

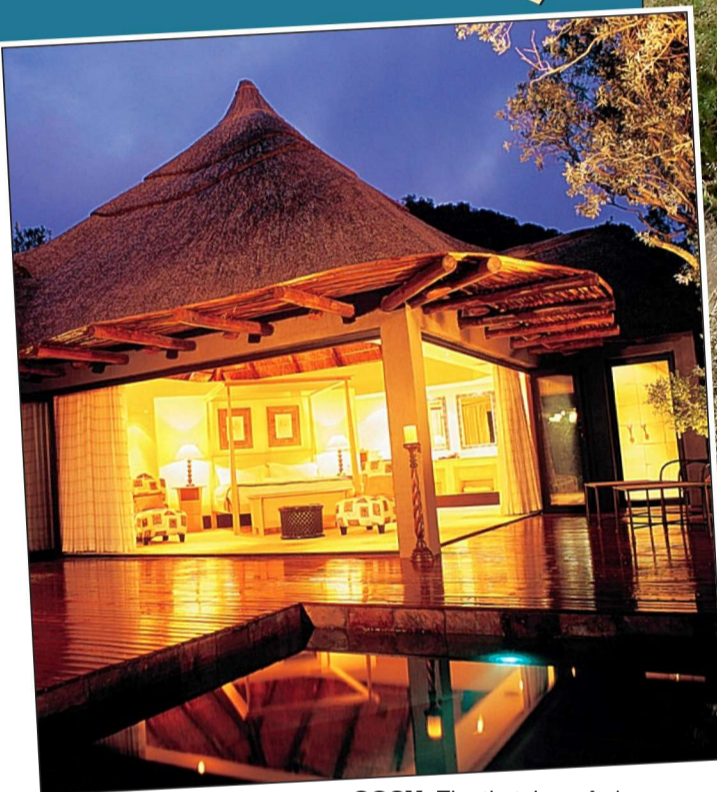
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The Mail ON SUNDAY

A five-star wilderness (and even the bugs don't bite)

Alice Bianchi spots leopards and ghostly white lions – and shares their diet – on a luxury safari



COSY: The thatch-roofed lodge at Eagle's Crag with its private plunge pool

OUR rattling Jeep gasps to a halt. My heart skips a beat. A spotty cub gazes at us with childlike curiosity before turning its attention to the bundle of fur in between its paws. With nonchalant grace, its mother twirls around and slides behind the filigree of a bush, her tail trailing behind her like an invitation. I never dreamed my first encounter with leopards could have the intimacy of a TV wildlife documentary. I train my binoculars on the cub. 'My goodness!' my words come out in a jumble, 'it's P-P-Pumba! The leopard is playing with Hogwart, from Lion King!'

Wildlife photographer, ranger and ecologist Geran Ellish can hardly resist a smile, 'Warthog,' he corrects patiently. 'That four-month-old cub is teaching itself how to hunt – it's learning about the tender bits.'

Geran reminds me of a big cat. Yet under that mane of strength lies a disarmingly rugged charm. 'You're lucky,' he says. 'If a leopard doesn't want you to see him, you might as well forget it.'

Less than an hour's drive from Port Elizabeth, 60,000-acre Sham-

wari in Eastern Cape is one of the few private, luxury and malaria-free game reserves in South Africa. 'The concept of a zoo has been reversed here. Those guys roam free and we're in portable cages,' explains Geran as we seep away and down hills with tall bushes flowering in candyfloss pink.

We are on our way to meet Themba. When his mother died unexpectedly, none of the other she-elephants would adopt him. 'If we hadn't rescued him, Themba would have starved to death,' says Geran. 'His cries were heart-wrenching. The question for us was shall we let him die, shall we shoot him to ease his pain or shall we try?'

As Themba lollops towards us, his ears flap forwards excitedly. Curious, he stretches out his wrinkly trunk and wraps it playfully around my arm, smelling me and tickling me with wiry black hairs and the moist tip of his trunk.

'We want Themba to return to the wild, to integrate back into his herd. It'll be difficult, but it's worth a try,' says Geran. For the time being, Themba is still on milk. He needs 50 pints a day, plenty of affection (Albert the sheep is his favourite playmate) and daily exercise. 'The trouble is, he's scared of the dark and cries if you don't spend the night,' explains Geran, pointing to the camp bed on the other side of Themba's enclosure.

'How would he know?'

'He smells you,' he says with a laugh, 'pokes you in the middle



PRIDE OF PLACE: The rare white lion roams close to Cape Town

of the night to check that you're still there.'

'No,' he clarifies, 'I sleep with my wife but we take turns keeping him company on that camp bed.'

Frankly, although Themba is adorable, I prefer to snuggle in my African-style thatch-roofed lodge at Eagle's Crag. A private plunge pool basks invitingly on my overgrown terrace and a telescope has been left behind thoughtfully for sky-gazing. I curl up underneath a blanket to soak up the sounds of the wild. The air is crisp with birdsong: the dueting bokmakierie and the southern boubou (both shrieks) and the whistling black-headed oriole.

In the evening, we gather around an open fire for braai (Afrikaans for meat grill), an unmissable South African experience. Guiltily, we slice through the mouth-watering springbok, impala and gemsbok, animals we glimpsed on our game drive.

THE big cat sanctuary of the Born Free Foundation does little to dissipate the guilt. Its mission is to raise awareness for the exploitation of captive animals. Here are a handful of cats that have been rescued from inhuman conditions of captivity. They can never be returned to the wild. It is a haunting, nauseating experience that calls into question the educational raison d'être for zoos and circuses. Literally, these animals have forgotten how to hunt.

Keen for more big-cat encounters,



GETTING THERE



ITC Classics (01244 355527, www.itcclassics.co.uk) offers two nights at Eagles Crag on the **Shamwari Game Reserve**, all-inclusive, followed by three nights' B&B at **Bishops Court** from £2,015 including return flights with **South African Airways** and transfers. Nightly rates at **Sanbona Wildlife Reserve** start from £195.

ROLE REVERSAL: Unlike in a zoo, it's the humans who are in a cage as they go wildlife-spotting at the Shamwari Game Reserve

Stellenbosch is self-taught. He moved into winemaking after working for many years in advertising. He welcomes us into his home, which has the humility of a Dutch genre painting, a wooden table, a brass candlestick, a large wedge of lacquered cheese and a jug of roses. We taste his rubellite-coloured rosé, with banana and strawberry scents, and Rebus 2003, his maiden red with hints of violets, chocolate and vanilla.

MY TASTEBUDS are equally enchanted by the La Colombe restaurant in Constantia, with its fairytale courtyard and chef Luke Dale-Roberts's finger-licking dining.

We stay at Bishops Court, a five-star guesthouse at the foot of Table Mountain in Cape Town, which commands spectacular views. On arrival, we are greeted by Forrest Gump, an 8st leopard tortoise which roams the garden like a house pet.

Dainty and homely, Bishops Court nestles among paradise flowers, lilies-of-the-Nile and lilac pincushions. I succumb to a pot of honeyed tea and a candlelit whirlpool bath in my courtyard, under a canopy of Cape honeysuckle.

I keep company with crickets and fireflies, which scribble patterns of light on the night's canvas, while I am busy plotting my return.

we head to the wildlife reserve of Sanbona. This 130,000-acre sister establishment to the Shamwari is in the heart of the Little Karoo region, three hours by road from Cape Town along Route 62, the wider counterpart to the Garden Route. Vast, open views of wiry, dwarf-like shrubs lie before us, occasionally broken by angular mountain peaks jutting like fragments of a broken window.

'White lions are rare, mostly hunted for rugs. The White Lion Project aims to return captive animals to the wild, give them back their dignity,' explains our ranger. He tracks the lions with a radio device and we race as if on a mission, trailing a cloud of dust.

The steenbok give the lions away. The wind carries the lions' scent, making them jumpy. Suddenly, a white lion stands, wearing its mane like a halo, its body glowing saintly against the shadow-grey shrubs. Alongside

are a tawny lion, seated majestically like a sphinx, and two lionesses, one white, one tawny, dappled in shrubs.

Cape Town is one of those cities I can see myself coming back to time and again. It has something for every taste. Rugged beaches, picturesque harbours and the calming Cape winelands, where we visit vineyards with gabled Cape Dutch architecture.

André Liebenberg of the family-run Romond Vineyards in

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