas set up tables with white cloths and thermos flasks full of tea and hot chocolate and little boxes of fruit kebabs and muffins. A hot cup of tea in the African early morning is incomparable! I had worried that the Tswalu safari would be all luxury and no real experience. But the real luxury is being here in such an immense ▷

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Above, riding in Tswalu.
Above right, Jonnas, James, Jimmy and Gus share a sunrise snack.
Right, Bella at Tswalu's stables. Below, meerkats in the morning sun



Jimmy's favourite creatures are two small warthogs who remind us of our border terrier

◁ expanse of land. Everywhere we look there are kudu, giraffe, buffalo and zebra. I particularly like the eastern clapper lark, a bird that flies into the air snapping its wings loudly before plummeting to the ground and only gliding off at the last crucial moment – it's like a handbag thrown into the air, its handles and flaps chaotically opening before it hurtles downwards.

Some animals bring the same rush of awe at their beauty as a breathtaking creation from a Jean-Paul Gaultier show. There's the ingenious colour combinations of the nyala – fawn, white, dark brown and black. And James becomes obsessed by the eland bull, which is elevated above all antelope by the bushmen and appears in many of their carvings here. Enormously tall – standing over six feet high at his withers – and with a long, silky mane under his chin, the beast cleverly clicks his ankle for communication.

As the day's heat begins to intensify, we return to camp for gigantic breakfasts: elegant plates of minute pancakes with mascarpone sauce and tiered platters with tropical fruit, cheeses and smoked salmon. Then my favourite, the Full Kalahari – beef, chicken and pork sausages, eggs, mushrooms and beans, etc. Or James and Jimmy's usual choice, French toast made from brioche with bacon. (Later, at teatime, delicious cakes are our downfall: chocolate profiteroles, tiny strawberry- and vanilla-cream gateaux, and even a wheatfree lemon drizzle cake for me.) As we feast, an almost tame family of nyala graze nearby, the baby as close to Bambi as you can get. Jimmy's preferred creatures are two small

warthogs that remind us of our border terrier Joey, with their sweet gaze, oversized head and sturdy little legs.

The other joy is the spa. Corli Schoeman, its manager, has magic hands, the kind that can miraculously release you from a migraine – which I often get after flying – or transform your skin from dead to alive. Her massages are so good that even Jimmy has one, and then another.

I leave him lying on a bed outside under a tree having a back rub. It turns out that even 10-year-olds like a bit of pampering.

One morning, we are able to sit waiting for the sun to come up with a meerkat colony. They are untroubled by us and stand around like footballers protecting their parts from a free kick. We also track down the famed black-maned lion, a grave-looking creature padding down a path less than 25 yards in front of us. He walks slowly, slackjawed, his head and mane massive, his back the colour of sand. We follow at a distance and then join him again, sitting in our jeep 10 yards away while he lies in the morning sun blinking and rolling over like a puppy, his ribcage rising and collapsing in a huge sigh of contentment.

We also see a lioness cleaning and feeding her three little cubs who can only just walk. And then, suddenly one afternoon, we are warned off by a black desert rhino. There are only 120 left in South Africa due to relentless poaching but our – very alive – rhino makes a mini-charge at us, requiring Gus to drive at great speeds to get out of his way. When we go back to look at his footprints, those few angry steps have made indentations over six inches deep. In his diary, Jimmy writes: 'The





Left, kudu at sunset. Below, Jimmy and Jonnas with a gecko



Mix and match

The beauty of South Africa is pulling together different strands to make up one awesome trip. Bush and Big Five, smart town and wilderness, all is possible in a hot, quick skip. Here are the best properties for families hunting the ultimate safari...

TSWALU, KALAHARI

At Tswalu (see main feature), the Oppenheimer family's private residence Tarkuni is by far the best place to stay. There can be no other place on earth so wild and private, so completely romantic, where the bush comes right up to the door. It's *Out of Africa* at the foot of a mountain, with infinite remoteness beyond. Inside are thatched ceilings as high as a Norman church. The most idyllic retreat: at night, baboons squawk in the trees while you play board games next to roaring fires.

GROOTBOS, GANSBAAI

Children love Grootbos. On the incredible beach of Walker Bay, this is the place to see the southern right whales jumping, leaping and having babies. Spot great whites for extra kicks. No expense has been spared at the new villa, with its six bedrooms and butler and chef; all is glass and wood and windows. There's riding and picnics, and guides from the townships – shareholders in Grootbos itself – take little ones on fascinating nature walks to the ancient milkwood forest (very Harry Potter). The lunatic, huge-hearted owner Michael Lutyezer has nailed responsible tourism; consequently Grootbos is a very special place.

CAMP JABULANI, KAPAMA

Yes, it's got the Big Five (lions! leopards!) but, more importantly, it's got the elephants. The glory of these creatures just bowls you over. Ride out on them at dawn and dusk and you'll never turn back; there simply is no better way to see game. The reserve's elephants aren't told to 'giddy up' with sticks, but are whispered to in their ears. Gentle and spiritual, they love being washed and children are fascinated by being so close to them, their tongues, their feet. Take over the Zindoga villa, fun and gorgeous with four-posters and plunge pools.



LA RESIDENCE, FRANSCHHOEK

The antique shops, the restaurants – Franschhoek is a kind of beautiful, idyllic one-horse town bustling with deliciousness. Liz Bidén creates the best hotels in the country (George Michael and Elton John are among her guests) and built the new family villas here so her grandchildren could stay. But everyone wants to get their sticky fingers on them. Wow, they're spoiling and uncompromising. Just vines and olive trees, horses and black swans. Little ones can cook with the chef, go on chocolate tastings and visit the butterfly house with winged creatures the size of their heads.

SAMARA, GREAT KAROO

Samara is not an obvious big-hitter but it often ends up being the children's favourite part of the trip. Why? The freedom. Here there are fly camps so they can sleep out at night – very rare – listening to snuffling warthogs, sitting round a fire, staring at the phenomenal stars. The guides here are outrageous; they'll stay out camping with the little ones, point out the Big Dipper, whip up kudu stew. There's a wonderful cheetah programme too, so there's lots of gorgeous cats around, often with little ones in tow. The private house is very handsome, with a glorious pool.



guide said it was best not to annoy him any more, otherwise he might really charge at us, so we decided to move on. Later that day we went out again and saw white rhino and baboons, who seemed to sound outraged because they were going woahahahahah!! Raf! Wooahahahahrrrrrrr!!!'

One of the most magical moments is going for a swim in a rainwater lake in the hills as a storm brews. We climb for half an hour before the sky suddenly turns to iron grey and the wind blows wildly. We can see sheets of rain across the vast expanse of plain below and reach what looks like a Scottish loch – a bowl surrounded by grassy, rocky hills and thorn. The water is soft and warm at first, but freezing when we stretch our feet down low, and the iron ore from the rocks makes our limbs look rust-coloured, like swimming in a peat burn.

On our last night, Gus and Jonnas take us for farewell Sundowners on a sand-dune in the middle of nowhere, with a fire on top and the sky changing every minute, through crimson and orange and blue. We sit around, chatting on cushions with cocktails and irresistible snacks of crispy spring rolls and kebabs with creamy dips.

Gus shows us the soon-to-be-active site on the camp, Night Under the Stars, a double bed under a thatched canopy. At a little distance there's a very simple shower under an acacia tree. And nothing else but Africa, dunes and herds of nyala. I am mesmerised by this place and want to claim it for my own. I want to come back here with different friends who are certain to be magicked by it. Spiders or no spiders, it is surely something very rare. □

HOW TO BOOK THE GREAT FAMILY SAFARI

Africa Travel offers four nights at Tswalu from £3,195 a person, including flights, meals and transfers. The villa at Grootbos costs from £3,625 a night; Zindoga villa at Camp Jabulani costs from £3,825 a night; the new villas at La Residence cost from £775 a night. All are bookable via Africa Travel (tel: 0845 450 1535; africatravel.co.uk), which guarantees it will never be beaten on price on any like-for-like itinerary.