

A herd of elephants passing guests in Phinda. The incredible fire pit at Vler lodge, opposite



Where the Wild Things Are

A safari in South Africa's Phinda Private Game Reserve has it all: thrills, luxury, and a smart approach to conservation—memories of a lifetime included. **by GREG EMMANUEL**

IF YOU NEED ME, I'm on channel two." That was the last thing our ranger, Dylan, said before tossing a beat-up walkie-talkie onto the front seat of the topless green Toyota Land Cruiser, grabbing his rifle, and heading off into the bush.

My wife and I looked at each other nervously. First, Josie, the wildlife tracker who was our other guide, took off following some lion footprints, and now Dylan was gone, too. We were alone—with predators lurking. Our two kids, 10 and 12, didn't seem to sense any danger. They were still wide-eyed, drinking it all in after being in our apartment in Brooklyn just 36 hours ago.

Dylan emerged from the trees, 10 tense minutes later, his boyish face betraying little emotion. Josie followed, and without saying a word, they both climbed back into the Land

Cruiser. Dylan revved the engine, sending us straight into what looked like an impassable thicket of thorny bushes. He slowed down a few minutes later, cut the engine, and pointed at the tall, sandy brown grasses to our right. There they were: A lioness and her three male cubs lounged contentedly, about five feet from us, under the early morning African sun. The mama tilted her head back and yawned, revealing some cartoonlike sharp teeth. "Holy shit," I whispered—a little too loud. The kids were too rapt to hear.

Trust me, you never forget the first time you see a lion in the wild—and that was just one of dozens of jaw-dropping moments I experienced this past August in Phinda Private Game Reserve. Located in South Africa's KwaZulu-Natal province, on the east side of the country, Phinda is not far from the borders of Swaziland and Mozambique and just a 45-minute drive from the Indian Ocean.



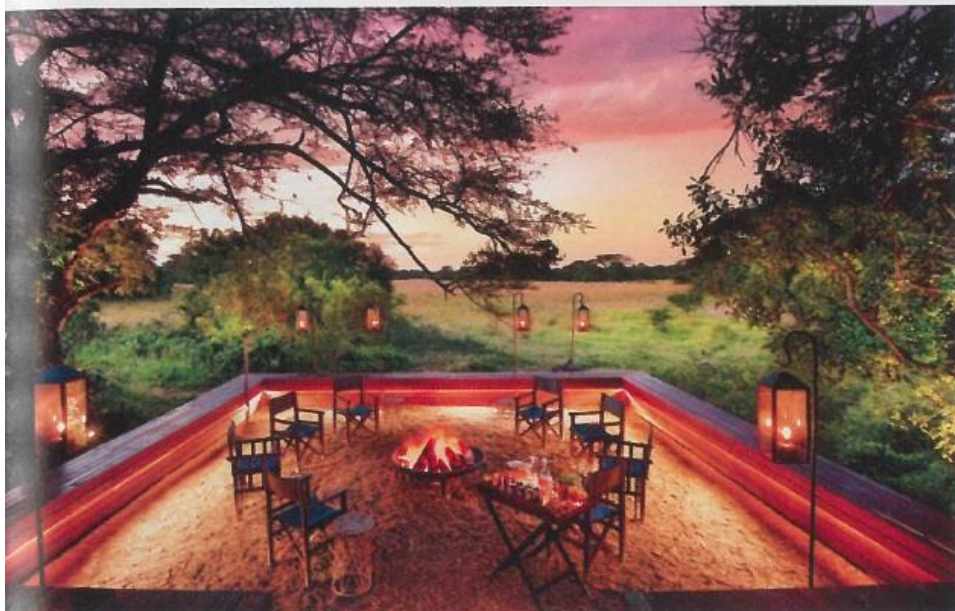
Owned and operated by andBeyond, a luxury safari outfit with 29 lodges worldwide, Phinda was created in 1991 from 170 square kilometers of fallow farm land, which was allowed to return to its natural state before being populated with African game moved from other, crowded reserves nearby. It's the model of the modern safari experience: a combination of luxury and conservation, where guests can experience the wonder of seeing Africa's legendary beasts in the wild, while money, jobs, and resources are funneled back into the Zulu communities that surround the reserve.

Barely inside the gates upon our initial

COURTESY OF ANDBEYOND/DOORPHOTO

KILLER SHOTS

The most important piece of advice for anyone going on safari? Bring a legit camera. A decidedly amateur photographer, I captured poster-worthy images like this yawning female lion (right) and a sounder of warthogs (below right)—my daughter's new spirit animal—using the Sony A7 III mirrorless camera and FE 100-400mm lens.



arrival, we spied giraffes—the most Spielbergian of all safari animals—munching on the side of the road, and we followed a few zebras that forced us to slow as they passed. As we pulled up to Phinda Mountain Lodge (one of six and Beyond lodges inside the reserve), things went from wild to refined—quickly. We met Dylan and Josie as well as our butler, Thobile, before taking in the incredible mountain-top views from the bar area. Our villas were a case study in modern boutique hotel design, with a deck and plunge pool that looked out on a storybook vista where we watched nyalas, a South African antelope, and more giraffes graze in the distance.

It was an incredible place to chill, but that's a safari's second-best activity. That first evening we headed straight out on a game drive, and spent a half-hour watching four cheetahs (a mom and her two female cubs and one male) relaxing as the sun began to set. The next few days were a dreamy whirlwind of early morning game drives, ridiculously delicious meals, naps, evening drives, sundowner cocktails, and magical dinners in the bush.

Each drive had its own epic storyline, and Dylan found ways to make the hunts as exciting as the sightings even when the animals were playing hard to get. (There may be a fence some-

where around this gigantic park, but you never see it, and the inhabitants roam of their own free will.) One morning, Dylan informed us the elephant herds were in the north, too far to reach on this particular drive, but as we rounded a bend while tracking two male lions, the sight of an enormous bull elephant (our first!) startled even our guides. We watched as he deftly used his trunk to pull leaves from a tree and threw dirt on his back to cool off. Dylan sent the Land Cruiser into reverse when the 10,000-pound beast made a subtle move toward us. (A charging elephant is the single-biggest potential threat cited by our guides at Phinda.)

After a few days, we moved about 18 miles to Vlei, a newly renovated lodge in Phinda with an even more romantic vibe and only six intimate, colonial-style villas with brass tubs and canopied beds. The area around Vlei was teeming with elephants, and we watched lions ripping into a giraffe carcass, but there were no leopard sightings—the one animal left on my son's scorecard. Our ranger at Vlei, Kerry, made sure to relay to Dylan this 10-year-old's heart's desire, and on our last day back at Mountain Lodge, the guide made it his life's work to find one of those beautiful big cats.

It wasn't easy. Josie and Dylan abandoned us again to go into the bush on foot, and it

looked like a leopard was just not in the cards. Then Dylan got a call from another ranger saying that one had been spotted not too far away. He gunned the Land Cruiser's engine and we bounced wildly as he drove over pitted bush roads in an effort to beat the setting sun. By the time we reached the spot, other groups had also arrived, and we waited for a glimpse of the male leopard. (Phinda allows only three vehicles at a time near game.) Suddenly my daughter cried "leopard!" and pointed in the other direction. Sure enough, its sister was there in the trees. My son pumped his fist at our discovery, and I locked eyes with the giant cat, taking a mental picture I will never forget. ■

PHINDA BASICS

HOW TO GET THERE South African Airways

offers a daily nonstop flight from New York City to Johannesburg. From there you can catch a short flight to Durban, where andBeyond will pick you up for the 3½-hour drive to Phinda. There is also an option to fly directly to a small landing strip in the reserve.

HOW TO ADD ON Cape Town is only a 2¼-hour flight from Durban and worth a stop before or after safari. The **Belmond Mount Nelson Hotel**, at the foot of the city's iconic Table Mountain, is the ultimate home base for exploring nearby wine farms, the Cape of Good Hope, historic Robben Island, and the incredible new Zeitz MOCAA art museum.