

LIONS AND RHINOS AND SCARES, OH MY!

I've never been much of an animal lover. I was chased by a Great Dane as a kid and he almost bit me as my bell bottoms flapped in the wind, nearly getting caught in the spokes of my bike as I lifted my feet from its hungry mouth. I still have a fear of dogs to this day. Anytime I'm near a cat, my gums numb and my hands swell from an intense allergy. I tried having tropical fish for a while until my brother scooped my favorite one out of the tank just to watch it flop around on the floor. So, it was surprising to many that one of my bucket list travel experiences was to go on safari.

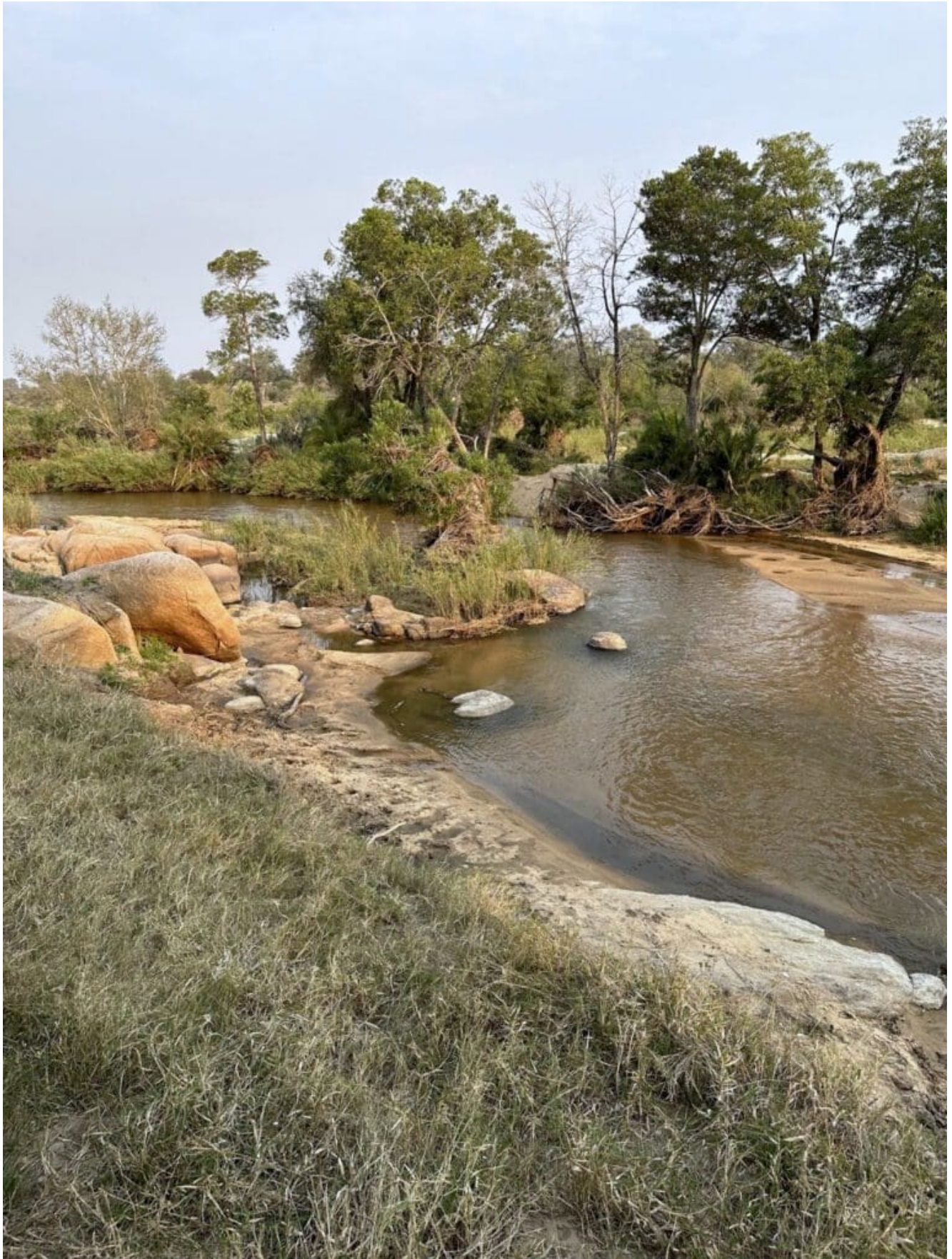
Fortunately my husband was game to see some game, so we chose South Africa as our destination, not knowing much about the nuances and differences in safari experiences. As it turns out, South Africa is home to the big five— lion, elephant, leopard, buffalo and rhino. But if you want to see gorillas, you have to go to Uganda or Rwanda or Congo. Like life, you just can't have everything in one place at one time.



Arriving in a tiny airport near Kruger National Park, we made the two hour trip to our campsite, surprised to find elephants within meters of the road. We didn't expect to see them so soon, but this is their territory and who am I to tell them where and where not to roam?



The Mala-Mala Camp sits just outside the border of Kruger with its own land to explore. I really shouldn't call it a campsite—it's a total "glampsite." Huge round huts made of clay and straw encase an unexpected interior of luxury with well-appointed furniture, art, and floor to ceiling windows. It's completely incongruous with the surroundings, but what can I say? You can't take the city out of the girl. I knew if I was going into the bush, I didn't want to have to "go in the bush," if you know what I mean. No sleeping out in Boy Scout tents just waiting for a monkey to come steal my cosmetics case for this girl. I'm not opposed to roughing it, but given the option, I'll go for comfort. I don't need bragging rights about how I slept on a hard dirt floor just to be one with nature. I'm okay with just being nature adjacent.



We were instructed to rise and be ready each morning by 6:00 for our morning excursion. Fortunately the FOMO was greater than our desire to sleep, so we grumbled our way into the open air Land Rover. It's winter here and the land is dry and

brittle, stretching out into one big brown vista. We're told it's a better time of year to see the animals. Come summer and the rainy season, the grass is so high, it's hard to spot them. But the Jewish mother in me wonders how the animals can feed themselves with so little greenery and the rivers almost dry? I'm assured there's still enough for them to feed themselves, so I try not to worry, but you can imagine how that goes.



Over the next few days, we come upon herds of elephants, some with newborns in tow. One little guy is so brand new his ears are still matted to his head, only fanning out occasionally when he walks. He stumbles around, not knowing quite what to do with his trunk and we all let out a collective “awwww’” at his antics. It's like watching a Disney movie of a baby elephant who accidentally drinks too much hooch.



A few moments later, down a hill that opens into a huge field, we encounter a herd of at least 100 Cape buffaloes. They all stare at us as if we're playing a game of chicken. And then they surround us. This is starting to get a bit too close for comfort. Our driver then turns the engine off and the buffaloes lose interest and walk right past us.



Right around sunset, a male lion meanders down the road in front of us and plops himself down for a rest. He barely acknowledges our presence. With his big mane surrounding his face, he looks just like the MGM lion. Although as far as I'm

concerned, there's no need for him to start roaring. Watching him yawn is much more reassuring.



We follow a leopard as she walks over to a stream to quench her thirst and then rests up on a hill. What a gorgeous creature with its regal brown and black spots.



Lounging in a field, we spy some adorable lion cubs snuggling up to their mom, annoying her as they nurse. It seems that we could easily just get out of the Rover and pet them, but our guide tells us we'd only get to do that once before being mauled to death. Noted.



Unbothered by our arrival, some rhinos cause us to pause as they walk in front of our vehicle making it clear they'll take their time. All of them are tuskless to prevent poaching. The conservationists remove their tusks for their own protection. Imagine what that job must be like.



There are so many impala walking around that it doesn't take long before we simply pass them all by having exhausted ourselves shooting their pictures. What's so astonishing is how close we are to all of them, often within meters. They are so used to these huge non-threatening vehicles that they seem to say, "Ok lady, shoot your damn picture and just move on. Can't you see I'm trying to get some sleep here?"



It takes a day or so before we see our first giraffe. Their heads towering above the trees, they become fairly easy to spot after a while. Some are huge – almost 20 feet tall, maybe more. As they nosh on the leaves of their favorite trees, they

take a beat to look me straight in the eye as if to say, “You want some of this? You’ll have to climb up here to get it.”



But as the days pass, I start losing hope of seeing some zebras. I mention it to our guide Bens—short for Benson—who tells me they can be a bit shy when they see the 9-seaters around. But within an hour of talking about it, there they are in all their splendor—three beautiful zebras out in an open field. They are so beautiful with their black and white stripes and multi-colored manes getting blown out by the air as if they were sitting in a high-fashion salon. I don’t know why I have such a fascination with them, but watching them prance around I’m almost hypnotized as their stripes practically animate.



By the end of the week we did indeed see all of the Big Five and then some. Even on our last day, we waited patiently for a hippo to surface from the water just in time for me to snap a shot of him yawning. It was very kind of him to hold the pose for me.

It's ironic how I am terrified by the bark of a neurotic domesticated dog, but I feel totally safe watching a lion and his brother devour the carcass of a dead baby hippo. Maybe I just need to get out in the wild more often. It's so much more civilized there.