

# THE LAIR OF LUXURY

Storytelling around a fire-lit boma, a brush with lions at dawn, and G&Ts served on the bonnet of a Land Rover make two days at the newly spruced Singita Castleton nothing less than exhilarating. Now, imagine that with a six-star stay.

PHOTOS MICKY HOYLE WORDS DEBBIE LOOTS

It's late one Monday afternoon when the tottering eight-seater plane skids to a halt on Singita's private air strip, shaking off guests at the newly restored Castleton camp. Situated on 45 000 acres of private reserve, Castleton is the original family homestead of Luke Bailes, owner of the Singita group of lodges, and also the oldest private lodge in the country.

Welcoming us to wild country are the high-pitched drone of sun beetles, our friendly host Claude Visagie, and expert spoor tracker Kenneth (Kenny) Mathebula. We hop along to Castleton in an open, state-of-the-art Land Rover, with Kenny perched on the game-viewing hot seat fitted onto the left-hand side of the bonnet – rifle in hand, his eyes scouring the land for anything that moves.

"You are now in the heart of the Lowveld, next to the Kruger National Park and Drakensberg mountains," explains Claude, one half of Castleton's managerial team, his wife Marinda the other. We soon realise our luck to have him as host – not only did he miss his calling as master storyteller, he is also an expert on everything under the sun – be it plant, insect or animal – and able to recall their Latin and native names at the drop of his Indiana Jones hat.

At the country house, Marinda welcomes us with drinks on the newly extended veranda. From here, views stretch down manicured lawns to a watering hole and, as we take to our cane chairs, we are just in time to see a sprightly springbok put on a show.

"The land was bought 88 years ago by Luke's grandfather, and for many years it was simply a beloved family home surrounded by



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six bungalow suites," Claude tells us over dinner, a meaty spread by Calum Anderson, ex-senior sous chef at Lebombo Lodge. "Castleton became a family-oriented private lodge around 1993, for visitors wanting a rustic and private bush experience, but with all Singita's luxe amenities."

Last year's upgrade did not change Singita's essence, it just got better – with a spa, wine cellar and gym, extended cottage bathrooms and a new wooden deck around the pool, making it all just a little more comfortable and all-out fantastic, for children too. Catering for only one family at a time, whether two or 12, ensures complete privacy and hands-on attention, and the kitchen is open game – guests are welcome to help themselves, cook or just hang out with the chef.

The homestead's communal lounge and dining area is filled with tell-tale signs of a bygone era – antique pieces and Africana curios, a grandfather clock and hefty old fireplace – conjuring up a sense of African magic in between its classic modern furniture and fittings. The work of interior design firm Cécile & Boyd, this sense of lived-in luxury has been extended into the six exquisite bungalow suites.

At the crack of dawn on Tuesday, it's time for a game drive and we see wild dogs feeding, elephants grazing and rhinos going for a morning stroll. Then there's a voice on the crackling radio: "Lions spotted!" Following directions, we catch up minutes later. "Two brothers hunting," whispers Claude. We stop meters away from the full-grown lions. One saunters across the dirt road and into the dense bush next to our vehicle, from where, suddenly, a herd of buffalo charges us. Their hunter too. Visions of mauling hooves trampling us in the open Land Rover, hungry lion in tow, are replaced by exclamations of relief when the beasts stomp their way around the front of the vehicle, the chase full on.

Later, coffee spiked with Kahlúa washes away the fright, and only memories are left by dusk, when we take an afternoon drive to watch the sky's spectrum of pastels, picnicking with G&Ts on the Landie's bonnet.

Back at the lodge, we gather for champagne in the candle-lit boma, looking for stars, against a soundtrack of crickets and Claude's tales of the old Delagoa Bay Railway, not a kilometre away, and of wild animals visiting the camp. On the way back to our cottages later, we make sure to follow close on the heels of our guides. You never know...

The next morning we bid Castleton goodbye, Claude and Kenny with big smiles, arms flailing. They disappear as the cloudbank swallows our plane, the propeller whirr conjuring up Karen Blixen's words in *Out of Africa*: "You know you are truly alive when you're living among lions." ✓

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#### PREVIOUS SPREAD

- 01 Indigenous bushveld candelabra in a corner of the garden.
- 02 Dine in style while watching the wild enjoy their watery sustenance.

#### THIS SPREAD

- 01 The pool's new wooden deck is a stone's throw from the veranda.
- 02 At the lunch table, yesteryear's guestbook and a collection of traditional bits and pieces tell tales of the old Castleton days.
- 03 Contemporary meets nostalgia in the plush lounge, home of a worn leather couch surrounded by hand-picked antiques, horns and tribal artefacts.



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THE HOMESTEAD IS FILLED WITH SIGNS OF A BYGONE ERA, CONJURING UP A SENSE OF AFRICAN MAGIC...



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**THIS SPREAD**

- 01** Collections of objects tell stories of days gone by, and can be found all around. Here, in the corner of the office, a glass cabinet presents its wealth of colonial cargo.
- 02** Expansive new bathrooms (by GAPP Architects, who handled all the structural renovations) await guests in the bungalow suites where industrial design meets metro tiles, while a cane chair and a slate-stone floor provide character.
- 03** All six bungalow suites feature botanical-printed wallpaper, which Cécile & Boyd commissioned artist Sarah Pratt to produce specially for Castleton.