

SOUTH AFRICAN GRAND SAFARI – 2023

By Mary Boyle with wildlife photography by Jerry

The wilds of South Africa called us again in May as we set off on a 3-week adventure at two of our favorite private game reserves in South Africa – Kirkman's Kamp and Ngala Game Reserve. This was our 6th safari trip to Africa and was by far one of our favorites. Our travel agent put together all the details of flights, transportation, and accommodation at the camps.

Following almost 30 hours of flying from Southern California via Europe, we arrived at the small local South Africa Skukuza airport to be greeted by our game ranger, Jade, who



Dinner at Kirkman's Kamp

took us to the nearby AndBeyond Kirkman's Kamp. Kirkman's is regarded as one of the best loved lodges in the Sabi Sand Game Reserve. The staff warmly welcomed us at the lodge and had us quickly settled in our private suite – our home for the next 6 nights. Kirkman's is a small 5-star unfenced camp with 18 guest cottages overlooking the Sabi River. Wild game can easily roam through the camp – in fact, a small group of warthogs was grazing on the lawn outside our room while

we unpacked.

It was a 5 AM wakeup call the next morning when we joined our ranger Jade and tracker Jerry for our first game drive. The sun was just rising when we set off. The chilly morning air is filled with bird calls as we followed tracks and sounds to find gorgeous wild animals. Every game drive is like a giant scavenger hunt – no two drives are the same. You may find a herd of elephants, lions, leopards, cheetah, wild dogs, hyenas, impala, and birds of every size from raptors to the colorful small Lilac Breasted Roller. The drives are along narrow rough roads, ducking tree limbs, crossing shallow rivers, or going off-road crashing through brush following an animal or herd. Really fun. It's a great core workout as you steady yourself on the seats of the truck. Thankfully, the seats are well padded; and there are sturdy handrails. The trucks are completely open – no roofs to hamper your views.



Jerry & Mary Boyle –
Africa awaits!



Morning coffee break on safari drive.

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The morning drives usually have you back at camp by 10 AM where you can enjoy a lovely outdoor breakfast under the trees, before you shower and relax until the afternoon game drive that leaves at 4:00. You're out until dark. The tracker uses a spotlight highlighting the trees and brush looking for animals. One night, we came upon a pride of female lions strolling along the



road in front of us. The animals are very used to the vehicles and completely ignore you. We sit very still and quiet when we're around the animals so as not to surprise or alarm them. Just watching their behavior is fascinating. If they have cubs or young ones with them, they are especially watchful. We saw lots of baby animals during our safaris – lion and leopard cubs are adorable – so curious, rolling and playing with each other, climbing over parents, or chewing on the twitching tassel of mom's tail. Just like the kittens you may have in your home.

We left Kirkman's after 6 fabulous nights to take a short (45-minute) bush flight North to the airstrip at AndBeyond Ngala Private Game Reserve (20 Five-Star thatched cottages) next to the Timbavati River in Northern Krueger Park. Ranger Mac greeted us at the airstrip in a safari vehicle and took us to the main camp. The lodge overlooks the natural riverine woodland. This is also an unfenced camp, so animals can freely roam throughout the property. At night, guests are escorted by a security staff member with a large flashlight and radio to get you safely back to your cabin. This was true of Kirkman's too. Hearty breakfasts and delicious lunches are served in the dappled shade of an enormous weeping Boer bean tree. Upon our return from the evening game drives, guests are welcomed by Ngala's warm, hospitable staff to a banquet in the elegant candlelit courtyard or an African feast around the blazing boma fire. Jerry and I were also treated to a few private candlelit dinners on the patio of our cottage. A very special welcome treat. Each evening, we found ourselves back in bed by 9:00 so we could be ready to enjoy another early morning safari the next day.

There were so many highlights over the 3-week safari adventure it's hard to just highlight a few. A Wild Dog pack of about 20 dogs came onto the Ngala reserve. These dogs are so exciting to watch – they hunt in packs (usually late afternoon or early morning) looking for something to eat. Impala are often their meal of choice since there are so many herds of them on the reserve. We followed the dogs as they raced through the brush – their high-pitched barks send excitement through your body as you search for them. Once they capture a prey, all the dogs quickly devour it – there are no "leftovers" for the hyenas following the dogs. The Ngala pack had a very pregnant pack leader. The pack was on the property looking for a place for her to



African Wild Dog on the hunt.

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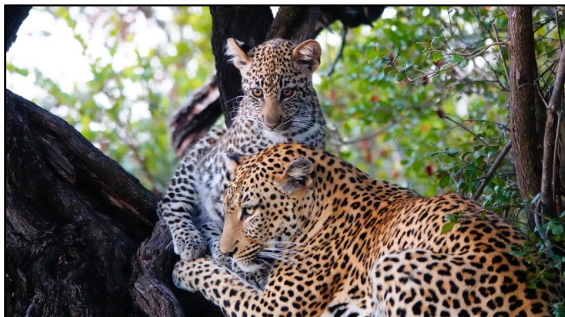
den and have her pups – often an abandoned termite mound. We saw the dogs several times while we were there and learned once we were back home that the female had had her pups on the property. This was good news since it means that the entire pack would remain there for several weeks until the puppies were big enough to join the group. Meanwhile, the pack hunts for food for the alpha female and brings it back to her at the den. She can deliver up to 12 pups in each litter.

Baby animals are especially vulnerable in the wild. Predators know this and hunt accordingly when they spot the young. Female lions will separate from the pride when they have their cubs – hiding the cubs for maybe a month before she brings them to the pride. She keeps very close eyes on the babies when they're in the pride. The larger lions can get a little rough when the cubs get in their way.



Our final 3 nights of the trip were spent at AndBeyond Ngala Tented Camp in a luxury tent with ensuite bathroom, heating, air conditioning, and intimate veranda overlooking the Sand River. Tented Camp was about a 45-minute drive from Ngala main camp. Andre was our new ranger – he'd been with Ngala almost 20 years and knew every inch of the reserve. As guests on these game drives, we were quickly lost on all the twisting game drive roads – no street signs or GPS here! This was especially true at night when the only light was from the carpet of stars and sliver of moon overhead.

Leopards are one of our favorite African animals. At Tented Camp, we located a beautiful female leopard and her cub hiding in heavy brush. It was extremely difficult to see her. Ngala and Kirkman's are especially careful when they find animals with babies. They alert other game vehicles by radio when a sighting is possible, and then they take turns driving up to view it and their young. Only one truck at a time and you usually stay at the viewing 15-20 minutes before trading off to the next vehicle. Until these young ones are used to the safari vehicle, they don't want to risk endangering or frightening them when they're so small. Andre told us one early morning drive that we were going back to where the female leopard had been spotted the night before. Sure enough, she and her cub were now up on a tree branch. Mama leopard had hunted the night before, and they were finishing off the feast up on the tree limb. Hyena were



Mama Leopard and Cub

circling below the tree in hopes the remnants of the impala would drop to the ground. It's a full circle of life in the wild; and no morsel of food, hide, or bone is ever left behind. 100% recycling. That morning we were able to enjoy a great viewing of the leopard and her baby. The youngster was interested in climbing down the tree, but mama kept him up in the tree until the hyena left.

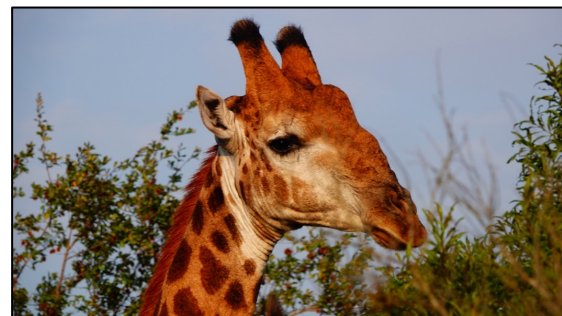
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Another night drive we watched the wild dogs on the hunt again, but this time they scared a sleeping leopard hiding in the brush; and we watched the leopard dash up a very young tree to get away from the dogs barking and yipping below it. The poor leopard was almost too heavy for the tree, and he had a hard time straddling branches to keep from falling. Soon the dogs were distracted again and ran off, giving the leopard time to get away.

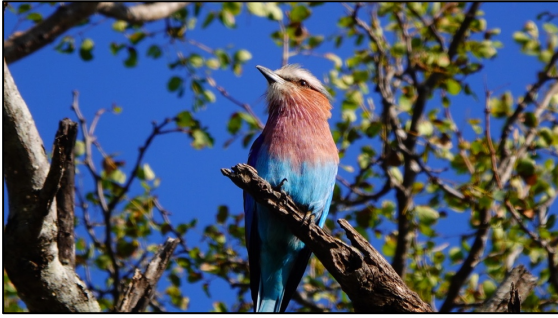
The days quickly sped by, and it was time to head home from this grand adventure. We counted that we went on 21 game drives over the 3 weeks. We met some lovely people who joined us on our game trucks. For many of them, this was their first time on safari; so we especially enjoyed sharing their excitement when the “action started” or a new animal was discovered. It’s truly magical seeing these beautiful animals in the wild. We came home so thankful and blessed that we were again able to experience this magnificent part of the world.

Mary and Jerry Boyle



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Lilac Breasted Roller



Glorious Sunsets in Africa!