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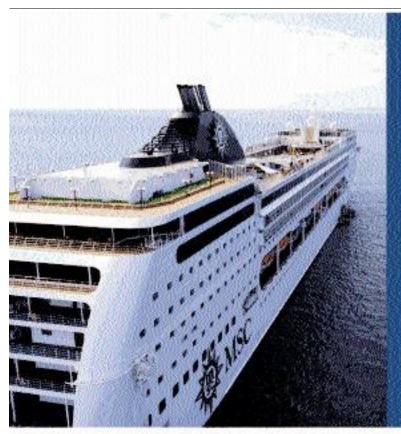
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The Mediterranean way of life

TRAVEL



Lazy lionesses ... engorged bellies show they have recently eaten.

Life is good... so relax at Rhulani

Brendan Seery

AIN drops still garland the acacia trees and in the two-track bush road, puddles make us wonder how long the scudding clouds will stay away. As we sit on the game drive Land Cruiser, our ponchos are only just drying from a mini-shower not long before.

We're a little bit chilly, damp in places ... but in the African bush, rain is a cause for celebration. It means renewal, it means new life, it means promise and optimism.

Those philosophical sentiments are beyond the ken of the fat African wild dog puppies frolicking outside their den in a corner of Madikwe Game Reserve. All they know is that life is good. They have friends to play with. They have old bones to gnaw on and, just beyond their sight, they know one of the pack adults is keeping a wary eye on them

Like all youngsters, they are unco-ordinated and it is amusing to watch them overbalance – often – as they play. It is interesting to think that in a few short months, they will become part of the bush's most effective killing machine ... a pack of wild dogs.

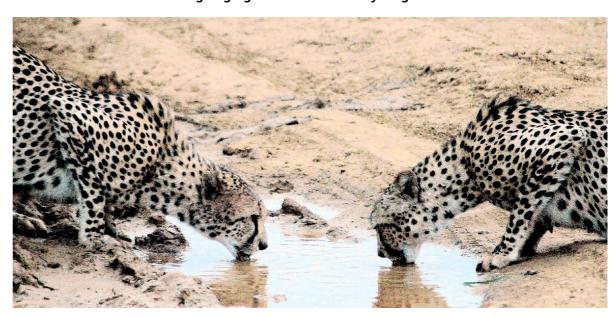
Chris Altenkirk, experienced ranger and general manager of Madikwe's Rhulani Game Lodge, tells us that a wild dog pack will be successful in killing prey in four hunts out of five. This is compared to the two or three successes out of five which hunting lions manage to achieve.

This is because the dogs work as a team – and they share the spoils accordingly when they're done.

As Chris tells us about the dogs, we sense a commotion and two adults join the third grown-up who has been watching the brood. There's a strange, keening, whining, almost laughing sound from one of the adults



Bush breakfast ... adult wild dogs regurgitate food to fee the young.



Camouflage ... two cheetahs share the waterhole.

among the pups and they mob the

Chris says the noise is the Alpha female (wild dogs are a matriarchal group) ordering the other adults to regurgitate meat they have eaten for the hungry youngsters. We watch as this most familial group of wild animals has breakfast, with the kids eating first It's the closest I have been to wild dogs and the experience was well worth the early-ish start Chris suggested. We had got up at 4.30 and were on the road just after 5 heading for the wild dog den. Normally, early morning game drives in summer at Rhulani involve a 5am wakeup call, followed by tea, coffee and home-baked rusks and muffins be-

fore the vehicles head out at 5.30.

Early starts in the bush are also worth the effort and we arrived late at the wild dog den because we stopped off en route to take in a group of jackal puppies who had just emerged from their den while their parents were off hunting. The jackals were curious and, I must admit, pretty cute.





Prick ears ...
two jackal
pups check
out their
world, while
(below) a
satiated lion
stands guard
over his
lunch.



TRAVEL

MADIKWE GAME RESERVE

Location: North West province, on the border with Botswana (malaria-free).

Size: 75 000 hectares.

Game: Big five and "special" species like the African Wild Dog.

Birds: 350 species recorded.

Getting there: Four-and-a-half hours from Joburg or Pretoria along the N4 to Zeerust and then then R49 to Gaborone.

Madikwe is a truly special place

I did wonder, though, whether their curiosity and the lack of watchful adults in the vicinity might well end in tragedy.

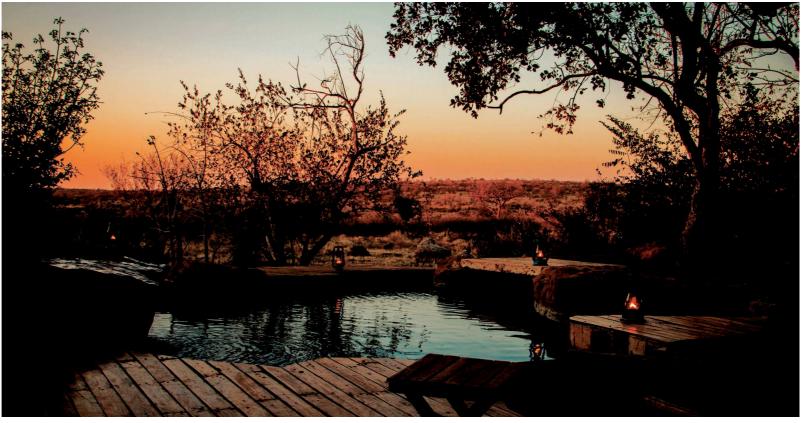
Mind you, the other side of the so-called tragedy coin is survival and we see that clearly on another drive, when Chris hears on the radio that another vehicle has seen some female lions near a main road. We quickly find them and note their distended bellies – a sure sign they have recently eaten, and eaten well.

The females wander slowly into the bush towards a low-hanging tree – and we quickly see what is happening. The group has recently killed a wildebeest and the lifeless animal, its sightless eyes staring nowhere, is being guarded jealously by a gorged male lion. He has had so much to eat he looks as though he will fall asleep at any minute ... and makes his displeasure plain when the females come too close.

Chris notes that the wildebeest carcass has been dragged under the tree to discourage vultures and other scavengers like hyena.

Madikwe has both spotted and brown hyena and, on an evening drive, we are lucky to see a brown hyena briefly before it skulks away into the bush.

Rhulani is a five-star establishment which offers an exclusive experience – having only seven chalets and one family unit. Each newly refurbished chalet offers



All the comforts ... Rhulani offers all the unobtrusive luxuries of a five-star resort.



privacy, luxury and understated African bush elegance. The bathroom has inside and outside showers and a large bath, and there is air conditioning and wifi internet access. You have a tea and coffee station and a mini-bar.

Outside, there is a private deck and a plunge pool, which is just the ticket on those days when the temperatures soar well into the 30s.

Apart from the accommodation, the service is what you would expect from a five-star place ... efficient but unobtrusive.

I do wonder whether I may be getting the red-carpet treatment because I am a journalist, but a quick look on TripAdvisor and other sites confirms top notch service is the benchmark at Rhulani.

Not for nothing, then, was Rhulani a winner in both the Boutique Hotel Awards 2014 and the World Luxury Hotel Awards 2014.

Cuisine, too, lives up to the high standard. It is simple and elegant and my pepper steak on the first night was one of my top three so far (I use a pepper steak as my way of gauging the quality of food at hotels and restaurants so I have had many of them over the years ...)

The Lodge is the perfect base for an authentic bush experience and Rhulani's people, like Chris, go out of their way to try to make the most of the time for their guests. We have a number of unforgettable encounters – with the wild dogs, the lions, a stroppy loan elephant and a bachelor group of cheetah which we encounter on two successive evening drives, enabling all guests to get top-quality photographs.

It is a little disappointing for Chris that he doesn't manage to get us a sighting of an elusive leopard who has recently established himself a territory not far from Rhulani. The rangers know the cat's favourite trees and his haunts. But, for us, he remains shy.

The reality is that leopards are seldom seen in Madikwe ... and that's life. We accept that and are also thankful that Chris shares his vast knowledge with us: I have been to many game lodges over the years and Chris still managed to tell me







elegant touches.

things I didn't know. For instance, that an elephant will often have one tusk shorter than the other because he favours one side when it comes to digging and pushing. Left or right-tusked ... just like we are left or right-handed.

But it is a privilege to have seen the wild dogs, among the most threatened animals in Africa (Madikwe's packs are thriving though) – at close range.

Madikwe is still one of our favourite reserves in southern Africa ... a truly special place. And Rhulani is a special place within a special place.

Brendan Seery was a guest of Rhulani Safari Lodge. See www.rhulani.com

